**SYNOPSIS**

**FORWARD**

*“Ask God for Wind – but Hoist Your Own Sails” (Flora Robson)*

This is a true story about the rivers, seas and oceans I have sailed upon. What follows describes my life in and out of boats and especially since 1986 when I started ocean sailing, when I was aged sixty, up until 1996 when I sailed back into the River Shannon after a circumnavigation of the world which lasted for three years and three days.

It is good for one to know both friends and enemies and the sea can be both. If you let it, it can kill and has and will again. Treat it with respect and love, which I did and you have more than a fighting chance. For like the land it was also meant to be used.

**Chapter 1**

**North Atlantic Venture – 1986**

* **Believe in the Magic of your Dreams –**

I was born in the capital of Ireland – Liverpool, on St. Patrick’s Day in 1926 of Irish parents. My dad was from Dublin and my mum hailed from Limerick. When I was ten years old my dad died and since then I have lived on the banks of the River Shannon, which flows through Limerick – I have been fascinated by water for as long as I can remember. In my teens I had my first boat, a 16ft open one with a dagger board and gaff rig, in which I taught myself to sail. And I am still learning – stories of solo ocean voyages and particularly solo Atlantic crossings caught my imagination, and still do. Somehow the Atlantic really bugged me.

So, in 1986 with my family grown up and with families of their own, I ploughed my savings, sold my car and borrowed on life assurance policies and bought a Swedish built International 26ft Folkboat. And I sailed it single-handedly out of the River Shannon to Newport, Rhode Island in 56 days non-stop via the Azores route to the 36th Parallel, then West for 1,700 N.M. where I picked up the Gulf Stream which assisted me for the remaining 600 N.M. up to Newport. After 10 days there, in which I put up the boat for sale, I flew back to Ireland.

**Chapter 2**

**Newport again – The Return Voyage to the River Shannon – Safe Journey**

* **Home and May Your Big Jib Draw - 1987 –**

My boat had not been sold, luckily for me, and now I was truly smitten with ocean sailing. So in January I planned to sail back and arrived in Newport again in May. Preparation for me is as satisfying as sailing, planning the route, equipment and rigging etc. is the next best thing to sailing. There is excitement and satisfaction knowing that when you are about will depend on the success of the voyage. My boat came alive again after launching it and so did I for I am never happier than when I am aboard my boat. I feel more competent and self-sufficient. After all ‘the world is your oyster’ with the freedom to roam.

Saturday 6th June 1987 saw me sailing out of Newport escorted by three launches.

En-route in the Gulf Stream, which will assist me to Ireland, we meet whales, gales and strong winds for 20 out of the 28 days of the voyage. Also I had a very lucky escape from a collision with a freighter. So again solo and navigating by compass, sextant and log I arrive in the River Shannon and discover that the Q.E. 2 had 2¼ million pounds sterling of storm damage done to it at the same time as my crossing!

**Chapter 3**

**The loss of the Iniscealtra – 1989**

* **Give me Good Digestion Lord and Something to Digest –**

Upon my first navigation attempt I am 100 days non-stop and solo, 1,000 N.M. West of Capetown South Africa. I decide that if I meet a shop I will be lifted off. That is if I meet one, for I have not seen one for forty days.

Ten days now since I lost the rudder in a bad storm and my supplies of food and water are running low.

At 0200 hours I am hauled up starboard side of a Norwegian ship with a looped bowline knotted rope under my arms which had been thrown to me after I failed to make the rope pilot ladder.

The captain asks me if I have a sea-faring family history and when I say ‘no’ he says ‘Aha, I think maybe one of my Grandfathers must have had an affair with one of your Grandmothers!’

Within four days I am landed in Capetown – having lost all my floating assets – so I take passage on an Italian freighter as the only passenger and I land in Harwich within 17 days.

