

Called to the

BAR

This year's winner of the Endeavour Cup is almost as well known for a certain Athlone pub as for his boating. Nuala Redmond talks to Seán Fitzsimons about his life and his enduring love affair with the waterways of Ireland

My earliest memories of Seán Fitz are of himself and his wife Anna throwing parties on the *Iron Lung* in the 1970s. I would be huddled under the walkway in the main cabin of the barge, hiding from the adults to avoid bedtime. There was a wonderful atmosphere of chat and music – the adults were always very ‘relaxed’ on the *Lung*. Then, ‘a bit of hush!’, and Seán would sing *Carrickfergus*.

Carrickfergus was, and still is, Seán's special song. People on the river hear *Carrickfergus* and think Seán Fitz. ‘It's a beautiful song and a beautiful air’, he says. ‘You have to half-speak it and half-sing it; it's nothing when it's just played to a

beat. It has to be sung individually’.

Individuality is something Seán knows something about. A pioneer on the river, Seán has blazed a trail of campaigns and parties, teaching people how to have fun while getting things done. He is a character and a force to be reckoned with.

He grew up on Sherrard Street, near Gardiner Street in Dublin. The youngest of three boys, he quickly found that the traditional method of learning didn't suit him, and at the age of 14 he left O'Connell's School to work. One of his jobs was working for a month in Gills of O'Connell Street, selling Christmas cards. When the month was up and he was ready to move on, his boss had different ideas. ‘Seán’, he said, ‘if you want a job, we have one for you. You're a salesman’.

‘He saw the salesman in me’, says Seán. ‘I didn't!’ But he stayed in Gills for the next 30 years, making a successful career selling church furnishings.’

HARING AROUND

His love affair with the river and the waterways started during those years. ‘It was about 1955. There was a crowd of us in Dublin that used to pal around together. One weekend, we took off to Killinure Point on Lough Ree, where Peter Quigley's father lived. I looked out, saw the lake and Hare Island, and that was the start of it. We got a loan of an 18-foot rowing boat and we camped on the island’.

The friends spent many enjoyable weekends on the river after that.

Six years later, Seán rounded up some of his usual suspects, and an enthusiastic gang of seven entered the first official Shannon Boat Rally in 1961. However, they only had a three-man speedboat, so four of them had to follow the rally by road in a van. ‘We changed crew each day, but I was always the driver’.

For the following year's rally, they wanted a boat big enough for everyone, so they hired a barge called the *St Mary* (49M). The *St Mary* had previously been based near Limerick, where she had been used to house the workmen building Rineanna Airport (now called Shannon Airport).

Having hired the barge, Seán discovered that the *St Mary* was for sale, and together with his friend John Connan, decided to buy it. He changed the name to the *Iron Lung*, ‘lung’ being the Irish for boat, and an ‘iron lung’ at the time was the nickname for a barrel of beer! In fact to this day, the chimney on the *Lung* is one such barrel.

He bought a second barge, called it the *Harp*, and started Omega Line Cruisers, hiring out the two barges. But that lasted only about a year as his business partner met the love of his life and moved to be with her in Sligo.

Seán settled down to using the *Lung* himself. He still lived in Dublin and made the trip to Athlone with friends at the weekends.

‘We used to all come down to the *Lung* at weekends, and we'd have a wild time. On a Saturday night, we'd

SEAN'S BAR



The *Guinness Book of Records* confirms that Sean's Bar, built in the year 900, is the oldest pub in Ireland, England, Scotland or Wales, and is probably the oldest pub in the world. The pub was built 300 years before Athlone Castle across the street and the building still contains a

section of the ‘clay and wattle’ wall with which it was originally built. Sean Fitzsimons bought the pub in 1970, and ran it for 31 years, selling it five years ago to Timmy Donovan. Timmy has decided not to change the name.



Seán with the IWAI's Endeavour Cup, awarded to him for his outstanding loyalty



Hands up who loves the waterways: Vintage Fitz showing how it should be done

his winters working in a pub in England. One day, Seán asked him if he ever got fed up going back in the winter to work.

'I hate it,' said Dermot.

'Why don't you get a job here?' said Seán.

'Sure no-one would employ me!' he replied.

Though he was the best in the world, Dermot could come across as being a bit moody, recalls Seán, who then ventured: 'If I buy Seán's Bar, would you run it with me?'

'I will,' said Dermot. And the partnership was born.

Seán and Dermot O'Brien bought the bar – which was already called Seán's Bar – from a man named Seán O'Brien. It was obviously meant to be.

Seán had no experience of working in a pub before he bought the bar. Dermot was the one with experience. But Seán is a salesman and, as he says himself, 'Isn't that what running a pub is all about? You have to sell yourself and the pub'.

'And it was by the grace of God I bought the pub', says Seán.

