

# FAMOUS TANDRAGONIANS

## *Some notable people from Tandragee*

BY GABRIEL McDONNELL

*“In nearly every sphere; political, cultural, medical and social, people from Tandragee have changed the rich heritage of Ireland and sometimes the world”.*

That’s a bold claim, I know, but one which I hope to show in this article, is an accurate one, for I believe that people from the place I call “home,” have enriched, not only the local, but the world stage in literature, medicine, sport, music and history.

The late Tommy Makem has a cracking version of “The Rollicking Boys around Tandragee” which proudly proclaims:

*“Green Erin’s my country, the gem of the sea,  
But the gem of auld Ireland is Tandragee.”*

A photograph of Tandragee, in 1903 with its thatched houses and its pot-holed main street is the oldest one that I have been able to locate. It depicts a scene very different from the busy town of today, where crossing the street can be a risky adventure in itself. This photograph of Market Street gives a glimpse of an era when life was less affluent, and simpler. The buildings on the left have all been demolished, to make way for a car park and new housing while the right hand side bears a few resemblances and features of today’s modern town.

Fifty years on, and this second photograph depicts Mill Street in 1953. One of the houses on the right is where my late mother was born and the second building on the left side is where I was born and reared.



**Mill Street, Tandragee, c 1950**

A visit to St. Patrick’s Church of Ireland Cathedral, Armagh, will introduce you to a statuette known as the ‘Tandragee Idol’. It derives its name because it stood for some time in the grounds of Ballymore Rectory, Tandragee, where it came into the possession of the Reverend McEndoo, Rector of Tandragee in the early part of the 20th century. R. A. S. Macalister, President of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland wrote in 1935, “It seems that the idol is a representation of one of Ireland’s



**Market Street, Tandragee, 1903**

*greatest kings, Nuadha, who lost his throne after losing his arm in battle. Overthrown by Bres, who ruled selfishly and oppressively, Nuadha had an arm made for himself out of silver and made a triumphant return to power by defeating Bres in battle. Though roughly sculptured the statuette makes a powerful and disturbing statement”.*



***The Tandragee Idol***

This article had its genesis in a question by one of the Society members who enquired had I heard of anyone called Benn who had some connection with hospitals in Belfast and was apparently born in Tandragee. I later “googled” the two pieces of information and was pleasantly surprised with the results.



***George Benn (1801-1882)***

George Benn (1801-1882) was born on 1st January 1801 – the very day the Act of Union came into force – in Tandragee and was the fourth of six children of John Benn (1767-1853) a brewer. The family later moved to Belfast and in 1816 George entered Belfast Academical Institution, where he quickly established himself as an outstanding and brilliant student. In 1819 he won the

faculty prize with an essay dealing with the ‘parish’ of Belfast, a subject he was to return to many times, and which eventually elevated him to being the foremost authority on the history of the city. After contributing many articles in the 1850’s and 1860’s to *The Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, in 1877 George Benn’s “A History of the Town of Belfast” was published by Marcus Ward. It received immediate critical acclaim and William Henessy, of the Dublin Public Record Office, proclaimed, “*I think you have managed to do an almost impossible thing, namely to create a history for an unhistoric town!*”

George’s elder brother Edward Benn (1798-1874) was an industrialist and one of the greatest philanthropists Belfast has ever known. He, too, was born in Tandragee and would have been thirteen when the family moved to Belfast. Edward was a man of business, starting out as a brewer in Downpatrick. However, after a costly, failed dispute with the Revenue which brought the family close to ruin, huge fortunes were made when Edward found a way of exploiting the iron ore on the family estate at Glenravel, Co. Antrim. By 1870 Edward’s eyesight was failing but in his remaining years he gave most of his money to good causes. Benn finances enabled the foundation of the ‘Belfast Hospital for Skin Disease’, ‘The Ulster Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital’, and the ‘Samaritan Hospital for Women’. I have been unable to find a portrait of Edward but he is a classic example of the “*No Pinch*” motto of his birthplace, Tandragee.

