

### Echoes of Percy French

Roscommon County Council Library Services hold a substantial collection of the works and material relating to Percy French. The holdings can be viewed at the Local Studies Section, County Library, Abbey Street, Roscommon. Full details can also be accessed at

[www.roscommoncoco.ie](http://www.roscommoncoco.ie)  
[www.percyfrrench.com](http://www.percyfrrench.com)

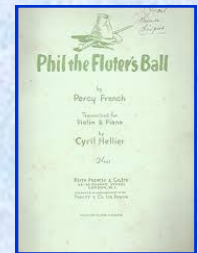
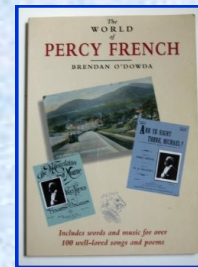
### Percy French Festival

The Percy French Festival was established in 2009 to provide an annual event in the County to honour and celebrate the legacy of this remarkable man. Castlecoote House, the festival's home, is a splendid location, providing a unique cultural environment and experience for visitors. Full details of the festivals' programmes can be found at

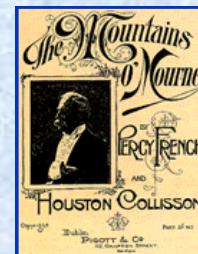
[www.percyfrrench.ie](http://www.percyfrrench.ie)  
[www.castlecootehouse.ie](http://www.castlecootehouse.ie)

## Roscommon Literary Heritage Series

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# Percy French



### Roscommon Anthology and Literary Map

Illustrated by artists associated with the county, *The Roscommon Anthology* is a beautifully produced book comprising selected writings by thirty-one writers with close associations to the county. The anthology is accompanied by a unique literary map of the county. Co-edited by Roscommon-born brothers, Michael and John O'Dea, the anthology was launched in November 2013 to considerable local and national acclaim.

*The Roscommon Anthology* is also available online at [www.theroscommonanthology.com](http://www.theroscommonanthology.com)

### Also available in the Roscommon Literary Heritage Series:

**Douglas Hyde:** *a gifted writer, scholar and first President of Ireland. He was a key figure in the preservation of the Irish language, through his translations of many hundreds of near-forgotten Irish folk tales, poems and songs. He was and remains a hugely significant national figure.*

**John McGahern:** *one of Ireland's greatest writers. Often referred to as 'Ireland's Chekhov', McGahern lived the writer's life, quietly yet determinedly writing novels and short stories of great depth and beauty.*

More editions in the series will follow.

Text: Gerry Boland Design and Layout: Dympna Naughten

Roscommon has a proud history and a rich literary heritage. Its authors, writers and poets have made a significant contribution to the national literature of Ireland. Roscommon County Council welcomes the production of these literary guides in promoting its cultural tourism. This first edition of the Roscommon Literary Heritage Series features three major literary figures in the county.

*Percy French was and remains one of Ireland's foremost songwriters. He was a hugely popular performer, spending much of his life travelling here, there and almost everywhere to perform, often with his long-time musical collaborator, Dr William Houston Collisson.*

*He was a deeply humane and compassionate individual who had little or no interest in politics or the world at large but who had an unquenchable interest and curiosity in people, most especially the 'ordinary' man and woman on the street. He had no time for pretensions and was without ego. Of his personality, perhaps the words of his first tutor, the Rev James Rountree, will provide a useful insight:*

*'Although I knew him for fifty-five years, I never saw him lose his temper or even get ruffled and I never knew him to lose a friend.'*

*In addition to all of the above, Percy French was also a highly accomplished watercolourist.*

## Songs and Poems

French was penning songs and poems from an early age. The melodies came easily, and he had a remarkable agility with words. Even at a young age he was writing poems and songs for the family magazine, which he edited, *The Tusk Morning Howl* and then later *The Trombone of Truth*.

He wrote his first successful song while studying at Trinity College Dublin in 1877 for a 'smoking concert' (actually, French never smoked or drank during his lifetime). The song, *Abdallah - Bulbul Ameer*, became hugely popular and was falsely claimed by other authors. It was an early lesson for French, who had failed to register the copyright of the song. By all accounts he never made a penny from this, his first successful song.

