

ARDBOE LITERARY, PHOTOGRAPHIC AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY



FRANCIS QUINN “THE PIN” 1883-1960

Francis Quinn was born on 13 May 1883 in the townland of Clunto-richardson, Ardboe Parish, Co Tyrone, on the shores of Lough Neagh; the third of six children of Felix and Elizabeth Quinn. Francis spent much of his youth living with his maternal grandparents and uncles, who were boat-builders. A local fisherman gave the tall, exceedingly thin boy his nickname - the Pin. In the boat builder's terminology, pins were the long nails that were used to fasten a boat's timbers to the keel. He became a fisherman like his father, his uncles, and the generations before them. He married his cousin Ellen Coyle and they raised twelve children.

In 1927 the family moved to a new house in the shadow of Ardboe High Cross and the ruined abbey. It signalled the start of a linkage between the religious site and the meditative fisherman who had a keen sense of history. The Pin's sense of orderliness was irked by the wild state of the graveyard and its ruined churches, neglected for over two hundred years. Over a number of years, when he had an hour to spare, he transformed the graveyard to a thing of beauty in its own right, a fitting adjunct to the magnificent High Cross. At the same time he was learning, from his old neighbour Mick Donnelly, much of the lore of the monastic settlement and of the Cross itself, an authentic oral tradition that stretched back more than fourteen centuries. Over the following three decades the Pin disseminated this information to the many thousands of visitors and tourists who came to Ardboe. He broadcast twice on the BBC World Service, something in which he took immense pride. Thanks to a Maynooth seminarian, Rev Henry Devlin, who in 1948 committed much of the Pin's knowledge to paper, much of it was preserved. For the Pin the high-point came in 1952 when the parish priest held devotions in the abbey grounds on Midsummer's Day. The Pin viewed this ceremony as a direct link with St Colman who founded the abbey in 590.

Francis Quinn died on 29 May 1960. The old fisherman was laid to rest in his own graveyard, close to the Old Cross, and overlooking the waters of Lough Neagh.