

Précis: the significance of the Carnduff Archive, and of critical approaches to Carnduff in the post-1968 (or 'Troubles') context.

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The Thomas Carnduff Archive was lodged in [Queen's University Library](#) in January 1999. This collection of Carnduff papers offers a more exhaustive record of the Belfast born worker playwright than was available to, for example, John Gray, when he edited *Life and Writings* (Lagan: Belfast) in 1994.

In 1932, Thomas Carnduff succumbed to an 'unholy joy' when Dublin's Abbey Theatre staged, *Workers*, and he 'an unemployed shipyard man, became a playwright'. Belfast's Ulster Theatre had earlier assembled a cast and begun rehearsing but abandoned the project when the Opera House objected to its 'working-class tendencies'. Carnduff later launched plays such as *Castlereagh* and *Traitors* in the home city that constantly exasperated him, but of which he never tired. Observing that 'tragedy simply cried out from [Belfast's] streets for expression', he uniquely rejected 'stage-Irish' dialogue and farce to voice the realist accents and desperate concerns of its working people. Subverting stereotypical images of Protestants as cultural orphans, in the 1930s Carnduff announced himself an 'Irishman with an Irishman's love for his fatherland'.

Carnduff wrote at least a dozen plays, including radio drama, published two books of poetry, wrote prolifically on "Ulster drama", "Ulster workingmen poets", and local politics, and founded the Young Ulster Society in 1936. These were extraordinary achievements, yet by 1970, when five extracts of his unpublished autobiography surfaced in the [Linen Hall Library](#), Carnduff's reputation had sunk almost without trace. Eight years passed before John Gray introduced three chapters, "Adolescence", "Industry", and "Drama", in *Irish Booklore* (Gray, J. (1978). "Thomas Carnduff 1886-1956: Chapters from an unpublished autobiography." *Irish Booklore* 4(1)). Two chapters, "Orangeism" and "Gun-running", were withheld as less interesting 'dated political theorising'. Carnduff's Orange Order membership is described as a 'virtually inevitable' phenomenon in a harsh environment, and his preference for the 'new Independent Orange Order' as a testament to his 'instinctive radicalism'.

The unpublished extracts comprise a passionate defence of 'Orangeism' and picaresque tales of Carnduff's 'enthusiastic membership' of the Order, of the 'Larne gun-running', and of his involvement with the Young Citizen Volunteers (later the Ulster Volunteer Force). Arguably, therefore, this summary of Carnduff and the excision of these chapters was influenced by contemporary sectarian tensions and prevailing negative critical perspectives of Irish, particularly northern Protestant, cultures.

By the 1980s, the early Field Day pamphlets had provoked a hawkish northern discourse in a backdrop of emergent, unprecedented interest in Protestant and 'loyalist' mind-sets. In 1986, Gray's appears to dovetail with this trend by reappraising Carnduff as 'one of the more tantalising Belfast figures of the inter-war years'. Announcing the recovery of three more of Carnduff's autobiographical extracts: "On the dole", "Culture in Belfast" and "The last chapter", Gray recalls the publication of "Adolescence", "Orangeism" and "Drama" in 1978 as a pre-emptive 'confirmation of [Carnduff's] value as social and cultural commentator'. Gray had shown considerable foresight in re-evaluating Carnduff in 1978, but it is important and quite significant that "Orangeism" was not in fact published then. Together with the initial eight-year delay in the material's part-

publication and its selective drip feed into the public domain it does at the very least suggest certain hesitancy towards asserting its 'social and cultural' value. Moreover, when "Orangeism" finally appeared in Gray's **Thomas Carnduff: Life and Writings** (1994), it was subsumed within chapter headings "A Protestant of good standing" and "These sons of Ulster".

In 1986, Noel Carnduff's intervention in the search for his father's papers provided the crucial impetus to the preservation of his literary legacy. Although Noel knew that Carnduff had never attempted to preserve finished work, he was nevertheless disappointed to discover that the Linen Hall Library - where Carnduff had been resident caretaker for the five years before his death in 1956 - listed only **Castlereagh** and two books of poetry, **Songs of the Unemployed** and **Songs of the Shipyard**. Only a chance remark from a Bangor Amateur Theatre Company member who recalled borrowing **Castlereagh** from the Linen Hall and finding another play inside stuffed inside, 'all about Orangemen', led to the discovery of **The Stars Foretell** placed as described, seemingly unnoticed for thirty years.

The extraordinary circumstances that led to **The Stars Foretell** characterised the complex means by which a steady trickle of material grew into an impressive collection that illumines an area of northern culture much decried in recent decades as inherently utilitarian and 'anti-art'. Catalogued in [The Thomas Carnduff Archive](#) are twelve manuscripts plays, poetry texts, nine autobiographical extracts, thirteen short stories, twenty eight drafts of published newspaper and journal articles, Carnduff's recordings for BBC Radio, a large quantity of biographical, photographic and theatrical ephemera, cuttings books, diary and work notebook, sketches, and a Minute Notebook and other material relating to the Young Ulster Society. More than two hundred letters (1932-1954) survive, the bulk of which comprises Carnduff's **Journal to Mary**. Rich in marginalia, the primary importance of **Journal to Mary** lies in its detailing of Carnduff's wartime activities and his interaction with the north's 'cultural scene' in the 1930s and 1940s, a period much neglected in appraisals of northern writing.

In 1921, Carnduff's contemporary, Alexander Irvine, observed of the north's working people:

I do not believe that any community in the three kingdoms was ever so completely left to its own resources. 'Our betters' felt no responsibility toward us. If they had only known that they had the power to lift our somewhat sordid lives to a higher plane, they might have given us a little more of themselves. We had capacity for greater things. We could have been stimulated to greater intellectual effort, and it would have taken so little time or effort to do it. (Alexander Irvine, *The Souls of Poor Folk*, (1921), p. 23).

Reporting on the opening of Workers at the Abby in 1932, a Daily Express Special Correspondent decisively identified Carnduff as being of that neglected 'community':

Mr Carnduff has been navvy, printer, soldier, and shipyard labourer...Also he is a poet. Free libraries have been his university. Now he is workless. Correspondent, S. (1932). "Author may not see his own play". *Daily Express*.

Nine years later, Carnduff was sufficiently self-empowered to challenge 'establishment' complacency. His letter to the editor of the Queen's University pamphlet, **The New Northman**, echoes Irvine's views twenty years earlier:

Writing as a worker, Queen's University, or anything emanating from that institution, means very little to me. So far as I can remember, the University and the worker have little in common. It is an educational institution reserved to certain classes of the community ... I am open to correction. I am a looker-on from the outside. The University may be doing work I know nothing about. You don't bother to explain to the working-classes what benefit they derive from your institution, if any. Carnduff, T. (Spring, 1941). "Letter to the Editor." *The New Northman* 9(1).

Irvine and Carnduff represent diverse strands of Protestant cultures. However, these 'sons of Ulster' do converge in perceiving the north's post-Partition intellectual elite as fatally conservative. It fittingly ironic, therefore, that Noel Carnduff has chosen Queen's as a 'safe house' for [The Thomas Carnduff Archive](#). With this astute act, he has almost certainly guaranteed that his father's place in Northern Irish writing will never again be relegated to that of 'a looker-on from the outside'.