**Chapter 4**

**Blind sailing to Brazil 1990**

**‘If a man does not keep pace with this companions perhaps he bears the beat of a different drum. So let him step to the music that he hears, no matter how measured and how far away’ (Thoren)**

I said ‘Those old guys who sailed without charts on voyages of discovery were great’. And my friend the retired skipper of the N.S.T. vessel the ‘Asguard’ said ‘They were indeed, who made it to their destination were very much the lucky ones’.

South of the equator on my second attempt at circumnavigation I find that my Reeds Nautical Almanac has long been of no use to me as it only covers Europe. As my friend was fond of saying ‘If my aunt had balls she would be my uncle’! If I had an Admiralty Nautical Almanac I could get the declination of the sun daily for use with my sextant. So my sat/nav kaput I am completely in the dark – ‘Where the hell am I?’

Too many days now since I got a position from a passing shop. Some 300 N.M. off the African Coast, my transistor radio is now picking up American stations, but I neither speak Spanish or Portuguese, the South East trade has left us and I estimate by dead reckoning that I am off the coast of Brazil. It is a nightmare and I have an alarm clock ringing on the hour as I know from a ship which gave me a position yesterday that I am approaching land. I awaken, hear a noise that I take to be a jet plane and in the pre dawn glow I see surf breaking on the shore. Luckily I get some time to turn around and head offshore unti dawn appears which shows a tropical shore of sand hills and palm trees. I then skirt the coast to Vittoria and tie up after a voyage of 90 days – solo non stop.

**Chapter 5**

**July 1993 – Third Time Lucky?**

* **My final attempt at Circumnavigation –**

July 1993. After my aborted effort in Brazil, I again leave the Shannon Estuary in the Ketch, Toyota – O’Mara – Limerick, kindly supplied by my neighbour, Tony O’Mara after I lost my own boat. This time slipping quietly out of the Shannon fishing port of Carrigaholt with not a soul to be seen – my family and friends had earlier in the month seen me off from Limerick docks. With little sponsorship, I had told them that I was only taking a cruise to Madeira, for this time I was taking a low profile and playing it ‘One Port at a time, Sweet Jesus’. I also had on board an Admiralty Nautical Almanac so that with my sextant I could see where I was going. Day 20 – I approach Madeira Islands and as I can see the tangle of spars in Funchal’s Marina the wind dies under this high volcanic island and leaves us dancing to sky mirrored swells. A sunset a puff of an ocean breeze ghosted us into the marina and though beautiful this island is by day, with many greens and dotted with red-roofed white houses climbing up to the cotton wool clouds, by night it is a huge Christmas tree with lights from its many houses festooning it, reaching up to the moon. The old sailors named it the ‘garden of the Atlantic’.

**Chapter 6**

**Across the Atlantic – Round my first Cape, Madeira/Capetown**

**114 days**

**‘Luck may sometimes help – work always helps’**

**(Wisdom of the Brahmans)**

Leave this garden in the Atlantic on Sunday 15th August. Under engine repaired after a pleasant eight days. I was in sight of it for two days and two nights due to light winds. On the first day out a whale tried to mate with ‘Toyota – O’Mara – Limerick’. I never saw it but it churned and boiled up the water all around and very near to the hull. Don’t know how long it lasted for, it seemed it would never stop. I feared for my bilge and self-steering rudder. 114 days out of Funchal, the fresh South-Easterly trade winds were pushing us to the fairest cape of all - the Cape of Good Hope, or the Cape of Storms – five days before my arrival in Gordans Bay, which lies to the West of the Cape in the Indian Ocean, I fell on a winch in heavy weather and cracked two ribs in my lower back – which was a great help! But South Arica has a beautiful climate and with R&R good food again I was soon mended. Four days after I got in I spent my first Christmas away from home in the company of friends I had made in Capetown.

After I lost Iniscealtra in 1989 my eldest son Jim flew down from Bahrain for a two-week holiday and this was my first contact with my family. The Cape peninsula is most beautiful with its rugged coastline and we visited the Cape of Good Hope, Table Mountain and also many vineyards, apple farms and of course the odd bar! I hauled out and antifouled ‘Loons’ bum before leaving as the marine growth resembled a women’s head of hair, which slowed us down considerably en-route.

