

MICHAEL J. MURPHY WINTER SCHOOL WAS A RESOUNDING SUCCESS.

The Micheal J. Murphy Winter School which took place in Ti Chulainn Cultural Centre, Mullaghbane, South Armagh, on November 24th and 25th 2017 was remarkably successful in relation to the numbers of people attending and in the intellectual stimulation provided for those who were lucky enough to include it in their calendar.

Proceedings began on Friday, November 24th at 11-30am when the Chairperson of Newry, Mourne and Down, Roisin Mulgrew, formally opened the Winter School and the local St. Mary's Primary School presented six i-Movies which concentrated on the history of South Armagh. These movies arose from a project on oral history which was undertaken in conjunction with Loch an Iur National School from Co. Donegal and completed by six children and their parents. Children from Loch an Iur, along with their teachers, parents and grandparents made the long journey to be present at the launch. This project on oral history links comfortably with the world-renowned work of Michael J. Murphy in this field. He recorded in the medium of his era and the children of 2017 recorded using the technology of theirs. A large delegation of pupils and teachers from Michael J's old school in Dromintee also attended and the films, which are available online, were viewed by 80 children with their teachers, parents, grandparents and members of the public.

In the afternoon there were two fascinating lectures which were also inextricably linked to Michael J. Murphy's life, family links and writings. Seamus Murphy, whose family members on both sides were involved in the pahvee trade, gave invaluable insight into how these 'ragmen', 'pedlars', 'hawkers' or 'travelling salesmen' from a clearly defined area of South Armagh around Dromintee, Killeavy and Killeen organised their lives and work which took them all over the world from Tasmania to the wilds of Canada.

Of course, many of these Pahvees originated as, or combined their trade with being, goatmen. Ray Werner from London, an expert on rare breeds, spoke on behalf of the Old Irish Goat Society in a talk inspired by a line from Michael J. Murphy's first broadcast for the BBC in April 1937 on 'The Goatmen of South Armagh'----'The Project was Successful'. In a thoroughly researched lecture he traced the prejudice against the goat in England after the coming of the enclosure acts and the identification by the people of Dromintee of a niche in the market for goats. These herders collected goats from Connemara and West Mayo, took them to the Slieve Gullion area and transported huge herds of up to 600 goats to Scotland, Wales and as far as the south coast of England. He detailed how they slept with their herds; sold the milk and goats on the edges of the industrial cities and gradually overcame the prejudice of the English people against both the animals and their handlers. DNA studies on goats have shown that the goat

population of our neighbouring island is descended from the goats of the West of Ireland and our own Slieve Gullion goats. Indeed, to add atmosphere to the talk, an old Irish goat, provided by Thomas Rafferty of Carricknagavna townland, was tethered on the lawn outside and became an added attraction for both young and old.

The debate on Friday night, chaired by Eamonn Mallie, was entitled 'Will Brexit Move the Border?' A capacity crowd heard contributions from an excellent panel consisting of Matt Carty (Sinn Fein MEP for the Midlands North-West Constituency), Eoin O Murchu (Pro-Brexit Socialist Republican), Lucy Anderson (London MEP and Labour European Whip), Damien McGenity (Co-ordinator of Border Communities Against Brexit) and Anthony Soares (Deputy-Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies). After the opening submissions the chairperson opened the debate to the floor. This led to a very lively and sometimes fiesty debate with the audience totally engaged in a detailed examination of the views of the panel. On several occasions Eamonn Mallie had to intervene in the interests of good order! The conclusion on the night was that the border was 'on the move' as the crowd dispersed to the bar to continue the tussle.

On Saturday at noon there was an inspiring reading of Michael J's insightful play 'Men on the Wall' (which was last staged by the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, in November 1961) by Sean Treanor and a cast drawn from Newpoint Players, Newry, and the local Lislea Dramatic Group. Despite rumours of very short rehearsal time, as many of the cast were just back from a tour in Canada with Anthony Russell's 'The Trial of the Orange Order', the audience in Ti Chlainn was treated to a totally professional reading and became engaged in an informative debate on the issues which arose from the themes of republicanism, role of women, smuggling and greed in the play. Several 'mature' members of the crowd were heard to confess to having been, admittedly amateurish, smugglers back in the days of the hard border. Some even expressed a wish to have a second coming if there is a 'hard Brexit'. This first reading in so many years may, hopefully, lead to a revival of some of Michael J's six plays in the near future.

