

## HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

### ANTRIM AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



**(Finlay's Fort)**

#### **ROBERT FINLAY (1808-1874)**

Robert Finlay grew up under the shadow of 'Finlay's Forth', Rathenraw, near Antrim where his father, James, had a small farm. Robert showed no interest in farming and could often be found sitting at the back of a ditch reading a book. A neighbouring farmer, William Graham, was quick to see the youth's potential and acquired a place for him, in 1826, at Belfast College (now Royal Belfast Academical Institution). He remained there until 1831 when he obtained a medal for gaining the best results in Mathematics and Philosophy in his year. After various teaching positions and further study at Trinity College, Dublin he became an assistant at Armagh Observatory. In 1840 he was appointed Professor of Mathematics at the new College of Manchester.

In addition to his teaching duties Finlay carried out research into various mathematical concepts eg. plane and spherical trigonometry, helped to produce the Belfast Almanac and published various pamphlets including one on *Elementary Principles of Dynamics and Equations of Motion* (1841). Another of his papers '*Application of Algebra to the Modern Geometry*' (1848) was published in the '*Mathematician*' edited by William Rutherford of the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich. He regularly corresponded with leading mathematicians of his day, in particular, Professor James Thompson, his teacher and mentor at Belfast College, who became Professor of Mathematics at Glasgow University in 1832 and his son William Thompson, Lord Kelvin.

In 1861 Finlay took up his final teaching post in The Royal School, Dungannon. On his death in 1874 he bequeathed his library of books to the Graham family in gratitude for William Graham's help and support. These books tell their own story of Robert Finlay because the boy who read books at the back of a ditch near Antrim now had a collection of over five hundred books; not only books on mathematics but also grammars, dictionaries and bibles in over one hundred different languages, all of which he had studied.