

Sensational Sarah :

the story of the Ulster-born woman who shocked the world

Terry Eakin

Few people in Northern Ireland will ever have read the books of Victorian novelist Sarah Grand. Sadly her name is now almost forgotten; yet one hundred years ago Sarah was regarded as a woman of genius. Perhaps more than any other woman novelist she has influenced life in the western world, yet today you will find few of her books in our libraries. Who was this amazing woman?

Sarah was born Frances Elizabeth Bellenden Clarke, in Donaghadee, on 10 June 1854. Her father was a coastguard commander who lived in a spacious mansion called *Rosebank* on the town's Millisle Road. This house remains today as one of Donaghadee's oldest inhabited buildings. The semi-autobiographical *Beth Book*, first published almost one hundred years ago, gives us a fascinating insight into Sarah's early life. She writes about childhood memories of playing in the gardens of the nearby Manor House, climbing the town Moat to watch passing ships and listening to tales of murderers who stalked the streets of Donaghadee. At the age of six, Sarah moved with her family to County Mayo and eventually, after her father's death, to England.

It was marriage to Magherafelt-born army surgeon David McFall which really began to shape Sarah's future life. David already had two sons from a previous marriage and their new mother was a mere six years older than her elder step-son. The family travelled widely in the Far East and for a time Sarah enjoyed the glamour and excitement of life abroad. However, after returning to England, Sarah quickly became disillusioned with her now domineering husband and his general moral decline. Excessive drinking, smoking and time spent with lewd women were some of Lieutenant Colonel McFall's more printable bad habits!

Sarah turned to writing and proceeds from her novel *Ideala*, published anonymously in 1888, gave her enough money to leave her husband and start to plan her own life. Sarah Grand, as she now renamed herself, quickly adopted unconventional dress and ideas. She publicly attacked double standards in marriage and coined the now familiar phrase – *new woman*.

Her next book, *The Heavenly Twins*, took a long time to publish. Its unusual style and frank views on Victorian sexuality scared off many publishers. Sarah was told, amongst other things, to bury the manuscript deep in her back garden!



Rosebank House, Millisle Road, Donaghadee, the house of nineteenth century novelist, Sarah Grand.

However, despite numerous rejections, she never gave up and eventually, in 1893, the book was published. Immediately, *The Heavenly Twins* was a sensation. Its story centred around the antics of two impish children but the not-very-well-hidden agenda was one of the conflict between human perception and human practice within relationships. This subject was to dominate the remainder of Sarah's life. The novel outraged Victorian society. *The Times* and other journals are said to have refused to review the book but suddenly *The Heavenly Twins* started to exceed all sales predictions. It sold over 140,000 copies, in England and America, and had to be reprinted eight times during its first year along. Sarah Grand had suddenly become a very famous person.

Success opened many doors to Sarah. She travelled to America, staying with Mark Twain, and embarked upon a lecture tour which attracted thousands

The Wider View

Talks and Topics from FULS and FLHS Members on Local History

Joint meetings between the Federation for Ulster Local Studies and its counterpart in the Irish Republic, the Federation of Local History Societies, have examined a number of ideas on how best to develop communication and co-operation among local societies in various parts of Ireland and are currently engaged in planning joint excursions and reciprocal visits. Another option is the exchange of speakers and the list below details topics that members of the executive committees of both FULS and FLHS would be prepared to lecture on, if requested. It is recognised that the list is very incomplete and that many popular topics and speakers are not included. This list is seen, however, as a starting point and it is envisaged that the list would be reviewed annually, with other speakers having their names put forward for inclusion. Speakers could either be asked to travel to address a society or the society might wish to use the speaker as the focal point for a visit to another district. Either way, people and groups from various parts of Ireland would be able to make contact and develop avenues of co-operation through a shared appreciation of local studies and scholarship. Requests for inclusion in the revised list in the Summer 1996 edition of *Ulster Local Studies* should be forwarded to the Federation office or to the editor of the Journal.

1994/95 Lecture List

<i>Name & Address</i>	<i>Lecture Topics</i>
Eddie O'Kane <i>County Donegal Historical Society</i> Cavanacor House, Ballindrait Lifford Co. Donegal Tel: 074 41143	History of Cavanacor House, Ballindrait a seventeenth century house – ancestral home of U.S. President James Knox Polk and association of the house with King James II. Guided tours of house and illustrated talks to societies.

of people and lasted for many years. She was acknowledged as one of the great literary revolutionary figures of the day – George Bernard Shaw linked her name with Ibsen and Wagner.

The intensity of Sarah's involvement with another great literary figure—Thomas Hardy—is still unknown. She did visit his home and she strongly influenced his last novel *Jude the Obscure*. Most mysterious of all is Hardy's enigmatic poem, *Donaghadee*, which suggests a strange fascination for the name of the town which was Sarah's birth place and childhood home. Hardy never visited Northern Ireland and did not know Donaghadee. We might never fully discover how closely he was involved with sensational Sarah Grand?