

**ARDBOE LITERARY, PHOTOGRAPHIC AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY**



**LENA GRIMES 1890-1971**

The fishing rights of Lough Neagh were granted to the Chichester family following the Plantation of Ulster, and from that time onwards the authorities regarded the indigenous fishing families as being outside the law. The most intense persecution of the fishermen took place in the years 1876-1970, when the fishing rights were leased to the Toome Eel Fishing Company. The fishermen simply refused to relinquish their right to fish Lough Neagh as they had done from time immemorial. In that bitter century-long struggle it was the women of the fishing families who provided the strength and the constancy that sustained their menfolk.

One woman who exemplified that spirit was Lena Grimes, whose lifespan coincided with the years of struggle. The daughter of a Lough Neagh fisherman, Helena was born on 21 September 1890 in the townland of Clunto-richardson, parish of Ardboe, Co Tyrone, on the western shores of Lough Neagh. Lena's brothers became fishermen; five of her six sisters emigrated to USA.

Shortly after her sixteenth birthday, she married Charles Grimes, a fisherman and odd-job man. Their first daughter, Elizabeth, one of seven children, died in childhood. Charlie died in Great Flu in 1918. The family survived the hard years of 1920s and the Depression of the early 1930s with the support of Lena's brothers, fishermen who were continually harassed and prosecuted as they attempted to earn their livelihood. Her spirit never wavered in those harsh times; she saw to it that her children received what schooling was available to them, and her home was one in which books and newspapers were to be found. In 1934 the family's inheritance of the small farm was quickly overshadowed by the death of Lena's oldest son from tuberculosis, the emigration of her two daughters and a son, and the continued persecution of her remaining two sons as they sought a living on Lough Neagh. But her own troubles and heartbreak were put aside as she reached out to help neighbours. She provided food and shelter for many people. She never refused milk to anyone. She took in a family who had been evicted by a neighbouring farmer. There was to be a final loss; the tragic killing of her son Joe in 1970.

Lena died just over a year later, on 28 October 1971, active to the end. Lena had lived to see her grandchildren attend university and graduate, and to witness the final stages of the battle for ownership of the Lough Neagh fisheries. Two months after her death the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Cooperative Society became the official owner of the fisheries. It was the culmination of a struggle that had lasted more than 300 years.