Mournes Cultural Heritage Book
Preserve your memories, keep them well, what you forget you can never retell.

Louisa May Alcott

As memories and traditions grow old, they also become all the more precious. Modern day life is very different to when it was like many years ago and it’s important that we understand and appreciate our past. This book seeks to celebrate our sense of belonging and remind us of the simplicity of Mourne life in days gone by.

It is designed to be a cross generational resource:

• An educational tool for younger audiences which will undoubtedly entertain them.
• A reminiscence and recall tool for the more mature audiences.

"Preserve your memories, keep them well, what you forget you can never retell."

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A celebration of the rich and diverse cultural heritage of the Mournes.

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Introduction
Rathfriland in the 1800s was a busy market town and had a thriving linen industry but still times were difficult with famine and economic hardships. Many left Mourne for a better way of life and Catherine O’Hare, just sixteen years old, left the area for the new colonies. Catherine survived the journey, worked hard, schooled herself and got married. At this time men were seeking to go “over land” to the west in the quest for gold. The Rathfriland lady persuaded the men to let her travel on this dangerous journey and she was the first European lady to cross the Rockies.

Catherine’s resilience and compassion was recognised by the pioneers and it is said that her presence nurtured a kindness amongst these hard men. In Canada Catherine taught children how to read and write, built a school house and is fondly remembered as a “brave and notable pioneer”.

Catherine O’Hare

The first European woman to cross the Rockies....
Highway men, also called outlaws, robbers, raparees and tories, roamed parts of Mourne for around 200 years! The Hilltown historian, Mr Francis McPolin, suggests that they were not truly highway robbers but the descendants of former land owners whose land had been seized. The most notorious was Redmond O’Hanlon of Orier in Co. Armagh, born in 1640. With land and other riches taken from the family, Redmond, with his band of raparees, took to the hills and roads, taking from settlers whenever he could. Becoming a menace to the authorities, a £200 reward was offered for his capture although he continued to roam until his end. On April 25th 1681, the chief went to rest as they waited on traders returning from a local fair. O’Shiel remained on guard at the bridge and Art took his opportunity to shoot Redmond and he discharged his blunderbuss (an 18th century gun) into the sleeping Redmond and ran off to claim his reward. The reward was claimed but O’Shiel, not part of the treachery, was executed for his part in the murder. Although the head was taken to Downpatrick, it was eventually found at Downpatrick.

Some locals still say that the ghost of Redmond haunts the Eight Mile Bridge!
The “Calliagh” or “Cailleach”

According to Mourne tradition, a handful of straw from the last sheaf of harvest was used to make a three foot length of plait called a calliagh. In 1965, Mr Henry McElroy from Greencastle was one of the last farmers to report removing a sheaf to hang in the kitchen. The calliagh is said to bring good luck and a fruitful harvest. Henry also used to put silver and salt in the milking bucket of a newly calved cow – perhaps this was to ensure it would provide a plentiful supply of milk.

New Year’s Wisp

This was the custom of taking a wisp made from hay or straw to a neighbour’s house on New Year’s Day morning and wishing them a happy new year. In return a drink would be offered to an adult and a silver coin to a young person. It was necessary to burn the wisp before midday or it wouldn’t bring any luck.

First Footing

The first visitor of the New Year would set the pattern of luck for the rest of the year and if they brought a gift of coal or salt, then that was a good sign. A fair haired individual was favoured and a man more so than a woman. Some homes ensured a fair haired female would visit in the early hours on the morning just to make sure the luck wouldn’t leave before he came.

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The May Fair and the Hallo’tides Fair helped to celebrate the natural divide in the pastoral year and were also important “hiring fairs” (ie fairs that you attended if you were looking for a job). Castlewellan was famous for its hiring fairs in the 18th and 19th centuries.

All Mourne towns were renowned for their monthly fairs selling livestock, eggs, butter, milk, cloth and crafts.

- Greencastle celebrated the Ram Fair and became known for crafters and entertainment.
- Hilltown fair was famous for sheep, especially the Mourne black faced sheep.
- Castlewellan had an impressive horse fair.
- Kilkeel and Rathfriland fairs were known mainly for linen, flax and livestock.

When summer was over the families returned home with their livestock and goods for the Boley Fair — a timely celebration.