He wrote some of his best songs while he worked for the Board of Works. He got his inspiration often from stories and anecdotes he would be told during his travels. Songs he wrote during this time were: *Phil the Fluther's Ball*, *Andy McElroe*, *Slattery's Mounted Fut*, and *The Mountains of Mourne*.

One of French's most famous songs is *Are Ye Right There Michael*, a song ridiculing the state of the rail system in rural County Clare. The song caused such embarrassment to the rail company that it led to a libel action against French, though this ultimately failed. The story goes that French arrived late for the libel hearing at the court, and when questioned by the judge on his lateness, he responded 'Your honour, I travelled by the West Clare Railway,' resulting in the case being thrown out.

## Percy French Locations

### *In Roscommon*

**Percy French birthplace at Cloonyquin:** Cloonyquin House, the French family home, is long gone. All that remains is a memorial and a bust of the artist which was unveiled in 1984. The location is atmospheric and any Percy French enthusiast should make the pilgrimage.

**Castlecoote House** (pictured below): *The International Percy French Summer School*. The Percy French Summer School is an annual event that takes place in the second week in July and is set in the beautiful and historic Georgian building of Castlecoote House, four miles from Roscommon Town. The School features prominent speakers covering the historical, cultural, social and political context of his life and works. Its Honorary President is the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins.



### *Outside Roscommon*

**Canal Bank Seat:** The seat, made of granite and situated at Baggot Street Bridge in Dublin, near Patrick Kavanagh's bronze seat, is a stone's throw from Percy and Helen's family home at 35 Mespil Road. The seat is inscribed with a typical French witticism:

*Remember me is all I ask,  
But if that memory proves a task,  
Forget!*

**Ballyjamesduff:** a statue of French sits on a park bench in the town centre of Ballyjamesduff, in honour of French and his famous song, *Come Back, Paddy Reilly*.

**Cavan County Museum:** Cavan County Museum has been very fortunate to receive from the Percy French Society in Bangor a large and varied number of Percy French related items for display purposes. Material on show includes six of Percy French's original water colour paintings, as well as a large number of photographs and correspondence.

He threw himself back into the melee of work and performance. Then in 1893, during the performance of his *'Music Comedietta'; Midsummer Madness*, he met and fell in love with one of the performers, Helen Sheldon. When she returned to her home in Warwickshire, he courted her relentlessly with letters and poems. They were married in 1894 and moved, first to Mespil Road in Dublin, and soon after to Ailesbury Road. They had three daughters, Ettie, Mollie and Joan, the latter born after the family had moved to London.

Helen was a great organiser, and if there was one thing missing in Percy's life, it was organisation. She kept a personal diary of all his engagements and fees, however because he was away so often, he always managed to bring a degree of chaos to his affairs. He was a devoted husband and father and wrote regularly and lovingly to his wife and to each of his three daughters. Here is an extract from a letter he wrote to his wife from Newquay in Cornwall:

*My life consists of eating large meals and painting two pictures daily which we auction. The Cornish Coast doesn't appeal to me, being mostly precipitous cliffs and tiny bays. The good old sun bursting over the bog is what I love most. Rudyard Kipling was in the audience last night.*

He was writing prolifically during these years. In 1910, he and his musical collaborator, Dr. William Houston Collisson, were invited to tour Canada, the US and the West Indies. They received rapturous reviews and enjoyed enormous popularity everywhere they went. In New York, a reviewer wrote that 'the folks laughed till they were tired and their sides hurt.'

He was at the height of his success as a songwriter and performer when World War 1 broke out. He had never had any interest in politics and the brutality of the war affected him badly. Nonetheless, like many singers at the time, he travelled all over Britain and to the Continent to entertain the troops, as well as touring schools and colleges.

By 1916, his health was failing. This decline did not, however, cause him to scale down his extensive touring, and it was while he was on his way from Glasgow to Liverpool to fulfil an engagement in 1920 that he developed pneumonia. He died after a short illness in Formby, in Merseyside, on 24th January. He was sixty-six. He was buried in St Luke's graveyard in Formby.

Many of his songs were about real people and actual events. He wrote *The Emigrant's Letter* in response to the experience he had of sailing on the transatlantic steamer to America with hundreds of mainly young emigrants who would never set foot on home soil again. He wrote his famous song, *Come Back, Paddy Reilly* after he learned that his great friend and one-time jaunting car 'chauffeur', Paddy Reilly, had emigrated from his town of Ballyjamesduff.

