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Hello Friends!

Happy July! We're grateful to be with you again this month and as always, there's a lot to share.

We have both Dr. Tom MacGregor and John O'Donnell with us this month! Tom muses about majestic trees via poet Joyce Kilmer, and John introduces us to the "Celtic Poe." Thanks as always to them both for

contributions.

If you follow the museum on social media, you may have seen that the Danbury Museum was invited by the Philadelphia Orchestra to bring a part of our Marian Anderson collection to Philadelphia for the dedication celebrations of Marian Anderson Hall in the Kimmel Center. Read all about it below!

We have a full three weeks of FREE Cursive Camp ahead, and boy, are we looking forward to it! There is still room in the [middle session, running from July 15-19 if you have interested students](#). Sessions I and III are sold out!

Summer also means more music at the museum. Join us for two concerts with Billy Michael--one celebrating the Beatles on Saturday, July 20, and the other on Saturday, August 17, recalling the legend of Davey Crockett! Both shows are at 2pm, FREE, and will be held in the air conditioned comfort of Huntington Hall.

We're also thrilled to have James Michael join us (in Huntington Hall) for a performance of Broadway show tunes on Friday, July 26 at 5:30 pm. This event is FREE and open to all.

Our friends at St. James's Episcopal Church have a wonderful series of carillonneurs lined up for their outdoor concerts this summer--see their flyer below, concerts begin at 1pm in the St James Garden! Also of note, the Friends of the Danbury Library are having their Summer Clearance Sale this Friday and Saturday, June 28 & 29--see their flyer below as well.

We wish everyone a safe and happy 4th of July and we hope we'll see you soon!



Joyce Kilmer

Musings on Joyce Kilmer

by Dr. Thomas MacGregor

My favorite perennial plants are large, majestic trees. Spending my youth in the farmlands of the Midwest, I only observed trees in our town and at the junctions of large fields of wheat and popcorn. I have since learned from doing crossword puzzles that this tree grouping in the farm fields is called a “copse.” Perhaps if I had paid more attention to British murder mysteries, I would have learned that these are ideal areas to dump a body. As a youngster, I climbed old trees to make a simple tree fort, while farmers used their shade as a place to rest and to eat lunch after a morning of tilling the soil.

I learned a lot about the beauty of century-old trees from Joyce Kilmer’s 1913 poem, “Trees.” Alfred Joyce Kilmer (1886-1918) was an American poet tragically killed by a sniper at Marne during the first world war. His works personified nature, and he was a favorite of one of my grade school

teachers. I probably had to memorize the poem while sitting in a “time-out” chair where I learned many additional poems (I preferred Ogden Nash’s short verses). As many may recall, Kilmer wrote:

"I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth’s sweet flowing breast.

A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray.

A tree that may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair.

Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree."

When I moved to Danbury 45 years ago, I was amazed by the tree coverage I found in the city and state. Visitors from my old stomping grounds in the Midwest also noticed that there are trees everywhere. I reminded them that Connecticut farmers engage in dairy farming rather than planting vast acres of wheat fields because of the rocky landscape underfoot; hence, the trees were saved.

Now that I am older and don’t climb trees to build forts, I plant and enjoy trees for their beauty and shade. I particularly enjoy flowering cherry trees (*Prunus* spp.) in the spring and Rose of Sharon trees (*Hibiscus* spp.) which bloom in mid-summer. There are many tree species, evolving from ferns around 370 million years ago, and several species live for a thousand years or more. Our trees play a significant role in moderating the climate by removing the greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide, from the air, releasing oxygen, and storing carbon within their tissues. Since Connecticut is a temperate region having relatively even rainfall throughout the year (almost an inch per week, on average), the predominant tree species are oaks, beeches, birches, maples, and

conifers.

Because of their pivotal role in protecting our ecological balance of four cool and warm seasons without temperature extremes, I cringe every time I hear a chain saw clearing trees from land for another building development. I sincerely hope replacement trees are being planted for future generations.