I also attended a New Years Eve dinner dance as a guest at Bertie Reed’s table at the Gordons Bay yacht Club where I was moored.

The commodore, who is of Scottish descent, blew in the New Year in his kilt and bagpipes at midnight and later at 0300 hours after many enquiries as to what he had in under his kilt he said ‘I will show you’ and he went out to the balcony and stripped and dived bollocks naked into the marina harbour! And was promptly followed by a dozen members of both sexes. I regret departing this wonderful and magical continent where I’ve only found very nice people blessed with climate, health and wealth.

**Chapter 7**

**Across the Indian Ocean and I round my second Cape**

**‘I must create a system or be enslaved by another mans’ (William Blake)**

Departing South Africa on the 30th of January, ‘Loon’ and I round Cape Leeuwin on Australia’s SW corner where king waves are to be found and feared, in just under 90 days and I set a course for the oldest settlement in W. Australia, Albany founded by the brig ‘Amity’ in 1926 which carried militia, tradesmen, convicts, cattle and fowl etc. I find that I am a celebrity after I ask the Port control for a tow-in as I was wallowing in king-sized swells off Princess Harbour with a little wind. There was a large crowd on the Town Wharf as I was towed in as my engine starter motor had burned out. I am big news and appear on local TV and radio and later on national T.V. as a TV crew flew down from Perth.

As my progress becomes more newsworthy, especially in Ireland, my son Dan and some local friends formed a support committee who raised funds which put me back in the black again and which enabled me to buy a GPS (Global Position by Satellite). I christen it a magic box as it constantly updates your position in latitude and longitude to within a few metres. It also gives the boat’s speed over the ground (sea bottom) and the boats heading, after allowing for variation and deviation plus a hell of a lot more but I am too old for this computer which is only the size of the palm of your hand and the length of your thumb – bloody amazing!

I help to start the annual brass monkey race which is held on the nearest Sunday to mid winder day, 21st June, at the Princess Royal Sailing Club, which hosted my stay there Buckshee, or Gratis. Later in Perth, where I spent a week with Irish friends, I met the Irish Prime Minister at the Irish Club who visited there, while on a trade mission. I had arrived in Albany on the 26th of April, and spent the winter months in this lovely old whaling port, with again only nice friendly people, preparing for my next leg. I also toured, went bush to Cape Leeuwin and the Valley of the Giants where the second largest trees on this planet can be found.

**Chapter 8**

**7.10.94**

**Across the Great Australian Bight to Tasmania (Van Diemens Land)**

**‘It is what we have to overcome which focuses our minds and shapes our destinies’ (Anon.)**

Two days before my landfall I had been lying ahull for 36 hours, that is with all sales down, in the worst conditions of sea and wind I had so far encountered. The wind had changed direction five times which makes the seas hellishly confused and dangerous, when at 02.00 hours Loon was lifted up and flung down with a force that broke a porthole, swept the sprayhood dodger away and broke the anchor lashings on deck and sent the anchor overboard. My forehead had a gash on it from a flying fire extinguisher and the cabin floor was in spaghetti.

Two days later we made the d’Estrecasteaux Channel, around the SW Cape of Tasmania which runs for 90 N.M. to Hobart, in the violent remaining squalls of the depression which left my sails in need of repairs.

After spending two weeks in Dover some 10m into the channel, where I found friends and peace, to repair mind, body and boat, I sailed up to Hobart for sail repairs and to provision, etc.

Here again as in SA and mainland Oz, I was well received at the D.S.S. (Derwent Sailing Squadron) where I was told the storm I had survived had been the worst since 1975. It had caused severe damage on land even above Sydney’s East Coast and had left snow on the Tassie Mountains.

During my stay in Dover I had met with two very colourful people, both with Irish names. After all, this was where Irish convicts were transported to.

One told me when I enquired, he was born in Ireland, that he was on his Mamma’s life support machines coming out on the boat.

