



Helen O'Clery (née Gallagher) - writer

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Helen Gallagher was born in Stranolar in Co Donegal in 1910, the middle child of three with two brothers. Her father Henry Thomas Gallagher was Crown Solicitor for Co Donegal. Her mother Eileen (nee Cullen) from Co Wexford, was very interested in giving employment to local girls and later Belgian refugees, and started up a jam and sweet making operation. This was in a farmhouse called Dunwylie in Co Donegal where Helen spent her early childhood. Later, in 1918 the family moved to a Georgian house in the townland of Urney, Co Tyrone. The house was sited on the banks of the Finn, and was large enough to accommodate the jam making operations in the basement. The Finn River marked the border between the counties of Donegal and Tyrone and the area was the scene of many skirmishes and often bullets ricocheted off the roof. Unfortunately a few years later the house was accidentally burnt to the ground, the fire engine taking three days to arrive from Derry! The local people from both sides did what they could with buckets of water from the river, but the house was completely destroyed. They started up the jam-making again in one of the out-buildings, but it got accidentally burnt down also. They were planning to emigrate to Canada or to rebuild, but before they made the decision, they were persuaded to help the new Free State and so the family opted to move to Dublin to set up a chocolate factory.

They moved to Dublin in 1923 and were offered the Station Buildings of the military aerodrome near Tallaght, then a small village about seven miles from Dublin. The aerodrome had been taken over from the RAF by the Free State Army who was still in residence when they moved in. When the army left they adapted the buildings for the needs of the factory and the family moved into what had been the Hospital, which was then called Urney House after the one that they had left.

The factory survived the cold winds of the Economic War and prospered until its peak production in 1965 when it employed almost 1000 people and was one of the main employers in South West Dublin.

Helen went to school in Dublin and later France, and then trained as a nurse in St Vincent's Hospital in Stephen's Green, where she qualified and won the Gold Medal.

At the age of twenty one she set off alone around the world, spending some time in Australia (where her elder brother was a doctor), Japan and the United States. On her return she trained as a physiotherapist and worked at the Adelaide Hospital in Dublin. Soon after this she met Dermot O'Clery who was helping her younger brother to build a racing car, called the Leprechaun.

In 1936 she married Dermot – a civil and mechanical engineer – and after some years living on the base moved in 1945 to the Glebe House, then called St Maelruans, which was off the Blessington Rd about half a mile from Tallaght Village. It was a busy household which comprised five children, Ann, Henry, Peter, Edward and Eliza, dogs, cats and ponies as well as Jersey cows and hens. There were also boats sometimes to be found in the yard and once a dinghy was assembled in the dining room. As Dermot at that time was Senior Lecturer in Mechanical Engineering in Trinity College Dublin, the family availed of the long vacation to spend summer holidays on the Shannon in a variety of boats. Dermot produced the first Shannon Waterways Survey of the navigation and harbours and was for many years President of the Inland Waterways Association.

As her children were growing up Helen told them stories to amuse them and soon began to write them down. She had always loved books and the house was full of them. Writing came naturally to her and whenever she had time she wrote. To avoid the distractions of her busy household Helen used her car as a mobile study and drove off to a quiet spot where she could write in peace. She always wrote in biro in reporters' notebooks, which ended up in piles and which her sister-in-law Una Coonan used to decipher and type up, but not without some spirited discussions about grammar and spelling. Helen was a noted idiosyncratic speller!

Her first book for children, set in Co Donegal was published by Collins in 1948 and two others followed - it is significant that her second book, set in Donegal and Dublin, "Spring Show" is dedicated to her children and three ponies.

A chance meeting with American writer Alden Hatch (he had rented St Maelruans one summer when the family went to France with their boat MV Caribee) led to a fruitful collaboration with the US publisher Helen Hoke Watts, and many more books

followed published by Franklin Watts Inc. There were three books for children and one of them, set in Co Mayo “The Mystery of Black Sod Point” in 1959 was a Junior Literary Guild Selection, chosen as an outstanding book for boys and girls. Another story set in the west of Ireland “The Phantom Ship” was translated into Dutch.

She also produced three anthologies for young adults, the most outstanding being “The Ireland Reader” which is a overview of Irish History.

She wrote a children’s story book promoting the cause of the Irish Canals called “Mysterious Waterway” published by Allen Figgis in 1963 in the midst of the public opposition to the threatened closure of the Grand Canal through Dublin.

Helen Hoke introduced Helen to Dennis Dobson the London Publisher who was producing a series called the Pegasus Books, which were information books for young adults. Helen wrote five books for this series, mostly about different countries, which necessitated some foreign travel to do research which she enjoyed very much. The last of these, The Pegasus Book of East Africa was published in 1972.

Some of her books were illustrated by her architect daughter, Ann, including the Junior Literary Guild selection, and all of her Pegasus Books, her son Edward providing map diagrams.

In 1973 her husband Dermot, who had been a great source of encouragement always, had a minor stroke, followed by others and she nursed him through a long illness until he died in 1977.