In days gone by, it was cattle that grazed the hills rather than sheep and it was the “Boley Fair” that attracted farmers from far and wide. This October Fair relates back to farming practice in the 1700s when families moved their cows to the mountains over the summer months to take advantage of free grazing. The families built a temporary shelter or ‘boley/booley’ from sods and earth. They minded their cattle, cut turf, milked the cows and made butter. It is likely that the women also spun wool whilst the men stacked the turf to dry out, before carting it home. When summer was over the families returned home with their livestock and goods for the Boley Fair — a timely celebration. Traces of boley huts can still be seen on the “backside” of the Mournes, at Deer’s Meadow and Castlebog near Hilltown, where turf cutting was also practised until relatively recent times.

In 1945, Stephen Fitzpatrick talked about a woman walking from Butter Mountain to Stang with a churn of milk on her back and when she got home the milk had been churned into butter.
It is common practice nowadays for patients to seek medical assistance when they have an ailment, however years ago General Practitioners were aware that patients often sought help through charms and local cures.

Charm usually consisted of a rhyme or a ritual i.e. the patient had to do something to ensure its success. The "cure" could be well known or, indeed, a secret.

Well known cures include:
- To soothe pain – dress wounds with a bread poultice
- To remove a wart - rub a potato on the area and then bury it
- To cure hiccups – drink from the wrong side of the cup
- To soothe a nettle sting – rub with a dock leaf

It was said that if a woman married a man with the same surname, she had the cure for the whooping cough. Others believed that it could be cured by passing the child under a donkey's belly.

Other cures were not for the faint hearted. For example, it was said that baldness was cured by the application of cow's urine!

But did they work?
Some suggest that ancient rituals instil faith and belief while others believe in the healing properties of natural herbs and materials.

Dr Ian Shannon from Rathfriland remembers a patient with a badly burning leg. The man had allowed his leg to become infected, upon which a thick layer of fresh cow manure was applied. The doctor remonstrated and persuaded him to discover that the patient's leg had healed perfectly.

He also mentioned that if a patient was recovering from an ailment and said "the charms" couldn't be self-administered?
How times have changed
In days gone by, finding the patient could present the GP with a real challenge. People were only known by the townland in which they lived. So people having the same family name were often referred to by a nickname eg "Strong Man Mc…", "Twister Mc…", "Scooper Mc..". This reference to character or employment was very useful!

Examining a patient could also be a problem. One farmer insisted that his simmet (a vest tied at the neck) stayed on all winter "as manys a one got pneumonia if they changed their clothes too soon".

The doctor couldn't get his stethoscope down the patient's back as the vest was stuck to his skin!!

Handy women
In the early 1900s many babies were born at home, delivered by the GP or midwives (the latter were known as "handy women"). Occasionally, if the women wasn't near by at the birth, she helped with the midwife until the baby was delivered.

Night life
The doctor's surgery was an important part of village and town life. Saturday could be a busy day as the farmer and his wife came to town to take advantage of late night shopping. The warm surgery was often a hive of activity, with patients frequently being seen at 10pm. It was also an opportunity to get the doctor to pull teeth or get a bottle of "coloured medicine", which was actually coloured water (the placebo effect)

"On Fair Days people came to have their teeth extracted by my father. I used to abhor the sight of rows of teeth on the window sill of the treatment room". (Dr Ian Shannon)
Folklore

There is a rich history of folklore in Mourne and Dr Francis McPolin, a Hilltown historian and school master, collected many stories about superstitions, beliefs and customs.

The thorn tree

Perhaps one of the best known traditions is about the bad luck that will follow if you cut down a thorn tree. It is believed that fairy spirits inhabit thorn trees - a belief that has resulted in a lot of respect or possibly fear! As a result, there are still many lone thorn trees in the wider Mourne area, sometimes in the middle of large cultivated fields, because the farmer has chosen not to tempt fate.

Folklore tells us that a bull kept knocking down the building work of the Clonduff chapel. The priest was getting very frustrated so he took a stick and beat the bull off and chased it away. He then stuck the stick in the ground saying “you’ll hardly come back past that!” It never did and the stick grew into a fairy thorn.

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The fairies

Stories about the fairies or “wee folk” can still be heard and it is believed that the Fairy Glen in Rostrevor is very aptly named. According to Dr McPolin, fairies were believed to be three feet tall. They lived in underground caves and got up to all sorts of mischief.

