

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

THE NORTH OF IRELAND FAMILY HISTORY SOCIETY

LISBURN BRANCH

JAMES MCKOWEN, THE BARD OF LAMBEG

James McKowen, the Bard of Lambeg, was born in Lambeg on 11th February 1814 and attended school for a short period. He worked in Barbour's thread mills at Hilden and then Glenmore Bleach Works, where he was employed for the next forty years. His mother's keen literary tastes influenced him, for Mrs. McKowen was the former Miss Johnson, daughter of John Johnson, who kept an inn in Bow Street, Lisburn. Robert Owenson's acting company performed in a theatre at the rear of the inn and Miss Johnson spent many evenings with Robert Owenson and his daughters Sydney, later the famous writer and patriot Lady Morgan, and Olivia, later to become Lady Olivia Clarke.

James was an avid reader and included Shakespeare, Scott, Burns, Byron and Moore among his favourites. McKowen never published a volume of his own verse but contributed to the Nation under the nom de plume Curlew, and in other publications he was known as Kitty Conner. His work, which was chiefly concerned with local subjects, had the genuine ring of inspiration about it. Among his most popular works was the famous ballad entitled 'The Old Irish Jig' and the 'The Old Irish Cow'. He exchanged verses with many of the working class, agricultural and handloom weaving poets of the day, such as David Herbison and Francis Davis the 'Belfast Man.' It has been said of McKowen that "Few men enjoyed life with greater zeal than he did; he made many friends for himself, and his genial countenance and happy disposition never failed in imparting to others a share of his joyous temperament."

James McKowen died at his residence, Beech Terrace, Largymore, Lisburn, on 22 April 1889, aged 75 years and is buried in a family grave in Lambeg Parish Church.