Helen’s interest in pre-history, astrology and archaeoastronomy was re-kindled by a visit later on to the “Pipers Stones” a stone circle at Athgreany, near Hollywood, Co Wicklow. She resolved to find out more about the purpose of this stone circle. She became convinced that the stones were connected with sunrise and sunset on the key festivals of the pre-Celtic calendar – Imbolc, Bealtaine, Lunasa and Samhain – the solstices and equinoxes. She decided to prove this and spent three years visiting the site to take photographs of sunrise and sunset at and around these key dates. She deduced that one was a Pilot Stone from which to observe shadows at sunrise and

there was another on the opposite side of the circle from which to view the sunset shadows. She observed the shadow from the appropriate stone lengthening until at its longest travelled through the centre of the circle towards her viewing position. To her gratification this happened at the festival dates.

This work necessitated being up on the site around four in the mornings during the summer, and a number of visits were often necessary due to cloud or mist which prevented the taking of photographs. These were developed and printed in her own dark room in between visits.

Helen contacted Dunsink Observatory and Dr Ian Elliot. With the aid of his computer he plotted the arc of the sun at Athgreany during the eight important days of the year in the ancient calendar. Her son Edward – a civil engineer- surveyed the site for her, checked the alignments and drew a profile of the surrounding hills behind each stone and superimposed them on the arcs of the sun.. Thereby it was confirmed that the positions of sunrise and sunset over the stones was consistent with the shift in the earth's axis over time

This gave strong credence to the concept of the Athgreany Stone Circle as a megalithic calendar of significant dates.. This important piece of research was published in 1990 by Al Morrison in New York as “Athgreany Stone Circle – The Stones of Time”. Afterwards Helen gave a lecture in Hollywood, Co Wicklow to explain what she had found to the local people who had been intrigued as to what she had been doing there for so long! They were very interested. Her most recent published work has been “Zodiacal Archetypes in Celtic Myths” published by Al Morrison in 1992.

Helen now lives in Knocklyon beside her daughter, son-in-law and family, surrounded by her books and tends her beautiful garden helped by two black cats. She is adored by her children, grandchildren and great-grand children. She is now writing her autobiography in her 96<sup>th</sup> year!

A list of her main publications is appended.

---Ann O'Clery Shouldice. December 2005.

## HELEN O'CLERY    Published works

SPARKS FLY – Written by H O'C

Published by Collins, London. 1948

SPRING SHOW – Written by H O'C

Published by Collins, London. 1949

SWISS ADVENTURE – Written by H O'C

Published by Collins, London. 1951

THE MYSTERY OF BLACK SOD POINT –Written by H O'C

A Junior Literary Guild Selection.

*Illustrated by Ann O'Clery.*

Published by Franklin Watts, Inc. New York. 1959

THE MYSTERY OF THE PHANTOM SHIP – Written by H O'C

Published by Franklin Watts. Inc., New York. 1961

THE IRELAND READER – Compiled by H O'C

*Illustrated by Ann O'Clery.*

Published by Franklin Watts Inc., New York. 1963

MYSTERIOUS WATERWAY Written by H O'C

*Illustrated by Ann and Edward O'Clery.*

Published by Allen Figgis, Dublin. 1963

THE MERMAID READER – Selected by H O'C

Published by Franklin Watts Inc., New York. 1964

HET SPOOKSCHIP (The Mystery of the Phantom Ship)

*Translated into Dutch.*

Published by Prisma-Boeken, Utrecht. 1964

REBEL SEA QUEEN – The Story of Grace O'Malley Written by H O'C

Published by Franklin Watts Inc., New York. 1965

QUEENS, QUEENS, QUEENS – Selected and edited by H O'C

Published by Franklin Watts Inc., New York. 1965

THE PEGASUS BOOK OF IRELAND – Written by H O'C

*Illustrated by Ann and Edward O'Clery*

Published by Dennis Dobson, London. 1967

THE PEGASUS BOOK OF EGYPT – Written by H O'C

*Illustrated by Ann O'Clery*

Published by Dennis Dobson, London. 1968

THE PEGASUS BOOK OF THE NILE – Written by H O'C

*Illustrated by Ann O'Clery*

Published by Dennis Dobson, London. 1970

THE PEGASUS STORY OF ATLANTIS – Written by H O'C

*Illustrated by Ann O'Clery*

Published by Dennis Dobson, London. 1971

THE PEGASUS BOOK OF EAST AFRICA – Written by H O'C

*Illustrated by Ann O'Clery*

Published by Dennis Dobson, London. 1972

ATHGREANY STONE CIRCLE – The Stones of Time – Written by H O'C

*Illustrated with photographs by H O'C and  
diagrams by Ann and Edward O'Clery.*

Published by Al Morrison, New York. 1990

ZODIACAL ARCHETYPES IN CELTIC MYTHS -Written by H O'C

Published by Al Morrison, New York. 1992



Helen O'Clery celebrating her birthday,  
Samhain 2004