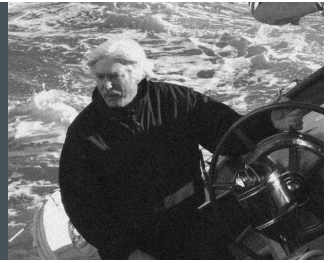


# Tom Cunliffe



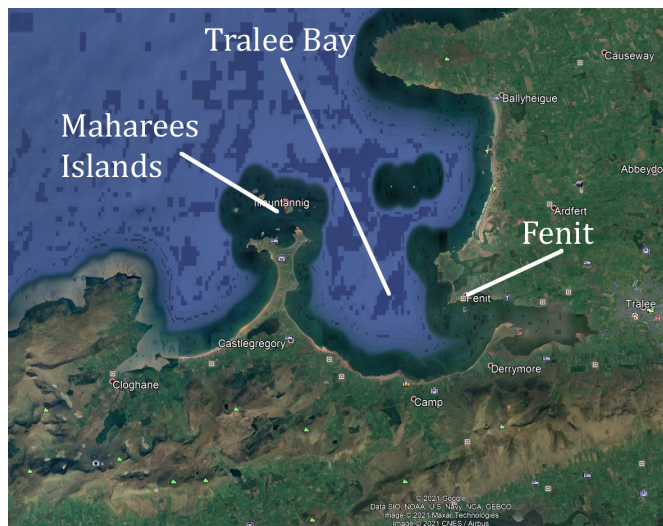
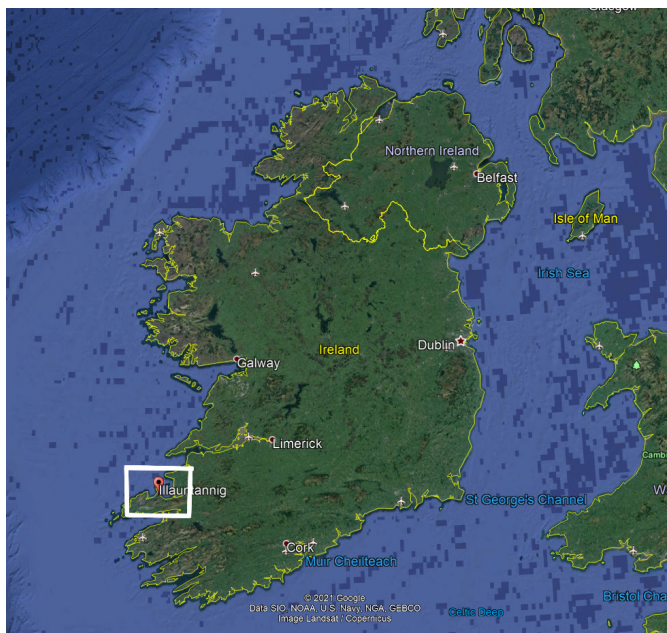
## The Far Maharees

**Tom sails to the far west of Ireland  
where he discovers another world**



*Westernman safely anchored in the lee of The Maharee Islands, piloted there in the old-fashioned way*

In the late 1980s and 90s I was researching my major work on world pilotage in the days of sail and oar. This was funded largely by the French journal *Le Chasse-Maree*, and it proved to be mind-expanding stuff. What follows is an account of my calling in on Bob Goodwin, a pilot from County Kerry in the far west of Ireland.

