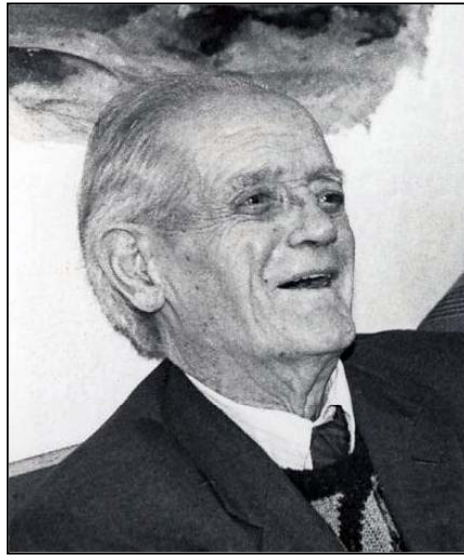


ARDBOE LITERARY, PHOTOGRAPHIC AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY



TOMMY DEVLIN 1906-1990 | Story Teller

Tommy Devlin was born on 1 September 1906, the second of four children of John Devlin JP and Ellen Walsh, national teacher, in the townland of Sessia, parish of Ardboe, beside the High Cross of Ardboe overlooking Lough Neagh. Parental ambitions foresaw a career in medicine or academia like his siblings, but he detested study - "I spent two or three terms as a boarder in Armagh, and it was the worst period of my life." By default he became involved in the family business interests: fish export, mixed farming, the bar and the shop. Tall, slim, lithe, the young Tommy Devlin was a county footballer and exceptional athlete, specialising in the high and long jump events. He married Eileen O'Hare, teacher, of Warrenpoint, Co Down, in December 1937. Their children - six daughters and one son - have made their own distinctive careers in the fields of literature and music.

Tommy's affability and his relaxed aristocratic bearing - as became one of the lineage of the O'Devlin clan, proud of the family nickname "Hatchety" in reference to their hereditary role as O'Neill's sword-bearer - made him an esteemed figure in Ardboe and in Mid-Ulster, and he fulfilled the necessary social and public duties that fell to his lot with the appropriate decorum and gravitas.

However it was in another field that Tommy Devlin was lauded and applauded during his long life: he was an incomparable raconteur, a master of the polished anecdote. Nothing gave his many acquaintances more pleasure than to hear him relate one of his countless anecdotes. He was not what is now described as a storyteller, a spinner of the tall tale or suggestive yarn; Tommy's anecdotes were re-tellings of the true incidents of everyday life, the trivial, the tragic, the comic. His scope was vast for he knew thousands of people; his gifts were that he had a perfect recollection of relationships and events; he could command, and retain, the absolute attention of his audience, whether a single person or the crowded bar of his public house, where Protestant, Catholic, and Dissenter mixed freely. In this ambience, this mood of pleasurable anticipation, he could unerringly set the scene in a few opening words so that the listener, by some peculiar osmosis, became an eye-witness to the unfolding drama, not only seeing but feeling the emotions, absorbing the very atmosphere. Tommy's delivery was soft-spoken, almost throwaway, but his timing was impeccable, and he had an almost mesmeric command of his audience's attention: with the slightest turn of the head he could make eye-contact with everyone in a crowded room. Finally, the denouement, and Tommy, appreciating the effect of his well-crafted art on his hearers, would allow himself a smile of satisfaction.