

Paul to tackle 'holy grail' for explorers

■ Transatlantic rower sets sights on Northwest Passage

Aine Fitzgerald

A LIMERICK man who made history in the winter of 2005 by rowing 2,500 miles across the Atlantic Ocean in a 24ft wooden boat is hoping to enter the record books again by attempting something that has never been done before.

Paul Gleeson, a native of Castletroy, is hoping to row across the "holy grail for explorers" the Northwest Passage in the Arctic Ocean, on human power alone.

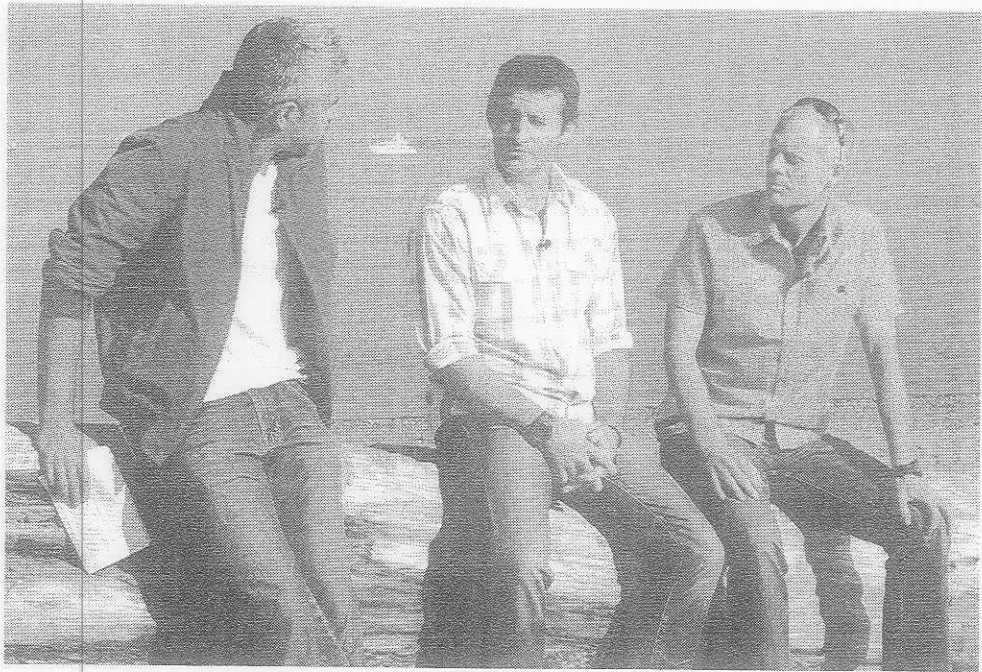
"Its history is shrouded in tales of tragedy, adventure and disaster. Many supremely equipped expeditions perished high up in the Canadian Arctic in their quest to find the elusive Northwest Passage," explained Paul who became the Limerick Person of the Year in 2006 after becoming the youngest, and third Irish person, to complete the transatlantic rowing journey at the age of 29.

Paul moved out to Canada in early 2008 with his then girlfriend Tori Holmes who is Canadian. Tori completed the transatlantic voyage with Paul in 2005.

Late last year when Paul was speaking at an adventure show he struck up a conversation with one of the other speakers - a very accomplished Canadian adventurer named Kevin Vallely.

"Kevin is in his mid 40s and his parents come from Limerick city so we got chatting and over the course of the conversation, our next expedition was born."

In July of next year, Paul and Kevin along with Dubliner Denis Barnett and another Canadian adventurer, Frank Wolf, will be attempting something that has never been done before - that is to row across the Northwest Passage on human power



Castletroy's Paul Gleeson and Kevin Vallely being interviewed by Riaz Meghji in Vancouver

alone in a single season.

Many supremely equipped expeditions perished high up in the Canadian Arctic in their quest to find the elusive Northwest Passage - the most famous of these was the Franklin expedition that departed England in 1845.

"The 129-man crew made it part way through the passage before their boats were crushed in the ice and the entire party met their maker. Their two ships, Erebus and Terror, were never seen again and to date have not been found. "The search for these boats rivals that of the Titanic and apparently the Canadian Government believes they are close to finding these historic vessels. Therefore, our 1800-mile expedition will not only be a journey into one of the harshest places on earth but in a way it will also be a journey into history," said Paul.

From this historical perspective, there is also a big Irish connection to the Northwest Passage in that the number two in command on the famous Franklin expedition was Irishman Francis Crozier.

The only reason Paul and the team can even attempt this expedition is because of climate change.

"The way it works up in the Arctic is the ice will break up typically in early July. What we will be doing is following the ice. The ice breaks up earlier in the western part of the passage so we will be following it along moving west to east as it breaks up. In terms of a window we have got about 80 to 90 days with the thawing of the ice so one way or another the trip will be finished by then," said Paul whose parents Bert and Lourdes live in Castletroy. The adventure

is also set to be filmed. "One of our team, Frank, is a film maker and so we will be making a documentary on our expedition. We have spoken with a number of production companies at this stage and the documentary is likely to take the form of a 10 part series," Paul added.

In terms of danger, Paul genuinely doesn't believe that the voyage is as dangerous as the Atlantic trip.

"We are in a passage, albeit at the start of the trip you are in the Arctic Ocean but as you move from west to east you are actually in a passage. I don't think it's as dangerous as the Atlantic, having said that no-one has ever done this before. One of the main reasons for that is that is really only over the last couple of years that the ice has thawed sufficient for someone to give it a crack."

For more details see www.thelastfirst.com

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