The other had a horse running at races on the mainland and after the race he was in the owner’s bar when a waiter bearing a silver salver with champagne and wearing white gloves, said “Champagne, Sir?” and Ian said “Fuck off and get me a can of beer!”

I found Australians generally to be very direct and rough diamonds but with huge hearts.

Three club members invited me to their homes for Christmas dinner. I tactfully chose one. It was with regret that I left this very beautiful “Apple Isle” and its people of whom I will only have happy memories for my lifetime.

**Chapter 9**

**Over the Tasman Sea to Southland, New Zealand. 18 days**

**‘It’s a long, long way from Clare to here’ (from Christie Moore’s Ballad)**

10.1.95 From Hobart I exit to the Southern ocean via Stormy Bay and I round the Tasmanian peninsula and lose sight of land before dark in a brisk south-westerly wind. My GPS shows latitude 43’ 20ºN, longitude 147’ 55ºE and I am as a happy as a pig in shit. This is the best possible time to be in the Southern Ocean, as it is mid summer down here now. It is now I should be rounding the big one, Cape Horn, but storm damage to boat and man took its toll of time in Tazzie, as the Tazzies say. In Oz most words are abbreviated – ‘rellies’ are relations – ‘roos’ are kangaroos. With only one short, sharp gale of 12 hours duration, and steady in its direction. For it is the wind shifts that kick up the seas and make life tricky, I enter the Foveaux Strait, between the base of NZ Southland and Stewart Island. Earlier I had seen the Southern Alps and Mount Cook (12000 feet). As dusk settles we made our entry into the biggest ocean of them all, the Pacific. I had changed my plan to sail south of Stewart Island and the Snares and go directly to Cape Horn, as the weather has been kind. It also saves many miles. Bluff harbour is to port at midnight, and I decide to enter it to replenish fruit and vegetables, etc. for the long haul across the Pacific. The lights of the town behind the navigation lights confuse me and I go aground on a falling tide. I haul off with the help of a local abalone shellfish diver and his boat with daylight, and I count myself lucky not to have lost all my floating assets. A lift out of the water shows some damage to the keel. A Maori, Fred Ryan, who calls himself a black Irishman, befriends me, as indeed do many Kiwi’s and tells me one of his grandfathers came from County Mara in Ireland and I smiled.

**Chapter 10**

**The Pacific – mast damage and to Valparaiso, Chile – 124 days**

**‘You can’t overcome difficulties unless you are presented with one’ (Anon)**

I departed Bluff Harbour on 25.2.95 under the small Genoa in strong winds which are too lazy to cross the Southern Alps, and swung around N.Z’s Southland with astonishing fury. Bluff is 46’ 38º S and well into the “Roaring Forties” wind belt area. Before leaving I had waited for four days for a decrease in the wind strength. Bounty Island is passed to port and we have 5000 N.M. of clear water to South American and Cape Horn. The seasons have changed and I meet strong gales every five to seven days. At 49º S and halfway across I lose my starboard spreader, or crosstree, and after rigging a jury shroud with a spinnaker pole to stop the mast from flexing, I can now only sail either running or on the port tack. Repairing entailed hauling myself up the mast and my legs are black and blue from being banged against the mast and shrouds. I also got a small hernia for my trouble but as I had another one twenty years ago I know it is no big deal. I meet two gales from the East against the Westerly drift, and the sea during both of them was like a mountain snowscape. I decide to go North for better weather and as I have only charts of Cape Horn I make Valparaiso my port of refuge. Knowing it from my schooldays, “Valparaiso, Valparaiso, when will the wind blow me down there again?” So I look up my atlas and get the co-ordinates from it. Juan Fernandez, Robinson Crusoe’s island of book fame is 60 N.M. to port. My GPS is only magic and makes life so much easier. The Andes mountains span the western horizon and after 124 days I call Valparaiso Maratimo to confirm my atlas co-ordinates and my position 8 N.M. offshore and 12 N.M. South of Valparaiso Bay. Shortly after a jet plane buzzes me and the pilot radios that a coast guard cutter is on its way to assist my navigation into the harbour. I had not seen a ship en route and in the absence of messages my support committee had alerted most South American Countries of my voyage plan and overdue status through diplomatic channels. Again I am a celebrity and boats with TV cameras on board meet me and escort me into Valparaiso, the Valley of paradise.