I would be quite surprised if many readers have heard of a little-known ‘Tandragonian’, John Creery Ferguson (1802-1865). (photo 5). When researching The Benn Hospitals I stumbled upon an article in *The Ulster Medical Journal* entitled *Two Hundred Years of Midwifery 1806 to 2006*. A fleeting reference to a J.C. Ferguson prompted me to continue, as the name Ferguson was quite common in Tandragee. I discovered a reference to a Dr. J.H.M. Pinkerton who had published a paper on J.C. Ferguson and, what follows, is widely reliant on that paper and, in many places, a transcription with very little original input by myself.

It is necessary however to put that article in its historical perspective. At the beginning of the 19th century most expectant mothers were delivered at home except the few who were admitted to the “lying-in” hospitals in Dublin and Belfast. The majority of births were delivered by females who had no training but had learned from older women or their own experiences of pregnancy and labour. Bear in mind that ultrasound and video-screening are developments of the last twenty years. It has been calculated that the average age of death in 1850’s Belfast was nine years: infant mortality was excessive, housing conditions were deplorable, food was scarce and of course there was an horrendous epidemic in 1847. There was no way of assessing the vitality of the unborn infant as there were no diagnostic instruments to do so.



**John Creery Ferguson, A.M., M.B., T.C.D.  
Hon. F. King's and Queen's Coll. Phys. 1. 1802-65.  
First Professor of Medicine Queen's University.  
First President of Ulster Medical Society**

Things were about to change radically, and the first development was the result of work carried out by a *Tandragonian*, John Creery Ferguson who was born in Market Street, Tandragee in 1802. The Ferguson family lived in Market Street, Tandragee, where the father started his career as an apothecary and where his father-in-law was the incumbent of the Church of Ireland Parish of St. Mark. The family moved to Dublin so that a young J.C. Ferguson could have a better life and education. He studied medicine at Trinity College from 1815 to 1823 and, as was customary, spent two years abroad – one in Edinburgh and one in Paris, before returning to Dublin where he graduated MB in first place, winning the gold medal.

'Auscultation' is a medical term which at its simplest means 'the act of listening'. *Auscultation*, upon which knowledge of foetal well-being largely relies today, did not become a practical proposition until after R.T. Laennec (a French doctor) had invented the stethoscope and perfected the technique of 'mediate auscultation' in the second decade of the 19th century. The stethoscope made direct contact with the patient unnecessary.

Throughout the British Isles the instrument was treated with suspicion and again widely ignored by the medical profession in general. Fortunately there were men ahead of their time and amongst these were two young Irishmen, William Stokes and J.C. Ferguson, who began to study the uses of the stethoscope in 1825 while undergraduates in Edinburgh.

In November 1827, soon after he qualified as a physician at Trinity College Dublin, a young doctor described how he had heard, with a Laennec stethoscope at the Dublin General Dispensary, the beating of the human foetal heart. This young doctor's name was John Creery Ferguson.

In 1829 he wrote a medical paper entitled, "*Auscultation the only unequivocal evidence of pregnancy*", citing cases. The first of the cases he describes is of great obstetric and historical interest, as it is the first time on record, that the foetal heart was heard in these islands.

The patient was a young woman, aged twenty two, who was seen at the Dublin General Dispensary in November 1827, complaining of indigestion: "*She told me her menses were regular and that her abdomen which I observed to be enlarged was so, only occasionally. Indeed such was the arrangement of the symptoms which she stated herself to labour under, that she completely blind-folded me. However, on her third visit with no beneficial effects following the exhibition of the medicines ordered for her, I employed the stethoscope.*"



**Using an early stethoscope**

Having convinced himself that he could, beyond any doubt, hear the foetal heart, he informed her that she was pregnant. The result was predictable. "*The patient received the news with extreme indignation. Indeed this young lady's histrionic talent was of the first order and such was her well-feigned agony at the very idea her virgin innocence being ever suspected that, had I not positive evidence of my senses to confirm the opinion, I had expressed I should have felt extremely uncomfortable.*" The other cases cited are of similar experiences but despite his youth and the strict official sexual mores of his day, Dr. Ferguson remained sympathetic to the plight of the unmarried but pregnant mother-to-be. He was exceptionally clever and sensitive to expectant mothers and dedicated to foetal wellbeing. It would appear he has received little recognition at home or abroad, but the first person to hear the foetal heartbeat in the British Isles was John Creery Ferguson and he was born in Market Street, Tandragee.

