

IF Kevin Donnelly has one regret about choosing a life at sea it is that it prohibited him from continuing a rugby career that once saw him skip inside the scything tackles of Leinster senior schools rugby to send former Bohemians international winger, Maurice Mortell, scampering in to add to his rising try tally.

"Those were the days when we were both at school in the Presentation in Bray, and the South China Seas and the Parc de Princes were most unlikely occupants of our respective imaginations."

Retired as harbour master of the Shannon Estuary for the past 14 months, Kevin looks every bit the seafaring captain, bearded, articulate, highly regarded as a nautical expert whose views on the potential of the estuary are refreshingly optimistic.

"Shannon Estuary has fantastic potential. That is one of the reasons that I came down here. I recognised the potential of the area and I wanted to be part of it."

His decision proved a prudent one both for himself and for the region, for during his 26-year term of office, the harbour enjoyed some of the greatest advances in its long history.

"When I came down here in September, 1966, we had the old fashioned dock in operation, the throughput was less than half a million tons a year, the average size of ship coming into the dock was about one thousand tons, except for the rare ten thousand ton grain boat which came up river."

After the arrival of the young former ship's captain, Limerick Port began a development that has resulted in the extensive improvements achieved within the last two decades.

"In my period as harbour master we advanced to ships of 180,000 tons, which was the equivalent of 36 ships carrying the previous maximum tonnage."

It was these economies of scale which dictated the international

spend hard currency on fuel for their aircraft.

The excellent benefits of shipping in modern bulk transportation and the 60-foot depth at low water of the Shannon Estuary was also a plus factor for the early investigators from Alcan who were exploring the possibilities of setting up on Aughinish Island.

"They saw that they could bring bauxite from West Africa in ships of 60,000 tons, known as Panamax ships because they were the largest capable of passing through the Panama Canal. They also imported oil and caustic soda through the port, and, of course, exported alumina in various sizes of ships."

With Alcan now up and running smoothly, Limerick Harbour Board had little time for pondering on their achievements, for very soon the ESB were beginning further construction on Moneypoint's coal-burning station.

"By now worldwide shipping had got a lot bigger, and they had built this jetty which was capable of taking ships of from 180,000 tons to 250,000 tons. This facility allowed them to avail of cheaper coal from Columbia and cheaper freight because of the large ships."

While all these developments



Kevin Donnelly . . . regrets influence of the "almighty dollar". (LL)

By AIDAN CORR

Old sea dog's life on an ocean wave

"in the second largest harbour" in Britain and Ireland after London," provided Kevin with a most exciting time in his life, his earlier experiences were also punctuated with significant events.

This incident was not the only unforgettable event on Kevin's inaugural voyage, for before they returned to port there had also been a murder on board, which no doubt gave the captain's log

shortly, Eamon is an artist in Cobh while Brian, an archivist, is also secretary of the Maritime Institute, and through his work is the only member of the family who has retained some association with the sea."

developing epilepsy on a voyage, and instead of him being removed from the payroll he was given a shore job by his employers. There was this lovely sense of loyalty."

But times have changed. Today the owner of a ship employs a management company to manage the vessel; the management company employs a crewing company to crew the ship and if Chinese, for instance, are cheaper this month than Philipinos, then they will employ Chinese; next year maybe the Eastern European crews will be cheaper, so they will get priority.

"While some of the Eastern countries are fairly well qualified seafarers, others are not, and there are worrying discrepancies in the present system of ship recruitment. Proper maintenance is not being carried out and as a result the ships are getting 'old' earlier. Recent incidents of lives lost at sea substantiate this argument, and the number of bulk carriers which have been lost throughout the world in recent years is just phenomenal. There are hundreds of lives lost each year at sea and unless it happens a short distance from the coast nobody is interested."

According to Kevin, even in shipping, "the dollar is the boss. Companies are now prepared to risk the lives of crews who are

typhoon, but once you were not too far out in the China Sea you were reasonably alright once you knew how to deal with it.

"I've never been sea-sick on a ship, but have got sea-sick several times on a small boat. However, I take consolation from the fact that even Nelson suffered from sea-sickness. Modern ferry boats have every sophisticated instrumentation and convenience, and generally, they are very safe. The only worrying aspect of them is that they are getting higher and higher which would create problems if one had to abandon ship."