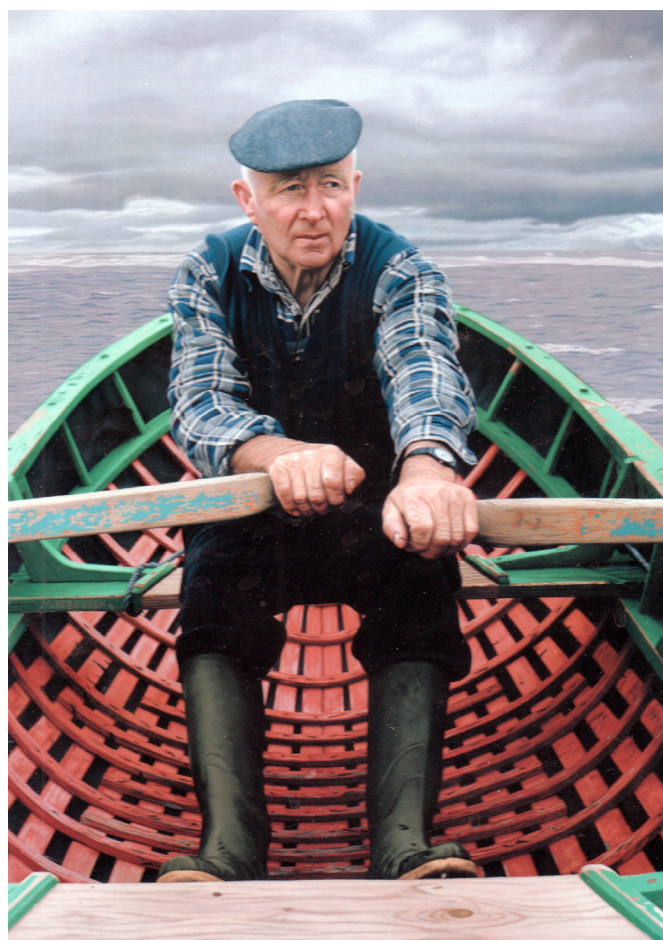


Left: Map of Ireland with area in question boxed  
Above: Blow-up of area

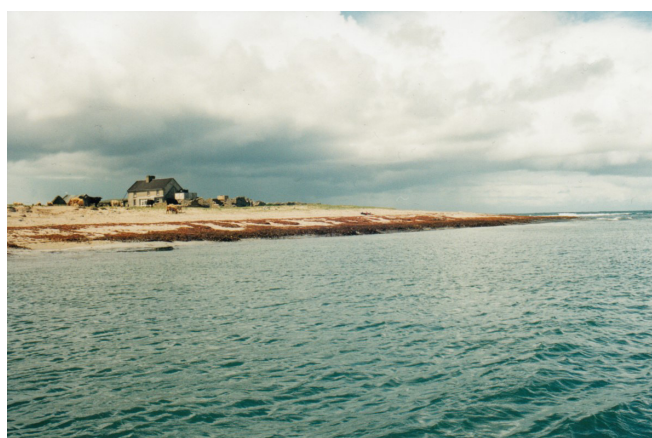
I cruised up to Fenit in *Westernman*, my 40-foot gaff cutter, where she was spotted by Bob as a replica pilot vessel. Wasting no time, he invited my crew and I to visit him at his old family home on the off-lying islands from where they had plied their ancient trade for generations. Next day we sailed out to meet him there.

It was a near-gale and I could see no hope of a safe berth, but Bob appeared as if from nowhere, singlehanded in a canvas-skinned curragh and beckoned us to follow him. No better pilot existed on the planet, so we did. He led us to a patch of water that was mill-pond flat yet surrounded by the mayhem of a strong wind on the lee side of the Atlantic. As the mighty swells thundered past on either side it was an uncanny berth but we were totally safe anchored there.

We boarded the curragh and went ashore for Bob to brew us tea in the simple house that had lain undisturbed since his family left.



Left: The Goodwin house  
Above: Bob in his curragh



Later he took us around the island to where the sea was eroding a low cliff. There, poking out boldly, stood the bones of anchorite monks of the Celtic church who had lived out their time here in prayer and contemplation as far back as the 6th century, long before the Vikings came. The remains of their beehive huts and a small graveyard have survived, battered by seas and hurricane force winds. All around us, the ocean gale blew on.

From the nineteenth century, licensed pilots have been working the waters of Tralee Bay and the approaches to Fenit, the port for Tralee itself. An Fhianait, means 'The Wild Place', and the name is well chosen. Historically, the business was at least potentially lucrative by the standards of the area and pilots were men of high prestige, but shipping was far from dense, so competition ran hot for what there was.