Where the Fairies Danced (In the Fairy Glen) by Alice Kelly

As you drew near the bridge, by the Fairy Glen You knew to go tip-toe For if the wee folk heard you They’d take fright and go Their music, older people say Was sweet unto the ear As a melodian sound swept through the air You’d wish that you were here Along the river bank was laid A fairy platform light A Rostrevor villager’ spied them Lay this floor one night Then the water lapped, as their steps they tapped And the moon was in full flight He watched them rather closely But hid well out of sight With hands held high up in the air They circled keeping time And then they glided gracefully And formed a single line

Next, coming down to join them From up the Fairy Glen With fiddles softly playing Were about twelve more wee men All were dressed in robes of red Which flowed down to the ground As the dancing partners took their place They all swung ‘round and ‘round Then appearing through the trees Was the fairy King himself He marched them up the Fairy Glen Led by a single elf Our village friend stole from his den For it was time to go His watch was touchin’ midnight And the moon was sailin’ low.

Hungry Grass

Another tradition suggests that if you walk over a type of grass in the mountain, known as “hungry grass”, you may be overcome with hunger and weakness.

From Brunagh to Bingian and back again There’s quare things happen mountainy men But if you on the hillside Yer days must pass Keep a shepherd’s piece For the hungry grass If you have the misfortune of walking on “hungry grass”, there is a cure:

A shepherd’s piece, A soda farl, Buttered and split With a rasher inside To give a taste till it

“A Mourne Man’s Memories” by W.J. Fitzpatrick

Probably good advice either way when out walking the hills!
Walkers in the Mournes will be familiar with the Brandy Pad - a winding track that links Bloody Bridge, outside Newcastle, with the Hare’s Gap and the Trassey Valley. In the 18th century smuggling in Mourne was a means for locals to earn some cash, as hefty duties/taxes were placed on alcohol and luxury goods. Boats arriving from the Isle of Man, laden with tea, tobacco and brandy, arrived at the Bloody Bridge where the contraband goods were loaded onto ponies, all under the cover of darkness. The smugglers and their ponies made their way along the Brandy Pad to the Hare’s Gap and Hilltown, where the goods were off loaded for distribution within the wider area. There are a number of caves, both along the coast and in the mountains, that were used by the smugglers to hide from the authorities.

The Smugglers’ Pad

When my Granda’s Granda was young and single,
There was the story of the Smugglers’ Pad
The panniered ponies stamp’d the shingle,
Each of them led by a mountainy lad.

The journey’s far, and the travel slow
To the cave that only the smugglers know.

Silks for Her Ladyship,
Webs that gleam and shine;
All the southern summer
In His Lordship’s wine.

Gold for the sailor-man,
Silver for the lad,
Them was the days of plenty,
On the Smugglers’ Pad.

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Traditional Life

Children in Mourne

"Are Ye Coming Out to Play?"

Streets are no longer the playground that they were in days gone by, when children played hopscotch, marble games, made racing carts, skipped and had fun outdoors.

Patricia Strong from Rostrevor describes the games played over the different seasons.

Spring

Marble season

A circle was drawn in the ground using a stick. All players stood away at a designated distance (Buttocks) and the players took turns throwing a larger marble or ‘taw’ into the circle with the aim of hitting a marble out of the circle which they then claimed. After the first throw, all other moves were made from the ground. The marble could be flicked or spun to hit another marble as far away as possible. The aim was to gain marbles from your opponent whilst not forfeiting any of your own (particularly the special coloured ones).

Summer

Shop, skipping, statues, stick walking, cart racing, making catapults, bows and arrows, rounders, handball, cricket in the Square, crossing the stepping stones on the river, sailing stick, paddling and catching spricks.

Bat and Caddy - This is a local game that has been seen in a few other places.

A handsewn bat and a stick (the latter sharpened at both ends) were made by parents. The game involved throwing, catching and hitting the stick. The children needed to estimate distances and needed to be good at jumping.

Autumn

Corks, ‘Squaddies’ (a scary game of tag), knocking on doors and running away and bonfires.

Winter

A bucket of water was thrown down the hill and the children used it as a slide. Sometimes a train of children was formed when everyone joined in.

Snow – making the biggest snowball in the square.

Rope making

In early days, sun-dried mountain grass (Molinia) was used to make rope - hay was used in later days. The hay was cut and left to dry, then turned and gathered into small bundles. After fur or dried flax bundles were made into hay ropes. When ready, the rope was twisted with a wooden twister and wire hook. The straw rope had many uses, both indoors and out.

Sheep's langles, were made in a similar manner, occasionally using flax fibre. The angle linked the sheep's fore and hind legs together to stop them from wandering.

Dry stone walling

The dry stone walls of Mourne reflect the traditional skills of the local stone men.