Consider planting a tree! Trees grow from seeds dispersed by the wind after pollination. Usually you can find small, one- to two-year-old trees near a larger, older tree. Perhaps a friend has a tree that you admire and there are several sprouts nearby. Consider giving your friend some of your extra perennial flowering plants for a couple of these young trees, i.e., plant swapping. This is how I obtained a little red maple tree that is doing well in my backyard. Maybe someone in the next generation will sit under one of these transplanted trees and read a book of poetry.

After 33 years at Boehringer Ingelheim, Dr. Tom (UConn '85) retired to his garden and piano.



Fitz-James O'Brien

The DIAMOND LENS

≈ *By Fitz-James O'Brien* ≈



A Celtic Poe

by John O'Donnell

One of the saddest tasks for an essayist is to write about a once promising writer who has fallen into obscurity unnecessarily. We will review the career of such a man and try to suggest why his career should be reevaluated and his work held in higher esteem than it is. This writer is Fitz-James O'Brien (1826-1862), a multi-talented writer who excelled in a number of genres and was one of the first writers to successfully delve into the nascent realm of science fiction. His career certainly deserves a second look as you shall see.

Michael Fitz-James O'Brien was born in County Cork, Ireland, in 1826. His father was an attorney who died when O'Brien was twelve. His mother married again, to a man named DeCourcy O'Grady, and he had no siblings. His maternal grandfather, Michael O'Driscoll lived at Baltimore Manor on the Cork coast. He was a man of such eminence that people simply called him The O'Driscoll. O'Brien's deceased father had been successful, and his grandfather was extremely wealthy. He seems to have had a very enjoyable upbringing. He showed an early interest in literature and began to write poetry at the age of sixteen. His formal education, based on his writing abilities, appears to have been very solid. He is thought to have attended Trinity College, Dublin. Based on his subsequent

career, it is unlikely that he could have excelled as he did without some formal training. His writings reflect an extremely well-read man who was fluent in French and acquainted with Italian and the classical languages. When his grandfather died, he was the sole heir and inherited between eight and ten thousand pounds which was a princely sum for such a young man. He immediately decamped for London.

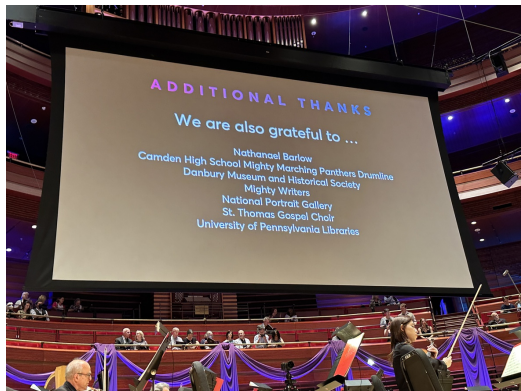
O'Brien was a charming man who wished to further his writing career by being at the center of English culture in London. He had enough social connections to be invited to all the right places. He lived well based on his enormous inheritance, and it was in London that he expanded from poetry to journalism and fiction for which he had greater talent. He started writing regularly for several English periodicals. He was also an anonymous contributor to Charles Dickens's magazine, *Household Words*. He seemed to be laying the foundation for a solid career in the English literary world. But then two events halted his progress in this area and forced him to leave London. O'Brien spent so lavishly on his lifestyle that he squandered his entire fortune. This legacy was enough to live on for the rest of his life, but he went through the entire amount in two years. He was also carrying on an affair with the wife of an English army officer who was stationed in India. The husband came home unexpectedly, and O'Brien was forced to flee London and made New York his next port of call.

His success in New York was like a dream come true for a man with his literary aspirations. He arrived knowing hardly anyone and yet made a dramatic and seamless entry into the New York literary and social scenes. His writing career expanded into short stories, more poetry, essays, criticism, plays and editing. He was a very engaging man and was at home in the salons of Fifth Avenue as well as with the Bohemian set which met at Charles Pfaff's Beer Cellar. This was a gathering place for aspiring and well-established writers. Here he met Whitman and other writers who were charmed by him. Everyone liked him. Richard Stoddard, one of the Bohemians, described him as a bright young fellow of pleasing address, elegant manners and more than the average amount of intelligence. But as he had done in London, O'Brien was living a boom-and-bust type of lifestyle in New York. He would sell a story, be flush with money, spend lavishly until the money ran out and then write another story and the cycle would repeat itself.