**Chapter 11**

**Valparaiso and Chile, South America**

**‘Bliss – A large cold bottle and a small hot bird’ (Anon)**

First impressions count and like my entry into Albany in Oz, I am amazed at the help and kindness and welcome I receive from everyone. The Port Capitane of the Chilean Armada (Navy) greets me and escorts me, with two naval ratings to his nearly five storey Armada headquarters and en route the dockers give me a cheer. This is my second visit to this vast continent and unlike Brazil, even though I also met nice people there, the Chileans who are Latinos immediately impress me with their happy outlook and industry and art. I had much to attend to, fresh food being first and unsure of security at the docks, I visited a nearby bank and supermarket and bough bread, butter, milk, eggs, bacon and sausages.

After 124 days at sea I must have been vitamin starved for I also bought chocolate and sweets. It was now July ’95 and winter! So I decided that my route home was now through the Panama Canal as the hurricane season was now in full swing over in El Caribbe there was no rush. I was receiving faxes, etc. from family, friends, politicians and my support committee. The best one was from my son Dan, which said, “Buy yourself two bottles of champers”.

John Hunt, of the Hunt Museum and Craggenowen, which houses the Brendan boat came across with the five-figure cheque.

Ricardo, a Liet. Col., in the Army in Chile visits me from his boat in the Marina and he being a vet, as the army has many mules and horses for the Andes mountains, which helicopters often cant be used for. So I tell him I have a small hernia and ask him if it will be OK if I wait until I get back home to get it fixed. He brings me to his brother Hernan, who is in private practice after retiring as surgeon General of the Chilean Navy, and with my pants down to my ankles he has me coughing and laughing. For I know if he is Ricardo’s brother he must have a sense of humour. “How is your stool?” he asks and I say “I shitten like a goosen” for they are German, and Ricardo says “He pissens like a horsen!”

I meet Elana Mercedes Pedalta Zapata. Darwin, in his book “The Voyage of the Beagle” devotes a page and a half to the South American black-eyed Suzies and states that European would learn from them. I agree.

Chile has enormous mineral deposits, especially of copper and they export 40% of it to the world. They had the second heart transplant after South Africa so I was in good hands in the hospital after first being to a clinic where I was checked for everything from heart down.

‘A boat to Valparaiso came

And in the bay her sails were furled

She brought a weary sailor to a sunnier world.’

**Chapter 12**

**1995/1996. North to Peru**

**Nelson said ‘Ships and met rot in harbour’**

Loon (Toyoto – O’Mara – Limerick) and shortly to have the logo ‘Craggenowen home of the Brendan boat. The living legend’ on its topsides, as my son Dan has arrived with his friend Clive with the logo transfers from Ireland. My second link with my family since July 1993. Departing from Quintero yacht Club (Club de Yates) which was cheaper and more scenic in a small fishing town than Higuerillas Yacht Club @ $15 dollars per day and only an hours bus ride to Valpo, I began my voyage along Chile’s long coastline. Due to a Northerly wind I pull into a little fjord with a sandy beach at its head and I, amid dry, craggy hills, and spend a week there with the very friendly, small community of its small fishing village before I reach ‘La Herradura’ (Horsehoe Bay) where there is a yacht club within walking distance of Coquimbo which is a major port. Here I am taken to visit La Serena. One of the loveliest cities in Chile, which has two avenues bisecting it, with a grass strip between them, with statues of both sexes in the nude. The locals call the Avenue of the Asses. I spend my third Christmas with a family from the yacht club, and we dine at midnight which is the custom there. And I drink my first rusty nail, a local brew mixture. After a few weeks there I set sail for Irquque which lies south of the Peruvian border and is reported to be the driest spot on the planet and boy was it hot.