Many readers might expect an article on famous "sons" of Tandragee to include some attention devoted to the dramatic career of one of the most colourful figures in Irish history viz. Tandragee's own "Robin Hood", Count Redmond O'Hanlon.

He was a member of the ancient O'Hanlon clan whose roots were in the Tandragee area and who ruled the Lordship of Orior for a thousand years, but fared badly during the reign of James I. However there is a plethora of material available on the topic and I would simply point out that the raparee was buried in the old graveyard at Ballinabeck.



**Clock and Uilleann pipes made by William Kennedy (1708-1832)**



William Kennedy (1768-1834), the next person I wish to include in this elite club of "Famous Tandragonians" does not have the distinction of having been born in Tandragee. The closing decade of the 18th century was a most fruitful and creative period, particularly for musical instrument making.

William Kennedy was born near Banbridge in 1768 and due to a virulent attack of smallpox, was blinded at the age of four. As was customary for the period, blind children were encouraged to learn music. By the time he was thirteen he had learned to play the fiddle and gained an elementary knowledge of making furniture. He acquired an old set of Irish bagpipes and encountered great difficulty putting them in playing order. While apprenticing with a local clockmaker, they shared a mutual interest in repairing clocks and pipemaking, particularly the making of 'uilleann' pipes. Uilleann pipes currently hold a prominent status in Irish music. The word 'uilleann' comes from the Gaelic word 'uille' meaning elbow.

Kennedy married in 1793 and moved to Tandragee in 1800 to work and support his wife and family. A few lines from the eminent politician J.G. Biggar help us appreciate Kennedy's amazing accomplishments:

*"From a rude block of ebony, a fragment of an elephant's tooth and a piece of silver, having first formed his lathe and his tools, he shapes and bores the complicated tubes, graduates the ventage, adapts the keys, and forms the instrument of perfect external finish and beauty that discourses the most eloquent music; and all this by the exquisite sensibility of touch, for he is stone blind and quite incapable of distinguishing the black colours of ebony from the white of ivory."* Another reference in the Newry Magazine in 1815 further illustrates his genius: *"Kennedy can distinguish by touch, on any kind of watch in common use, the time of day to a single minute, by merely gliding his fingers around the dial plate, and thus ascertaining the position of the hands."*

T.G.F. Patterson, author of "Harvest Home" provides further details to our knowledge of Kennedy; *"He made an excellent writing cabinet for Mrs. Reilly of Scarva, where he met the celebrated piper Downey, and it was here that Kennedy first became interested in pipes. Apparently Mrs. Reilly was taught to play the harp by a blind harp player."*

No doubt this would have given inspiration and determination to Kennedy in the pursuit of his craft. Kennedy died on October 29th 1834 and his obituary can be found in the Newry Telegraph of November 11th 1834:

*'The Late Mr William Kennedy, of Tandragee ... one of the most extraordinary men who have appeared in these latter times. Though totally deprived of sight.....This ingenious man fabricated his own tools, and with ease he constructed time-tellers, bagpipes, flutes and various other instruments of music.....Add to this that he was a kind-hearted, friendly, industrious, moral and religious man; an affectionate husband, a fond parent, and, in all respects, an useful and justly esteemed member of society.'*

The memory of William Kennedy is kept alive in this area by an annual Festival of Piping organised each November by Armagh Pipers Club which brings together pipers from a wide range of European traditions.