At the height of the potato famines that ripped through the western population in the mid-nineteenth century, ships like the famous *Jeanie Johnston* sailed from Fenit and nearby Blennerville with desperate families emigrating to the USA. Traders coming in carried all manner of cargoes, but the best payers for the pilots were those loaded with grain or maize, known locally as 'corn boats'. Pilotage dues on ships from Ireland or England were much lower than those on vessels arriving from foreign departure points, and pilotage 'out' was only 25 per cent of the inward fee. Turnaround time for a corn boat was about two weeks and until the early 1960s pilots were still boarding from four-man canvas currachs.

Years ago, pilots were based not only in Fenit, but also eight miles to seaward on the Maharee Islands which, in the nineteenth and part of the twentieth centuries, were home to the pilot families of Goodwin and O'Leary. At the time of my visit, Bob Goodwin was still a pilot for Fenit, and Michael O'Leary was building currachs in County Kerry. Both remembered going out with their fathers to board ships in the traditional way, and it is to them that we turn for information about the old days, for little has been written down. They have been generous with their pictures and memories.



*The ancient monastic buildings are surprisingly well-preserved*



*A fine replica of the  
famine ship  
Jeanie Johnston*

For many generations, the two families and some of their crews lived on Illauntannig (Oilean tSeanaig), St Seanach's Island, one of the group known variously as the Maharees and the Seven Hogs. The low-lying limestone island stands about a mile offshore from Scraggane Pier at the north end of the sandy Maharees peninsula which offers what shelter it can to Tralee Bay.



*The pilots' house on Illauntannig*

The scenery can only be described as massive. Mount Brandon's immense bulk rises 3,000ft in the southwest, the Slieve Mish Mountains form a noble backdrop to the south, while from seaward rolls the Atlantic, misty with the spray of three thousand miles. Here, above all places, is the end of the Old World. Beyond is nothing until America.

Padraig O'Duinnin, a student of Irish traditional boats and their builders, reports that for a short time, the Goodwins and the O'Learys were in such tight rivalry that although close together on their island, they talked only when they had no choice. This awkward situation was not prolonged, however, and within living memory they were pulling boats with one another at regattas, which they often won. Spending so much of their working life at the oars made the men folk fit in a way that would be hard to mirror today.

There was no rota system for pilots, apart from a private one among two Goodwin brothers. Sometimes, a pilot crew would put to sea long before dawn to be out of sight before daylight. The result was that the other pilots either would not realise they were gone or, if they did, would not know which way to steer to keep in touch with them. It was not enough to watch from the shore for a ship, then launch off to meet her, hoping to out-row the others. There could well be up to five pilots already out there hoping for the job.

Such head-to-head competition led to boats being launched in increasingly heavy weather, and standing further out to sea for longer periods than was remotely safe. Bob Goodwin feels that something should have been done with the regulations to put a stop to it, because it was only by supreme seamanship and good fortune that the practice did not result in extensive loss of life.

Curragh oars are of a singular nature, having almost no 'blade' as such. The outboard end is merely flattened off, but because of the light displacement nature of the craft, it generates enough leverage to propel her effectively. The bladeless form also creates minimal windage when rowing to weather and causes no problems by dragging dangerously in the surf. It looks odd to an observer unused to it, but like so many time-honoured arrangements, it works.



*Left: Carrying the curragh ashore  
Right: The race is on!*





*Once outside the surf,  
a small lugsail was  
sometimes set*

Once afloat outside the surf, the four men either rowed or sailed with a small lugsail out to sea. The sail was reefed in heavy weather and the boats were ballasted with stones according to their expected requirements of the day. Extra lateral resistance for sailing was sometimes arranged by leeboards.

When they had seen the pilot safely up the boarding ladder, the three men left in the boat either rowed home or followed him aboard. If the latter, the curragh could be towed or lifted out of the water. Michael O'Leary recalls seeing this done. Two ropes were lowered and passed under the curragh, one forward, one aft. Then the fragile boat was hauled up to travel into Fenit hanging from the ship's side.