A large, internationally financed observatory is not too far away in the dry sandy hills that abound here, as they get nearly 365 days of unbroken sunshine annually. The harbour is like Hong Kong, with fishing boats and naval boats and shipping, and again where I go there are statues of Bernardo O’Higgins, the father figure and liberator of this fine nation. I smile as I think of his equivalent in Ireland, de Valera, who was of Spanish extraction. I have two hand grenades on board which where given to me by a yacht club member in Valpo as protection against possible pirates off the coast of Equador and Colombia. “Times have not changed, Pat” he said, “off the West Cost of South America”.

**Chapter 13**

**On the Galleon Route. January 1996**

**‘Who wants hassle’ (Self)**

I am enjoying this pleasant easy sailing up the East Cost of Chile where I do not have to wear oilskins when going on deck and have not to wipe my glasses constantly. The winds are Southwest and gentle. I failed in Chile to get a chart of Peru’s coastline, as I would have like to stop at Callao, the Port of Lima. I had made out a timetable from Valpo to the Panama Canal via the countries and ports I decided to call to. The total mileage was approximately 2,500 N.M. I also estimated 12,000 odd N.M. from Panama to Miami, and then to Ireland, as I wanted to leave Miami before the end of June latest, to avoid the hurricane season and have a summer crossing of the North Atlantic. So I estimated three months sailing and three months R&R and sightseeing. I regretted being unable to visit the Museo de Oro in Lima, as a retired Scottish mining engineer in Valpo advised me that it housed the biggest and best gold and silver artefacts in this world. After all this as where the treasures that reached Spain came from in richly laden galleon convoys.

The cargoes after reaching Panama were made portable for the 60 odd miles across the Isthmus of Panama by mule train. As the canal was then unknown, that is if the gallon convoys every reached panama by escaping the clutches of pirates and other enemies of Spain. The Humbolt or Peru current was assisting me in a steady flow and I reached Manta in Ecuador from Iquique, after pleasant sailing, some 60-90 N.M. off the Peruvian coast, a distance of 1,440 N.M. in 21 days.

**Chapter 14**

**I Reach my First Gun Country. Manta, Ecuador.**

**‘I will have memories for my lifetime’ (Self)**

The night before my arrival into Manta I counted the lights of 21 fishing trawlers that I had to find a way through and at times I had to use the engine to manoeuvre past them and their nets. As dawn broke the early sun showed Isla de la Plata, which lies off the headland, and which I had to round to make the yacht club at Salinas. I was working from a sketch I had made from a chart, that a kindly Yank in Iquique had, and as I had also noted the co-ordinates I had no difficulty entering the harbour, and I off the clubhouse. This is the first gun country I had visited, wherever I go, supermarkets, banks, post offices, anywhere there is cash to stash, you see armed hombres, at the doors of supermarkets, two guys in jeans have pump action sawn-off shotguns hanging from straps on their shoulders at the ready. At the fisherman’s dock where I went to fill my diesel cans, the pump attendant was similar armed. At night, the guy on the yacht club gate had a double-barrelled shotgun. Though I must say I never saw any trouble of any kind while I was there, and found only nice friendly and most helpful people. As a very good friend of mine in Ireland says, “Stay near the wall”. I had been advised not to venture out alone at night, and the only times I did was either to cross the busy seafront road from the club to a pizza restaurant. I liked Manta and its people. It has a modern busy high-rise city and a lovely old-world fishing waterfront with some old type sailing boats with long overhanging booms that are full of tradition and character as they sail out to sea every evening. But it is hot, as the equator lies 56 N.M. to the North. I learn to siesta as the city and country does in the afternoon and I rig an awning over Loon’s decks and cockpit. I bask in a hammock slung between shady palm trees in the foothills of Manta and sip fruit juices and say ‘Who the hell wants to round Cape Horn?”

