

COUNTY DONEGAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY



HARRY SWAN (1879 – 1970): Founder member of County Donegal Historical Society

Harry Percival Swan was born in Buncrana, Co Donegal on 4 June 1879, the eldest of eight children. His father was a miller and after graduating from Foyle College, Derry in 1896, Harry was employed in the family business as an apprentice miller and grain merchant, subsequently rising to the rank of Director. As the business expanded, Harry became a sales representative and travelled the north west seeking orders for grain, meal and oats. In this capacity, he came in contact with a number of folklorists and he collected their stories which he later published. He developed contacts with noted archaeologists such as Oliver Davies of Queen's University, whom he invited to contribute to his books. He loved the outdoors and secured the services of D. J. O'Sullivan, a noted naturalist as a contributor to his publications. He was a prolific author and in 1938 published his first book, the "Book of Inishowen"; his best-known books are "Twixt Foyle and Swilly" and "Romantic Inishowen".

For recreation, he played golf and was President of the North-West Golf Club, Buncrana, in 1924. Always interested in the development of his native town, he acted as Chairman of Buncrana Town Improvements Committee. A keen promoter of local history, he was a founder member of County Donegal Historical Society, acting as Vice-President in 1946. Visitors to his home were always welcome and he was an enthusiastic tour guide. His unique contribution to folklore and history in his native county resulted in his election to the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland. Later in life, he developed an interest in travel and he claimed he had sailed all the major seas of the world on some of the great liners of the period. On his return, he would invite local people to lectures on his travels.

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

Over the years, he built up a unique collection of historical artefacts including Greek vases, Bronze Age axe heads, ivory glass, scientific items, silver and ceramics. In 1942, he presented his entire collection to the Royal Irish Academy. He had hoped to have his artefacts displayed in the National Museum but money was not available for this project.

He died in 1970 at his home, "Ardeelen" and is buried in the family tomb in the Church of Ireland graveyard in Buncrana. In an obituary published in "Donegal Annual", the following tribute was paid to him:

"Seldom have the praises of Donegal been so well sung; Seldom has any county had as forthright a propagandist as H. P. Swan."

Seán Beattie