**David Sinton (1808-1900)**

Many American presidents have interesting Irish connections claiming Irish heritage - the most recent being the 'O'Bamas of Moneygall' - and for this reason only, I make mention of David Sinton, (26th June 1808-31st August 1900). Wikipedia encyclopaedia states that: "*Sinton was born in Tandragee, County Armagh. He was the son of linen manufacturer John Sinton and Mary McDonnell. The family emigrated to America and settled initially in Pittsburgh. He was a pig-iron industrialist whose fortune came from stockpiling this commodity, waiting for the American Civil War and then selling that iron at hugely inflated prices. Mr. Sinton's only surviving child, Annie, was the wife of Charles Phelps Taft, whose brother was William Howard Taft, the 27th President of the U.S.A. It was said, with assuredness, that Sinton money financed the presidential bid. Upon his death, he left \$20,000,000 (the equivalent 2011 of this is ten times that sum). The town of Sinton, Texas is named in his honour.*"



**John Henry Porter**

An advertisement in some of the local newspapers in 1846 invited applicants to apply or contact Henry John Porter, who was agent for the 6th Duke and Duchess of Manchester. The Duchess was formerly Miss Millicent Sparrow and, through her huge fortune inherited as an only daughter, the present Tandragee Castle was rebuilt between 1830 and 1838. Millicent, a very religious person, was very socially aware, and influenced her husband to be likewise. They had the good sense to delegate management of their Tandragee estates to the missionary-like H. J. Porter.

## TO THE TENANTRY ON THE DUKE OF MANCHESTER'S ESTATES

The DUKE OF MANCHESTER, anxious to alleviate the Distress which the failure of the Potato Crop is likely to occasion, has directed me to make such arrangements as will provide employment for the TENANTS and COTTIERS on his ESTATES, in the execution of Works which will be of permanent utility.

Having himself already opened the principal Water-courses on his property, the Drainage of the Land has been greatly facilitated, and His Grace now proposes to advance money, without Interest, to such Tenants as are anxious to improve their Farms by Thorough-draining, under the direction of the Agricultural Inspectors; the Sums so advanced to be repaid by TEN equal Yearly Instalments.

When it is borne in mind that Thorough-drainage, properly carried on, is found to repay the expense in Five Years by the increased value of the Crops, the extension of the time for repayment to Ten Years will be found more than sufficient. I beg to call the attention of the small Farmers to the necessity of preparing their Land immediately for the ensuing Crop; a quantity of SEED RYE shall be provided, at First Cost, to be repaid after the harvest of 1847; and to those who prepare Ground for PARSNIPS, a portion of SEED will be given, together with TURNIP SEED at the proper season, as hitherto, without any charge.

**HENRY JOHN PORTER,  
AGENT.**

Tandragee Castle,  
October 31. 1846.

James Henderson, Printer, Newry.

He was appointed 'moral agent' in 1833 and served them and their tenants zealously for the next twenty years. Porter had a lively, intelligent mind and a passion for hard work and, despite his surname, was extremely anti-drink. Porter became a great innovator, setting up a loan fund, a clothing fund, three dispensaries, an orphan asylum, a circulating library, creating twenty-odd schools and a fever hospital. He had a talent for large-scale organisation and with his evangelical landlord, the Duke of Manchester, he fostered a religious, social, economic and political attitude which had an enduring legacy. Try as I have, he disappears in 1853 and nothing further is known about him.

There is, however, plenty of material on the Manchesters. The 10th Duke was the last of the Manchesters to be born in the castle in 1902 – thus a *Tandragonian*. He was also the last Manchester to occupy the castle and left in 1928. He had been left with crippling debts by his father the 9th Duke, who was, a spendthrift and a heavy gambler, with a love of the fast life. From 1928 the castle lay empty until the outbreak of the Second World War. In 1955 the castle was sold to another famous 'Tandragonian', 'Mr. Tayto'!

In the sporting arena two "*Tandragonians*" have achieved the highest honours..

