

The Stars of Ballymenone

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Thirty-four years after his first visit to the rural North Ireland community, Henry Glassie has produced a new anthology of tales, beliefs, and rituals from Ballymenone. A consummate storyteller, Glassie draws on over three decades of fieldwork, friendships, and community involvement to map the town of Ballymenone, its history and inhabitants, in richly evocative, lyrical prose.

The heart of this beautifully written book is the “stars” of the Ballymenone community. Readers familiar with the now classic *Passing the Time in Ballymenone* will be fondly reintroduced to familiar characters and now, their legacies. Glassie opens the book with his recollection of community historian Hugh Nolan’s death, the hardest passing he has ever endured. A more poignant, melancholy work than *Passing the Time*, *Stars of Ballymenone* honors the departed artists whom Glassie feels himself a successor to, both in style and in sensibilities. Dutifully charged with appropriately remembering these great people, Glassie masterfully interweaves their stories, chats, and ways of living in a brilliant presentation of how these seemingly common people are among the finest human beings that the author has ever encountered.

Nothing if not sincere, *Stars of Ballymenone* is a different kind of ethnography, one that is self-consciously interested in people rather than theories. Glassie takes his cues from his “stars” and writes about Ballymenone as its inhabitants conceive of it: Hugh Nolan’s history pins narratives to local geography rather than dates, and has a complex understanding of time as a double stream moving forwards to technological improvement and backwards to social regress. Honoring his mentor, Glassie’s history follows suit.

Glassie makes no pretense at the typical shifting, uncertain insider-outsider status of most ethnographers: he is a member of the community, and he writes as such. That said, the fluid position between participant and observer is often as valuable as it is precarious, and Glassie's lack of distance from his subjects/friends is perhaps dangerous and occasionally confusing. The blurring of the author's voice with that of his participants leaves the reader to assume their values are always his, a problematic expectation when he moves between the very different views of the fiery young radicals, and that of the sadder, knowing old singers who try to counsel through music. In their relationship Glassie skillfully considers the slipperiness of art, which both inspires violence and offers itself as a substitute for bloodier passions. Another minor criticism, the chapters on saints and battles of Ballymenone do not focus so much upon the stars who are clearly Glassie's strength and passion, as they do the history of Ballymenone. Despite this, the brief history is a well-written and important contextual contribution to the book's scope.

A welcome addition to the text of *Ballymenone* is the attached audio CD, giving readers privileged access to the voices of Ballymenone's singers and storytellers. The CD, co-created by Doug Boyd, is masterfully edited and easy to use, particularly in cooperation with Glassie's transcriptions and helpful suggestions for listening. The author's notes are also of special interest to scholars, as Glassie's uncanny ability to find the pulse of his research subjects is clearly articulated.

In sum, scholars will find *The Stars of Ballymenone* a welcome addition to their repertoire of folklore collections. This book stands alongside other classic works such as James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and beautifully detailed fieldwork pieces such as Zora Neal Hurston's *Go Gator and Muddy the Water*. Henry Glassie's *The Stars of Ballymenone* is a rare achievement: a book about verbal artistry that is itself a work of art.