Boulders, which littered the land, were used to build a dry stone wall which was then used as a boundary and a means of keeping in livestock. In the Mournes there are two kinds of dry stone walls - the single and the double skinned wall. Single skin walls are made from large granite boulders laid on top of each other. The double skinned walls, made mostly of shale, have two faces with a filler of smaller stones in the gaps between.

Dressed stone

In the 19th century, when the granite industry was booming, Mourne granite sets were cut by local craftsmen and these were used for the pavements of Britain’s booming industrial towns. Walk through the hills and you will see remains of the granite industry - rows of stone fences, flute troughs, setts (paving blocks) and children.

Hearthside crafts

Women in Mourne were also very skilled in home crafts. As the linen industry developed, women produced drawn thread or white-work for many Irish textile firms. Agents would call to the town with a sample book and ask for a number of different designs, ranging from simple stitches to detailed drawn thread and embroidery work for bespoke linen pieces. Of course, this work was carried out in addition to the many other chores the women had to do at home.
Mourne has a great history of old sayings and words, many of which are not known outside of the area. The older generation may remember a few of these!

What’s in a name?

Many of the mountain names came from the Irish language but it’s interesting to see how they reflect the nature of the hill, the animals in the area and the work of the local people.

Sayings and Words

He’s cute – he could mind mice at a crossroad

He’s not strong the more he looks it although

She’ll not tear in the plucking not as young as she seems

There’s a fair stretch in the evenings long nights-post Christmas

The nights are fair drawing in short nights-pre Christmas

Whatever you say say nothing keep quiet - don’t tell

Hawl up there whoa, stop

All rid up tied up

He would take the shirt of yer back take anything or everything

It’s raining cats and dogs dogs and cats sat on the thatched roof for heat – a sudden downpour, and down they came

hawl yer wisht be quiet

There’s not a hair of it not true

Someone has the bottom of the box on him wearing their best clothes

...has to stand twice to make a shadow very thin!

...not the day or yesterday...

A long time ago

dayligone, edge of dark dark

I would know your skin on a bush I’d recognise you anywhere

...an odd as clogs on a clergymans elbow out of place

...jaws were going like a fiddlers elbow tentative

He just knew enough not to eat himself not too keen?

Mourne has a great history of old sayings and words, many of which are not known outside of the area. The older generation may remember a few of these!
**Cartin’ Peat**  
By Richard Rowley, from *Apollo in Mourne, Poems Plays and Stories*  
Heavily loaded  
From Pierce’s bogs,  
Wi’ a cart o’ peat  
The oul’ mare jogs.  
Slitherin’, slidin’,  
Diggin’ in her toes,  
Down The Turf Loaney  
The oul’ mare goes.  

**On Slieve Na Man**  
By Richard Rowley, from *Apollo in Mourne, Poems Plays and Stories*  
If I was in Castlewellan  
I’d have the fun o’ the fair,  
But up on Slieve-na-man,  
Och! it’s lonely there.  
Only the clouds an’ the hills,  
An’ a scoldin’ mother to sort me;  
If I was in Castlewellan  
I’d have a young fellow to court me.  

**The Quarrymen**  
By Tom Porter  
I see them high on Donard’s slopes,  
On Seefin and Crockanroe,  
The ghosts of Mourne quarrymen  
Of fifty years ago.  
The mountains stand deserted,  
No more the hammer’s blow.  
Ghost of skilled and sturdy men,  
Proven men of worth,  
Who took the sparkling granite  
From the bowels of the earth.  
Now they live amid the silence,  
Gone for e’er the smiddy hearth.  
The cart tracks down the hillside  
Will echo ne’er again  
To the rumble of the stonecarts  
Or the boots of mountain men.  
For those days have gone for ever  
And alone the ghosts remain.  
Still they wander o’er the mountains  
From The Forks to Slievenagore,  
Over Kivitter and Bearnagh  
Ghosts of Mourne quarrymen,  
Men who lived in days of yore.  

**The Wayfarer in the Mournes**  
J.S. Doran  
Sing a song of pleasant beaches  
Where the mountains meet the sea.  
Sing of woods and shadowed streamlets  
From the uplands bounding free.  
Sing of crags against the high sky,  
Shepherd’s path and quarry track,  
Stone fringed fields, scots pine and fuchsia,  
All the things that call us back.  

**Singing of crags against the high sky,**  
*Shepherd’s path and quarry track,*  
*Stone fringed fields, scots pine and fuchsia.*