**Chapter 15**

**Tropical islands Feb/March 1996**

**‘Somewhere over the Rainbow skies are Blue’ (Wizard of Oz)**

February is upon us and once again I must haul anchor and leave another paradise. Loon and I cross the Equator again within a day of leaving Manta. We had left in tandem with Etienne and Jeannie in their yacht ‘Liane’ but lose each other after a tropical downpour that lasted for many hours. Etienne, a Swiss had built his steel boat in Switzerland and had road hauled it to the Med. From where he sailed it through the Suez Canal, Red Sea, Indian ocean to oz and Tassie, where he met Jeannie. We had arranged to rendezvous at Isla de San Jose, which is the most Southerly Island of the Los Perlos (Pearl Islands) Archipelago, which adorn the tropical paradise of the Gulf of Panama. We keep well away from the coast of Colombia, a country I had been advised, when in Chile, not to either visit or skirt. It is a drug producing country and even merchant ships are not immune to modern coastal pirates. I would imagine poverty does not help either and as a lone sailor I was taking no chances.

After ten days during which I crossed the doldrums in heavy rain which pours as if out of a sieve, I sail into Isla de la San Jose. With a good chart and my G.P.S. with a full moon and I drop anchor and have three rum and cokes with lemon.

I awake to daylight and see my first tropical island or Pear of the Pacific. Clear blue water, white sandy beaches, green hills and waving palm trees, blue skies. I breakfast and hear a voice. A local in a dugout canoe offers me fish and fruit. She has no English and I have little Spanish and no Panamanian currency, so I offer her cigarettes in trade for fish, as I have fruit. But she throws in a bunch of green bananas as a gift.

Pelicans surround us and I think heaven must be like this. Although I had not originally planned on this route it is turning out to be one of the nicest legs of the whole trip. ‘Liane’ arrives and we sail North to Isla Pedro Gonzales where I hitch a lift ashore in a dugout canoe with four happy dark-skinned youths and as she keeps taking water they dive overboard to lighten it as I sit in water on its floor. They take me to their village where I meet the happiest and most hospitable people of my voyaging. Was it because they had no bank, PO, or phones and T.V.? The children were beautifully dressed and the girls had their hair in braids and beads. We continued island hopping and sopped at two smaller uninhabited Pearls of the Panamanian Gulf before arriving at Isla Contadora which has a lovely resort complex. So I am able to fax and phone family, friends and supporters. I celebrate my 70th birthday on the 17th march, St. Patricks day with Canadians, Americans and Argentineans who have been shuttled from panama by 20 seat jetplanes on a package deal, after transferring from jumbo jets in Havana.

Isla Tiaroga, the most Northerly of the Pearl islands is only 70 kms to the N.E. as I make a swift passage in a brisk Northerly breeze, an extension no bout of the N.E. trade winds in the Mar Caribbe. I see ships of all sizes and nations at anchor in the Bay of Panama awaiting transit through the canal. Isla Tobago is less than 230 kms from Balboa, the pacific entrance to the canal. ‘Liane’ and ‘Loon’ stayed a few days here and we visited many bars and restaurants as it is popular with Panamanians and has hourly ferry boats to and from the mainland.