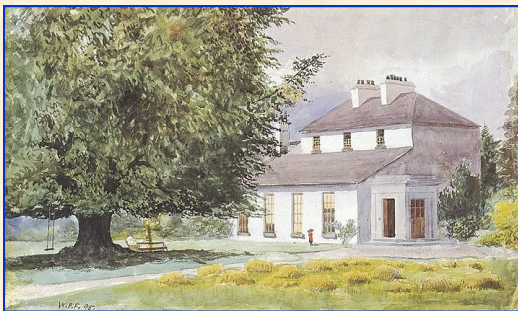
***Long, long ago in the woods of Gortnamona,  
I thought the wind was sighing round the blackthorn tree;  
But oh! It was the banshee that was crying, crying, crying,  
And I knew my love was dying far across the sea.***  
[from **GORTNAMONA**]

French was also a poet. Many of his poems, although they possess a lightness of touch, contain an inner sadness, the source of which almost certainly lay in the devastation that followed the death of his beloved young wife and first, great love, Ettie.

***Oh, loved one of the far away,  
I know that we shall meet some day,  
And once again walk hand in hand  
Through all the realms of fairyland.  
And Heavens own harps around us chime,  
As they did - once upon a time!***  
[from **NOT LOST BUT GONE BEFORE**]

## Visual Artist

William Percy French had a capacity to feel and experience beauty in a profound way and he often expressed these emotions through his paintings. He was a prolific painter of landscape watercolours. For much of his time as an 'Inspector of Drains', a period in his life in which he painted many of his best works, he considered art to be his true vocation. By the early 1900's he was exhibiting in Dublin and in London, at the New Dudley Gallery and the Modern Gallery on Bond Street. The Royal Family were enthusiastic patrons. He worked primarily in watercolours, though he did use oils from time to time. His watercolour of Queen Victoria's visit to Dublin hangs in Windsor Palace. (A variant of this painting hangs in the National Gallery in Dublin.)



The now demolished Cloonyquin House, where Percy grew up.

## A Brief Biography

The son of an Anglo-Irish landlord, William Percy French was born on 01 May 1854 at Cloonyquin House (between Tusk and Elphin), County Roscommon. His father was a doctor of law and justice of the peace and fine classical scholar. His mother, a daughter of the Rev William Percy, Rector of Carrick-on-Shannon, was one of the 'Misses Percy' who were much admired for their beauty, wit and musical abilities.



William Percy was the third of nine children, four boys and five girls. They spent a happy and carefree childhood in what William referred to as 'a haunt of ancient peace'. (The name Cloonyquin translates as 'beautiful meadows'.) Alas, as with so many of the great houses of Ireland, nothing remains of Cloonyquin House today.

Willie (those closest to him called him 'Willie') attended Kirk Langely School in Derby, then Windermere College, completing his secondary school education at Foyle College in Derry. He went on to study civil engineering in Trinity College, Dublin, taking longer than most to earn his degree. He wrote about this later: 'I think taking up the banjo, lawn tennis and water-colour painting instead of Chemistry, Geology and the theory of strains, must have retarded my progress a good deal'.

In 1881 he was appointed Chief Engineer with the Board of Works in County Cavan. During his period of employment, he travelled widely throughout the county, almost always on his trusted bicycle, performing his engineering duties and also visiting and staying with a growing number of friends and acquaintances. He wrote many of his best known songs during this time and he also painted the local landscape extensively.

When the Board of Works reduced its staff around 1887, French was let go and almost immediately took editorship of a new, weekly, comic newspaper, *The Jarvey*. He threw himself into this project but it didn't last long as the project was doomed from the outset as it never made any profits. However, even while he was editing *The Jarvey*, he was already pursuing what would become a successful career as a songwriter and entertainer.

Just before he became editor of *The Jarvey*, he met and fell in love with the petite and beautiful Ethel (Ettie) Kathleen Armitage-Moore, who he called his 'Little Ray of Sunshine'. They were married in Dublin on 28 June 1890. Disaster struck a year later when Ettie died giving birth to their daughter. She was only twenty and her loss, and that of the baby a few weeks later, was a devastating blow to Percy. Those close to him spoke later of how the loss affected him, how his hair turned white, and how he eventually turned himself towards a future without his dearest love.