Having such experience at sea, it is interesting to note that Kevin regards Irish sea waters as intimidating as anywhere in the world.

"If you go three miles off the coast of Ireland you'll meet weather as rough as anywhere you'll encounter, as any of our harbour pilots will tell you. When they go out past Loop Head to meet the boats coming into the harbour they meet very big seas. Sometimes these pilots have to wait until they are on the crest of a wave and then jump for the ladder to board a ship. It's a young man's job."

Surprisingly, piracy remains a serious threat for ships throughout the world, and while Limerick's former harbour master has had personal experiences of attempts at illegal boarding, the present situation, he claims, is more serious.

"In our day they were only armed with knives and we turned the high-powered hoses on them and drove them off. Now they are armed with machine guns. It is a much more serious problem now than it was then, and up to last year piracy was rife within the Malaka Straits, for instance, where whole ships were captured and the flags were changed."

According to Kevin, the master of a ship does not have the authority to perform a marriage ceremony on board, but he has administered some minor medical

the previous maximum tonnage." It was these economies of scale which dictated the international trend, with large quantities of cargo working out cheaper per ton, and the first local company to identify this benefit was Irish Cement.

"About four or five months after my arrival here the first of the larger ships began arriving at the Cement company berth at Foynes Island. She was a 40,000 ton tanker and brought a whole new perspective to the port authorities. The biggest ship I had been on in my time in deep sea was 16,000 tons, so this was something awesome in comparison."

The ESB were next to realise the benefits of the estuary, and after completing their oil-fired generating station at Tarbert, they brought in ships ranging from 30,000 tons to 80,000 tons, which again were expertly handled by the pilots and staff of the harbour board.

As the trend developed a new berth was built at Shannon to facilitate the servicing of the airport directly by ship, a benefit that later proved to be a boon to Shannon for it was one of the factors that influenced Aeroflot to set up in the airport and eliminated the need for them to

earlier experiences were also punctuated with significant events.

Born in Kilkenny, the family soon settled in Longford, and before his tenth birthday, Kevin had made Bray in Wicklow his permanent home.

"I suppose the fact that I lived on the seafront there, which familiarised me with the easterly gales, may have influenced my fascination with the ocean, and after finishing school I applied for an apprenticeship to the Irish Nautical College. My ambition was to be a captain — I always wanted to be the top man — and my first appointment was with the Anglo Saxon Petroleum Company, who were actually Shell tankers.

"My first long trip at sea was the most memorable of my life. We started worldwide trading around the Atlantic, and then worked our way out east, where we remained for quite a while going from port to port. During the 17 months of the trip we had a very serious explosion and fire on board, which we had to put out ourselves as we were three days from the nearest land. It was one of the most religious moments of my life. The chief engineer was killed, and there were many injuries."

Returned to port there had also been a murder on board, which no doubt gave the captain's log some notable inclusions. Having completed his four-year apprenticeship with just two sea trips, Kevin remained with this company, and it was while back on leave that he accepted an offer of the post of harbour master of Drogheda.

"I was married with three children at this stage, my minimum trips were of one year duration, so I decided it was time to try the shore life."

Remaining in the Louth port for six-and-a-half years, Kevin benefited greatly from the experience gained, and it prepared him for the developing role he was to later play in the advancement of the Shannon Estuary.

As his knowledge and experience of port affairs and officialdom increased, so did his family, and today he, and his wife, Mary, "a true-bred Bray girl who has some sea-going ancestors" are proud parents to seven children ranging in age from 25 to 38.

"Alva and Barry are both married; Shane is a musician who travels extensively, Neil is a horticulturalist living in France, Orla is heading off to Germany

the only member of the family who has retained some association with the sea."

Kevin's longest trip at sea lasted 27 weeks and in 1951 his salary increased from £10 per month to £27 per month, "which was quite a respectable wage at that time. I was just beginning to enjoy life at sea when I had to come home to sit an examination for my first and second mate qualifications, and after further time at sea, I was awarded my masters."