The curragh might stay aboard to drop the pilot outward bound if no further ships were expected during the time of the turnaround. Otherwise, the crew would have to launch off to meet their 'boss' as he came out. From time to time, they missed their rendezvous and Fenit pilots were sometimes carried all the way to Liverpool or the Bristol Channel. Some of them had coast licences and could pilot the ship all the way if required. A number of passages to Cardiff and Barry are on record, but after the 1860s the Fenit man would have been obliged to hand over to a licensed Bristol Channel pilot if challenged east of Lundy Island. The trip would still have been well worth while, however.

The islanders used their curraghs for every waterborne requirement, so builders were in great demand. Water was often in short supply, and this was carried over, together with other necessities the island folk could not produce. The island soil was surprisingly fertile and there was a degree of simple farming. Cows, a bull and even the two working horses needed to keep things going were all transported by curragh, although the sharp hooves were lashed up first! There was no priest, however, so the people had to come 'ashore' for mass.

On 20 April 1916, the *Aud*, a German freighter masquerading as a Norwegian and flying false colours, was seen standing on and off in the approaches. Unbeknown to the authorities, she was due to meet Roger Casement, a British diplomat of Irish origins who had obtained German support for the rebellion. Casement had arrived on board U-19, landing to the North at Banna Strand and was soon captured. He was later executed for treason. So far as we can gather, the *Aud* arrived after dark and no pilot was involved. The O'Learys are said to have been lined up for the job, but were not there when the ship steamed in.

A day or two later, she sailed and was arrested by the British off Cork, her disguise having been discovered, together with an anonymous letter to the authorities about a delivery of guns in the west. Since the armaments were surely for the IRA, the British put out a hue and cry for anyone who had helped the ship. Naturally, they came after the pilots.





## *The Aud*

When the soldiers and police arrived on the island there was a swell running on the strand. Unaware of their precarious situation, the Goodwins helped them land from their boats, but no sooner were the uniformed men ashore than they demanded, 'Where are the guns?'

'What guns?' was the only answer.

'You aren't going to bluff us!' retorted the guards, and began to interrogate the men individually.

In short order, two were marched away in chains. Just as they were leaving, the O'Learys returned and, needless to say, kept their mouths firmly shut.

The two Goodwin pilots were taken to Dublin and narrowly escaped being shot before the truth was established. The guns were never found.

In the two decades leading up to World War II, Fenit was thriving, with ships varying in size up to 6,000 tons and 22 feet draught bringing in maize from South America, coal from Poland and many more cargoes besides. The highly desirable corn boats used to call at the Canary Islands to bunker and would wire their progress from there, giving the pilots a chance to be out ready for them. Sometimes, however, this proved a mixed blessing because in those days, bad weather could easily delay them by a week.

The O'Learys left the island in 1928, but continued in pilot work until 1939 when the port effectively shut down for World War II. Activities resumed when the port reopened in the middle 1950s, though the Goodwins too moved to the mainland in 1953.

The first ship due in after the war was in September 1955, a Dutch coaster with 500 tons of timber. Bob Goodwin's father, Patrick, went out to look for her at the time she was expected, which was 2300 on a Sunday evening. He could not find the crew he needed at such an hour, even though with what some might describe as the dubious benefit of a 'British Seagull' outboard, the curragh now demanded one less man. Lacking anyone more mature and therefore stronger, his young son Bob came along in case the outboard failed and more oars were needed.

The ship failed to arrive until the morning and Pilot Goodwin told me that he 'never knew a night could be so long'. He obviously performed well enough, however, because thereafter he accompanied his father regularly. The old man continued piloting until he was nearly eighty.



In 1964, nine years after his initial all-night vigil, Pilot Bob Goodwin made his first trip. He was taken to the ship by his cousin, John Goodwin, a curragh builder and his son, who were going out in their curragh to tend lobster pots. The pilotage fee was £7 10s inwards. Goodwin paid his crew £2 each, leaving £3 10s for him. In his own words, 'I was as happy as if I had won the lotto!'

As we weighed anchor and set off northwards, I realised that Ireland is a country of other-worldly experiences and spiritual uplift. To sail the west coast with an open mind in a stout vessel can open doors to communities past and present whose lives transcend mainstream understanding. We who follow the sea are fortunate, because the salt road can carry us to places and people that the land-based traveller will never meet.



© Tom Cunliffe 2021