Michael (Mick) Hoy (1910-1984) was a former Irish footballer who played for Glenavon, Dundalk, and Ireland. When Mick began his international career in 1937, the Football Association of Ireland claimed jurisdiction over the whole of Ireland and selected players from the whole island. Between 1937 and 1939 Mick Hoy made six appearances for Ireland winning his 'caps' while playing club football for Dundalk. He made his international debut in a 3-2 away defeat to Norway, 10th October 1937, in a qualifier for the 1938 F.I.F.A. World Cup. He made his final appearance for Ireland on May 23, 1939 in a 1-1 draw with Germany. No doubt he



**Mick Hoy**

would have achieved many more international honours but the Second World War brought international competition to a cessation.

During the 1950's Mick returned to his local club, Tandragee Rovers, where he worked as a coach with the senior and youth teams, which achieved considerable success under his tutelage. A kind and humble man, Mick was passionate and knowledgeable about the game of soccer, never mentioning his own considerable achievements but fostering a love of the game in the community. He was blessed with a family of five – all girls!



**Philip McCallen in action**

Another 'Tandragonian' to achieve the highest honours in his chosen sport is Philip McCallen. As a motor-cycle racer, Philip is third in the list of all-time Isle of Man T.T. winners and, in 1996, riding a Honda, he achieved four wins in a week – a record still unbeaten. He also won five races from six starts at the 1992 North West 200. During his career, he was employed by Honda, working on research and development. He now owns and runs a successful motor-cycle franchise.

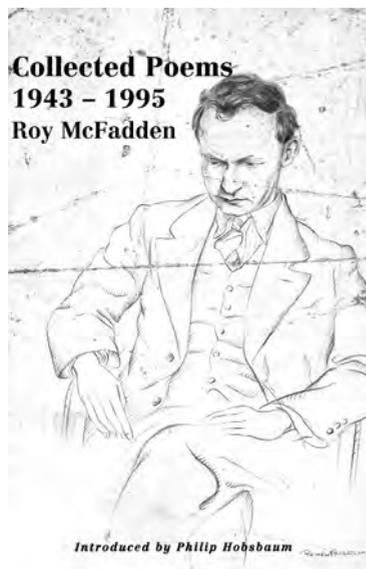
A simple headstone in St Mark's Parish Church graveyard marks the grave of Roy McFadden, 'lawyer

and poet' and, although his link with the town is somewhat tentative, the fact that he chose Tandragee as his final resting place qualifies him, I think, to be included here. Professor Philip Hobsbaum, of Queen's University, who taught such notables as Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and James Simmons in the 1960's, and not a man given to exaggeration, said of Roy McFadden in 1996, "*There is no better poet living in Ireland today, and few, precious few, elsewhere.*"

Roy McFadden was born in Belfast in 1921, the year of partition, and lived there most of his life. He was brought up during the 'troubles' of the 1920's and 1930's. Towards the end of his life wrote, "*I was born in violence, and my whole life was dominated by violence.*"

A solicitor by profession, in 1952, he married Margaret Ferguson from Tandragee. Thereafter, he was a very frequent visitor to the town and in 1955 even considered purchasing Tandragee Castle. From 1949 to 1963 Roy McFadden presented a regular radio programme, '*The Arts in Ulster*', produced by his friend John Boyd. His later poetry often reflects the irony of being a lawyer, in what had become one of the most lawless cities in the world. Dr Edna Longley, speaking of his poetry said; "*The most essential quality of his work is of a fastidious clarity of feeling which holds the mind and should command the attention of anyone interested in Irish poetry.*" A volume of his 'Collected Poems' was published by Lagan Press in 1996. Roy McFadden died in 1999 and was buried in St Mark's graveyard.

So this is why I feel that the opinion expressed at the beginning of this article is justifiable, for these citizens of my small town of Tandragee, have over the years, 'punched well above their weight', in many different spheres and have contributed to progress in a variety of ways. There are others who could, perhaps should, have been included and there are, no doubt, some of today's citizens, unknown now, who will, in due course, enhance our reputation in the arts, science or sport and deserve to be included in some future list of '*Famous Tandragonians.*'



**Collected Poems  
1943-95**