'Because when Vatican II came in, I could sell absolutely nothing for Gills'.

Where there used to be seven altars in a church, now there was only one. The church furnishings business collapsed. 'At that stage, I had the pub a few years', says Seán, 'so I went into it full time'.

Happy days. He worked in the pub in Athlone and kept the barge on the quay wall. He got to know the

go Gertie Browne's pub across from Seán's Bar. And eventually I'd say, "Anybody want to go to Lecarrow? (or Shannon Bridge or Glasson)". And they'd all say "yes" and come with me, which meant Joe lost ten of his customers!

'So, the slagging was that if I was ever to buy Seán's Bar, I would take Joe's pub high and dry. Joe himself used to say, "When are you going to buy that pub across the road?" But I'd absolutely no intention of buying a pub. I was fine. I had a job in a Catholic supply shop in Catholic Ireland. But the slagging went on and on.'

Dermot O'Brien used to spend the summer here on the Shannon and

Both the Lung and the Harp were available for hire through Seán's company Omega Line Cruisers

PIC: CIAN REDMOND



The flotilla of barges on the 1972 rally to highlight the need to re-open the B&B Canal

river and Lough Ree very well. He has seen the lake in all conditions and all weathers.

‘I remember one time in the early ‘60s, when part of it was frozen over

solid. I saw a man driving a Volkswagen from Coosan Point to Hare Island to Killinure Point and back to Coosan Point again’.

Seán’s involvement with the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland (IWAI) stretches back to those early days too. ‘The first boat show in Ireland was held in the basement of Bus Arás’, he says, ‘I can still see it: the IWAI had a stand at it. They had made a cave out of tin foil. A silver cave. I went in there and joined the association for five shillings’.

He started being an active IWAI member straightaway. ‘Shortly after I joined, there was a big meeting in the Mansion House to discuss how to keep the Grand Canal open. Dublin Corporation wanted to close it off in the city to make way for a road. That was a big fight for the IWAI. I was one of the people who went around

with a bucket, collecting money for the fighting fund’.

Later, in 1972, Seán was involved in John Weaving’s rally to highlight the need to re-open the Ballinamore and Ballyconnell Canal (now the Shannon-Erne Waterway).

‘There were 11 barges. We all gathered in the Jamestown Canal and a flotilla went into Carrick-on-Shannon. Then everyone got onto John’s 125B barge and made the trip to Leitrim. We started to clean under the bridge – took out shopping trolleys and all the rest of it. We got under the bridge, but when we wanted to go into the lock, it was so overgrown and silted we had to pull the barge by ropes to get her into the chamber. But we managed it’.

Seán has covered most of the waterways of Ireland. He’s been up to Beleek on the Erne, to Carlow and down to Waterford. He’s been up the Nore and the Barrow and over every inch of his beloved Shannon. He has supported rallies and events all over the country. But neither the IWAI nor the Shannon were his first introduction to the wonders of the waterways.

‘In my school days, we lived very close to the Royal’, he says. ‘We used to hop on the horse-drawn barges. The bargemen would always let us on, but we had to sit up on the bow and not move. And when we got to Cabra, we would hop another one coming back. That was my first boating experience – the Royal Canal’.

The Royal has always held a special place in Seán’s heart. He is looking forward to its re-opening in 2008, when he plans to travel the

49M: YE IRON LUNG

The 49M was built as a Grand Canal Company barge by Vickers Ireland in 1928. At the end of her working life she was bought at auction in Shannon Harbour by the Anchor Hotel at Ballyleague (Lanesboro). She was converted to a houseboat and provided living accommodation for workers constructing Rineanna (Shannon Airport)

In the summer of 1961 Sean Fitzsimons hired the St Mary for two weeks to do the Shannon Boat Rally. Following a great holiday Sean and John Connon decided to buy the barge between them for a figure believed to be £620.00.

The 49M is supposed to have its very own ghost. While still owned by the Grand Canal Company, one cold night on the Grand Canal the skipper was at the tiller and the crew were down below when the barge hit a bridge. The crewman knew something must be wrong and came up to find no sign of the skipper and so no one at the tiller. The next morning the skipper was found drowned in the canal. When this story was related to friends of Seán’s some years later, a man from London who had stayed on the barge the night before claimed he had seen someone aboard go into a cabin but there was no sign of him later. He was also able to describe what the man was wearing, and it fitted with the long overcoat and cap that would have been worn about this time. Other people over the years have also felt a presence of someone on board.

Over the years various work has been done on the *Lung*. When first bought she had an Atlantic marine diesel engine fitted. Apparently the gearbox was so big that the engine was side mounted. This was later changed and a BMC six-cylinder bus engine was installed. It is still



PIC: PATRICIA DARBY

this type of engine today, but I believe is probably on its second bus.