On Saturday afternoon, in keeping with the overall theme of the Winter School, 'Borders and Traditions', there were six enthralling contributions in the area of traditions. Firstly, Sebastian Graham (Author of 'The Mills of the North of Ireland') gave an excellent illustrated talk on The Mills of South Armagh. A totally interested audience was able to see our local mills in a new light and to be aware of what is on our doorsteps.

Eugene McConville of Dromore, Co. Down, the owner of probably the last working scutch mill in Ireland, gave a detailed demonstration of how the flax was grown, pulled, retted, scutched and processed into cloth. The highlight of the presentation was the fact that Eugene illustrated with examples of flax at all stages of development and some of the tools used. He easily engaged

with his audience(which included experts in flax such as Eugene Malone of Drumherriff,Whitecross)and answered all questions with the assurance of the professional.

The exhibition of fantastic examples of strawcraft were presented by Nora and Paul Carville of Straw Craft Ireland of Derrymacash,North Armagh.Nora gave a comprehensive talk on the history of this craft and invited all present to try their hands at making some harvest knots and angels.Paul demonstrated the making of a 'pannel',which was a straw saddle for a horse and which was used in Ireland from the middle ages to the nineteenth century.Indeed,if you go to the National Museum of Country Life in Castlebar,Co. Mayo, you will see,in the foyer, a larger than life photograph of Michael J. Murphy and James Loughran of Ravensdale with a pannel which James made for the Department of Irish Folklore.It is most encouraging to see that such an intricate craft is being carried on in the twenty-first century.

Seamus Murphy once again enlarged on the Pahvee craft and spoke about his father,Jim Murphy,who was one of the last of the pahvees in Dromintee and who,on the day of his final illness, was returning from a 'successful day on the road' with £350 in his pocket.He also dealt with his ancestor,Paddy Kearney of Annahaia townland,Dromintee,who is alleged to have plied his trade in 150 countries!

Caoimhe Nic an tSaoir gave a hands-on demonstration of the art of making Forkill Black Pudding and Armagh Cider.Some people in the audience,who remembered the killing of pigs on the local farms and the making of black pudding,gave their impressions of an art which has now been discontinued.Caoimhe cooked the black pudding on site and handed around samples for consumption by a crowd of eager and hungry onlookers.There were no such samples of the cider,but it is great to see that these arts are being practised and available in the Slieve Gullion locality.

After being fortified by black pudding and some more of Caoimhe's recipies,the audience settled down to listen to Rosie Finnegan,originally of Carrigans townland,Silverbridge,give an illustrated talk on her extensive research into the history and art of lace-making.They learned that 'Carrickmacross Lace' is somewhat of a misnomer,because the original lace-making school was set up in Culloville almost 200 years ago and that there were,at one time,three lace-making schools operating in the Crossmaglen/Culloville area.These women were feminists before the term became popular and strong lace-makers often educated their families and bought farms from the proceeds which were sold to aristocratic families around Europe.Rosie is determined that this craft will be revived amongst the younger people and that its history will become much better known.

All present for the afternoon were enthralled at the wealth of tradition still alive and left determined to find out more,taste more and try their hands at something with roots in the past!

The Winter School concluded on Saturday night by the light of old oil lamps beside old rocking chairs,walking sticks,domestic utensils from yesteryear,fan bellows,crooked pipes and tools of the past.The music,song and dance for the 'Calling Back of the Ceilidhe House' were provided by the Traditional Arts Partnership,South Armagh,under the direction of Elaine O'Sullivan.The creative ability of these young musicians has to be seen (and heard) to be believed and Michael J. Murphy,whose article 'Can We Call Back the Ceilidhe House?' in Hibernia magazine in October,1944,inspired the title for the evening,would have been reassured that his question has been answered.In the article,which he resurrected in 1975 when he attended one of the first Ceoltas seisiuns in the Welcome Inn in Forkill where he heard John Campbell tell stories and folk tales during breaks in the music,he asserted that the ceilidhe house was going to disappear and there was a need for the shanachie to move into a community setting.In the article he quoted the eminent Scottish conductor,Hugh Robertson,as observing : 'If you do not know what a ceilidhe is,you do not know what living is'.Anyone who was in Ti Chulainn on Saturday night certainly does know!

Another very successful Michael J. Murphy Winter School has concluded and it is hoped that,in the coming year, his works will,given proper funding,be made available to a much wider audience.Every schoolchild and student in the area should be au fait with the poetic prose of Newry,Mourne and Down's greatest writer,folklorist and social campaigner.