O'Brien's New York literary career lasted about ten years. He was, like many of the Bohemians, greatly influenced by Edgar Allen Poe. As the genre of detective fiction is usually ascribed to Poe, O'Brien is credited with being a forerunner of the pioneers of science fiction. One of his stories, *The Diamond Lens* has a narrator who is obsessed with the science of microscopy and acquires a large diamond by theft and murder. When processed a certain way the diamond turns into a microscope lens which then reveals phantasmagoric images in a drop of water. The story raises profound questions about our conception of reality. Is the world in the drop of water as real as ours? Like many of Poe's characters, the narrator gradually declines and loses his mind in the end. We do not know where O'Brien would have gone with his foray into science fiction because of the onset of the Civil War.

O'Brien joined the New York Seventh Regiment and was passionate about the Union cause. He looked forward to the experience of fighting and the material it would provide for his future work. Alas, he was involved in a skirmish with a Confederate unit. He was shot in the shoulder by the Confederate commander, Colonel Ashley, whom he then shot and killed. The shoulder wound was not serious but was mistreated and O'Brien died on April 6, 1862 of tetanus at the age of thirty-five.

John O'Donnell first became a history devotee while in elementary school. He was raised in Brooklyn and frequently went to Prospect Park which has a Revolutionary War monument. He was hooked!





In early June, the Danbury Museum was given the incredible opportunity to take items from our Marian Anderson collection to Philadelphia (Ms. Anderson's hometown) for the dedication of [Marian Anderson Hall in the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts](#). To be able to play a small part in such a historic moment was a great honor.

Marian Anderson's performance gowns from the museum's collection were flanked by framed photos of her wearing them, adding context to these beautiful garments. Thousands of visitors were able to view this display over the course of the day and evening. It was quite an experience to listen to visitors share their Marian Anderson memories and talk about the exquisite costumes.

In the Academy of Music, museum staff installed two more small displays filled with other Marian Anderson artifacts including awards, play bills, books and more.

To be able to share Danbury's Marian Anderson via costume, ephemera, and even a hat(!) with her beloved hometown of Philadelphia, was an incredible experience. (The hat, worn for Eisenhower's inauguration, is on display in our Marian Anderson Studio and part of the tour. Anderson was the first black woman to sing at a presidential inauguration.)

We are grateful to our friends at [Pioneer Cleaners](#) (if you stop in to get your dry cleaning, please thank them for their generosity!) for giving all of the costume pieces a sympathetic steam, to Laura Flachbart and the Danbury Music Centre, to former museum staffer Megan Shiskin for crafting a beautiful "costume bible" reference binder that was invaluable in the gown selection, and to the incredible staff and team at the Philadelphia Orchestra, who were so generous and such fun to work with.

**St. James' Episcopal Church
2024 Christel Davis Memorial
Outdoor Summer Carillon Concerts
Wednesdays in July**



**1:00 pm in the Garden
25 West Street, Danbury CT
Bring your lunch and chair to enjoy great music
in our beautiful garden**

**July 3: Kristin O'Connor Vece
Former Carillonneur at St. James', Danbury, CT**

**July 10: Carla Staffaroni
Carillonneur: Riverside Church New York, NY**

**July 17: Austin Ferguson
Carillonneur: Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN**

**July 24: John Widmann
Carillonneur: The Joseph Dill Baker Memorial Carillon
Frederick, MD**

**July 31: George Matthew, Jr
Carillonneur: Middlebury College and Norwich University
Middlebury, VT**

Join us at noon in the Chapel for worship before the concert.



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2024 Danbury Museum Summer Performance Series

Saturday, July 20 @ 2pm
Billy Michael Beatles Tribute

Friday, July 26 @ 5:30pm
Show Tunes with James Michael

Saturday, August 17, @ 2pm
Billy Michael Celebrates Davy Crockett

All performances will be held in the air conditioned comfort of Huntington Hall.

Information on exciting autumn performances is coming soon...stay tuned!

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MUSEUM**

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DanburyMuseum.org

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