Seán once bought a second-hand double-decker bus and stripped out any parts he could for the barge. Aluminium panels were used for the side superstructure. The large windows were installed in the lounge, and some of the bus seating was used for a time which could double for beds when the crew exceeded the twelve bunks she had up until very recently. The engine was taken out and used as previously mentioned. Sean then managed to sell the remaining windows and chassis and still made a profit on the deal.

Having owned the barge for 40 years, Seán found it was becoming too much without regular crew and decided to sell it in 2001. With his usual canniness he felt that by selling it to family he would have the best of both worlds, get rid of the responsibility but still enjoy use of the barge. I duly paid him an exorbitant price and have been the new owner for the past four years.

We look forward to the years to come and hope that we have as much pleasure from, and can give as much pleasure to, as many people as this barge has done in the past.

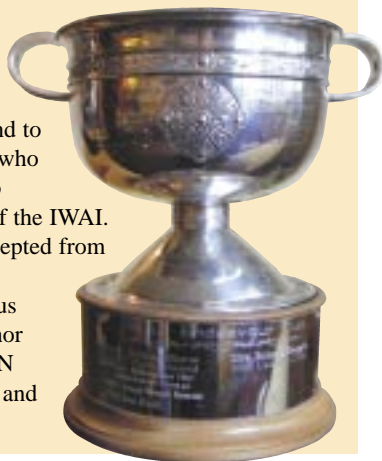
Andy Fitzsimons



As a young man, Seán once cycled from Liverpool to Dover, then from Calais to Paris and on to Rome. And back again

THE ENDEAVOUR CUP

The Endeavour Cup is awarded by the executive of the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland to the person or group who has done the most to promote the ideals of the IWAI. Nominations are accepted from the association's membership. Previous winners include author Ruth Delany, ex-IWN editor Brian Goggin and the Carrick Cubs.



length of the canal by boat.

He remembers great nights with the Royal Canal Band, a group set up to raise money for the fight to re-open the Royal. 'People would come in busloads. Sometimes we would go to the pub on Coosan Point, the next time it might be Keenagh. Billy Henshaw, Tommy Flynn, Larry Benson and a few others were in it. The girls would bring along food, and we'd collect money. And we'd have mini-rallies on the Royal too'.

Seán recently organised the reprint of the book *Green and Silver*, which raised over €10,000 for the Royal Canal Amenity Group.

At this year's IWAI general meeting, Seán was presented with the Endeavour Cup. He was stunned when his name was called out.

'I hadn't a clue about it', he says. 'I no more thought that when they were talking about it that it was for me.'

He was nominated for the award by his fellow branch members in Athlone.

The Athlone branch has accomplished many things over the years, including the placing of mooring buoys and jetties in Athlone town, Ballykeeran, Portrunny and Lecarrow. The work of the branch was all made possible through Seán's hard work as treasurer, raising funds and keeping a healthy bank balance. He was treasurer of the branch for 30 years. He still attends all the branch meetings, and always with a 'to do' list. The branch is currently working towards a cut and harbour into Glasson from the inner lakes, north of Athlone.

Athlone is Seán's home-berth for his present boat *An Spalpin Eile*, and the base for most of his boating. The annual Shannon Boat Rally between

'I remember one time in the '60s, when part the lake was frozen over solid. I saw a man driving a car from Coosan Point to Hare Island to Killinure Point and back to Coosan Point again'



Athlone and Carrick-on-Shannon has benefited from his great energy for all of its 45 years. In fact, one of the rally's biggest success stories – the RNLI auction – is Seán's brainchild. The first rally auction to be held in aid of the RNLI was in Portrunny in 1985.

'We asked everybody on the rally to donate something', says Seán, 'and it just grew over the years. People got more and more generous, giving stuff and buying stuff'.

He decided to sell the *Iron Lung* in 2001. 'I was getting older', he says, 'and getting in and out of moorings and harbours was more and more difficult without a full crew. So I decided to buy a smaller boat. My nephew Andy had a boat

John Weaving's barge: the base for the tremendous work done by the participants of the 1972 rally at the start of the B&B Canal

but he wanted a bigger one. So I sold him the *Lung* and I bought *An Spalpin Eile*.'

There was one unusual provision in the sale of the *Lung* though. The barge is still Seán's for one morning a year – Christmas morning. Over the years of Seán's ownership, a Christmas tradition had developed on the *Lung*, and the participants of the annual festivities were reluctant to see it end.

'All the lads got together', says Seán. 'One of chiefs of the court here in Athlone is a friend of theirs, and they drew up this lovely legal document which stated that Andy could only buy the *Lung* on the condition that it would be mine for Christmas morning. They got everyone to sign it'.

So if you're passing through Athlone on 25 December next, take a walk down by the quay wall. You might just hear the strains of *Carrickfergus* being carried on the wind from the direction of the *Iron Lung*. ■