"Captaining a ship is very much a hands-on business, and in those days we received a very complete and thorough education, both practical and written. Nowadays, unfortunately, people can get away to sea as an officer following a quick course, and it is no surprise, in my opinion, that there are so many casualties."

According to the former Limerick harbour master, the entire system has now changed since his days of apprenticeship.

"When I was starting out, the owner employed you. You knew him, or his representative personally, and there was a certain amount of loyalty between the two of you. I can recall a colleague of mine

same manner as ancient, the immediate prospects of a worldwide code of shipping standards are slim."

It has not been unknown for a captain who had cabled his dissatisfaction of the standard of his ship, and requesting immediate repairs, to be replaced by the owners at the next port of call.

"The situation is disgusting, is putting lives at risk and is affecting shorelines, pollution and creating dangers of explosions all because of the power of the 'almighty dollar.'"

Kevin is not alone in his views on present day shipping standards with many of them being shared by the deputy editor of one of the leading shipping publications, Lloyd's List of London.

"Michael Grey, a former ship's master himself, has been ploughing a lonely furrow advocating international legislative change for years and, so far, much of it has gone on deaf ears."

Admitting that he spent much of his sea life in "the best weather areas of Singapore and Indonesia", Kevin has had his terrifying moments.

"We caught the occasional

ceremony on board, but he has administered some minor medical treatments in his time at sea, while he also considers mariners to be "very religious" in an emergency.

"For quite a number of years I would not have recommended life at sea to any young people. Now they are improving, and with Irish cadets always in demand, there is an exciting career available for experienced and well trained people, many of whom are graduating from Cork RTC at present."

Since his retirement, Kevin has been enjoying "more leisure time and spending more time with my family."

He is becoming increasingly attached to the "good life and the family comforts", but strolling past the memorial to the region's merchant seamen in Limerick Docks, which he was instrumental in having erected, the rise of the tide and the gentle lapping of the Shannon waters bring back memories of an exciting career.

Later in the day he will return to his home in Ballinacurra, put on his "editorial hat", and prepare the next edition of the Captain's Logs, a periodical of Irish maritime affairs

New information pack to help city's 400 epilepsy sufferers

THERE are roughly 400 epilepsy sufferers in the city, it has been revealed.

But educating the public on symptoms and treatments is one of the biggest problems encountered by the Irish Epilepsy Association.

At the launch of a new information pack for parents of children who have epilepsy, Una Herron, regional executive of the association explained they try to get into schools and factories to educate people but often meet with difficulties.

"There is a need to inform the general public,"

Ms Herron said.

However, Mary Keane, a social worker, said now that schools have introduced a transition year, guest speakers are often invited and she has given talks in a few schools on the subject. She added that even displaying a poster on a factory wall can be of enormous help.

"It is only in recent years people are learning about it as people did not talk about it before," Ms. Keane said.

"Fear and lack of knowledge is the biggest problem," Mayor O'Sullivan said as she launched the information pack this Thursday.

"Information is power, and once you know about it, you are so much better able to deal with it," the Mayor said.

The book, *Epilepsy - A Parent's Guide*, was written by consultant paediatric neurologist, Dr Joe McMenamin, and the association's education officer, Mary O'Connor Bird.

"The more the parents understand the more they can help the doctor and improve the treatment of their child's seizures," Dr McMenamin said.

In the book, the different types of epilepsy that affect children are described in

detail. The features of each type are outlined and comments on the treatment and prognosis are given. The majority of children who suffer from epilepsy live normal lives thanks to medication and surgery. The national figure for people who suffer from epilepsy is one per two hundred of the population.

The video is presented by Mick Lally - Miley from Glenroe - and parents and children talk about their experiences of epilepsy.

Further information on the pack, which costs £11.50, is available from Ms Keane at 061-396774.



At the launch of the Epilepsy Association pack were, Mary Keane, social worker, and Veronica and Paul Monaghan, Raheen.

Charge reduced

A RATHKEALE man, James Sheridan, 1, Hillview Park, who was home for the Christmas holidays and who collided with another car at the Crescent Shopping Centre, had a charge of dangerous driving reduced at Rathkeale Court to careless driving. He was fined £85, with his licence endorsed. The incident occurred on Christmas Eve.

WOMEN

Are you being mentally or physically abused? Do you

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