

Conor O'Brien 1880 – 1952.

Conor O'Brien was the finest Irish seaman of his era who set new standards of small boat sailing and navigation for generations to come. His greatest achievement was his circumnavigation of the globe, from 1923 – 1925 rounding Cape Horn and the Cape of Good Hope in the 42ft ketch 'Saoirse'.

He was also a patriot, architect writer and mountaineer. In 1914 while his friend Erskine Childers was landing guns at Howth, Conor O'Brien's yacht 'Kelpie' was involved in a similar operation off Kilcoole.

He sometimes used his boat as a base for mountaineering in coastal areas and in 1913 spent a week in Brandon Bay with the famous climber George Mallory.

In 1914 when war broke out he joined the R.N.V.R (Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve) serving on H.M.S. Lord De Ramsey. Unlike Childers he took no active role in the war of independence or civil war and 1922 found him serving as a fisheries inspector for the new Irish Government.

His excuse in 1923 for commencing his circumnavigation was that he was joining a mountaineering expedition in New Zealand, but it seems clear that he always intended to sail around the world.

However it is as a writer that his energies and imagination were fully captured, and that he is best remembered around the world. In all he wrote fourteen books ranging from the sailing classic 'Across Three Oceans' and other books on yacht design, to stories for children similar in style to those of Arthur Ransome.

He was born Edward Conor Marshall O'Brien in 1880 and was a grandson of William Smith O'Brien. His brother Dermot O'Brien R.H.A. was President of the Academy in 1910. Educated at Winchester in England Conor's love of the outdoors sprang from Summers spent in Ireland on holiday at his family's property on Foynes Island and Derrynane in Kerry.

He qualified as an architect after spending time as a student at Oxford, but seldom practised although he was always interested in the subject. His greatest design work was designing his own boats the 'Saoirse' and the 'Ilen' which were built at Baltimore Fisheries School.

A patriot of his time he spoke Irish fluently by adulthood and was an early member of Sinn Fein and a Home-Ruler.

In 1928 he married the artist Kitty Clausen daughter of the noted artist Sir George Clausen. They spent the early thirties sailing together in the Mediterranean where she illustrated his books. Kitty died tragically young in 1936 and by 1940 'Saoirse' had been sold.

Conor was too old for active service in World War 11, but he made occasional trips for the Small Ships Pool delivering support vessels across the Atlantic. Interviewed by the New York Times in July 1943 (20th) he said I “ thought I’d better get back to sea”, - this at sixty-three!

He spent most of the war living with his sister in a cottage in Cornwall. After the war he returned to Foynes Island where he died in his sister’s house in 1952 aged 72.

Conor O’Brien was not an easy man. His trip around the world used seventeen different crew and it didn’t seem to matter whether they were paid hands or volunteers; they all went the same way driven off by his exacting ways and his impatience. His most loyal crewmember was a Tongan called Kioa who accompanied him back to Dun Laoghaire. His nephew Murrough O’Brien remembers as a child being chased out of the study at Foynes if he disturbed his uncle writing.

He was also a bit intemperate particularly in later years and is remembered in Cornwall for occasionally falling asleep in ditches.

If he were alive today he might have been seen as a boat bum or a bit of a hippy. Certainly he did not seem to fit into the strict social milieu of his day.

Whatever his faults, in an age like ours where heroes are in short supply, Conor O’Brien stands out.