**Chapter 16**

**The Panama Canal – Balboa to Colon – April ‘96**

**‘Two girls in a silk sarong, both beautiful, one a gazelle” (W.B. Yeats)**

By night the Bay of Panama is like Blackpool, with lights of liners, tankers, merchant ships. The next day I skirt this vast Armada and as panama is in sight and only an hours run I have no need of a compass or charts and enter the busy channel which leads up to the Balboa yacht Club. Here I am flabbergasted at the concentration and variety of yachts of all nations, which are moored within sight, and sound of the Balboa yacht club. I am directed to a mooring buoy, while shipping glides past the mooring area into the Pacific. It is a whole New World for me and I gaze in wonder and amazement at this amazing ballet of water traffic. Upstream I can see the American or the Thatcher Ferry Suspension Bridge with traffic buzzing across it and ships passing beneath it. So I have exited the peaceful Pacific with this island and dugout canoes. But I have palm trees. As we are still in the tropics, which has only two seasons – the ‘dry’ season from December to April and the ‘wet’ or ‘rainy’ season from May to the end of the year. Three club water taxis collect the cosmopolitan crews and I make use of my foghorn and call one over and go ashore and step on the historic Isthmus of Panama and its friendly yacht club where I meet only nice people. It is a milestone for me and I am happy for I am only 50 miles from the Caribbean, which will bring me into the Atlantic, which is after all my own backyard. Many of the visiting yachts have exited the Canal at this end and while others await entry and I arrange with a nice Canadian couple who are looking for line handlers, to transit to Colon with them. As four line handlers are ‘compulsory.

My Irish tricolour was the only one flying amongst the many sailboats from every nation on this planet and I felt proud to be flying it for my country and it gave a boost to my morale.

The Canal was one of the most gigantic enterprise in human history and was completed in 1914 at a total cost of £75,000,000. 1,500 ships pass through this manmade water each year with its gigantic locks. We went through ahead of a big freighter at the Pacific end and astern of us a liner at the Caribbe end. You are allowed to use sails only on the 40 N.W. transit of the Gatun Lake.

There is an enormous rainfall in the wet season in Panama and the Canal runs through a tropical rainforest for most of its 50 miles. Its depth varies from 300 to 1,000 ft at its bottom and its mean depth is 45ft. Small boats seldom make the transit in one day and are obliged to anchor at night as we did in the Gatun Lake which was created when the canal was built. Crocodiles, monkeys and parrots inhabit the forest waterline.

It is an unforgettable experience. In ‘Loon’ we made the transit in one day as we had an 0600 h. departure after our pilot boarded us. Etienne, Jeannie and Porky a Panamanian who I hired at $50 U.S. per day made up the four line handlers, as I was the helmsman. The paper work prior to transit is tedious and is the same as for a merchant ship or liner. ‘Loon’ was measured from hole to pole, etc. The cost excluding a cruising licence (compulsory $100 US) came to $180 US plus custom clearance charges. So they have you by the short and curlies. Our pilot Ivan was a nice young man and we made the Panama Canal Yacht club in Cristobal just before dusk where Porky and Etienne and Jeannie got the bus back to Bilboa. Etienne boarded the bus with his 40 metre of rope around his shoulders like an Alpine climber. I recall being so happy after exiting the last lock and entering the ‘El Caribbe’. Michener’s book ‘The Caribbean’ is well worth reading on the history of this fabled sea.

Colon City was only a short bus or taxi ride away. In spite of all the Holy names, like San Francisco, San Felix, etc. it is another gun country and Colon is a dangerous, dirty and violent city. Visitors are advised to travel by taxi and for once the warnings are not exaggerated. Tenements border the colonial buildings of the old town where young louts and drug addicts will attack anyone who may have something they want, including clothes and sunglasses.

**Chapter 17**

**‘El Caribbe’ – Panama to Cayman Islands – April/May 1996**

**Another Rung up the Ladder of Life and Adios to Central South America**

I set sail from the yacht club to Cristobal. The heat and ‘mossies’ (mosquitoes) as I pass the Colon Harbour mole and more ships in company with ‘Liane’ in a fresh Northerly headwind under engine. Panama lies East to West, contrary to most peoples idea of North to South and is from 50 to 120 miles wide and is bounded by 805 miles of Caribbean coastline and 1,062 miles of Pacific coastline. So I make sail on the port track to avoid the busy shipping lanes in and out of Panama. 600 N.M. and east of north lies the Cayman Islands and my route is to be festooned with cays (banks) and shallows to within a 100 miles of the Cayman Islands. One of the channels between the cays and bank was the Rosalind Channel 50 N.M. long and 11 N.M. wide, which took me nine hours, some of it in darkness.

But I have good charts, which I photocopied, from the Daves’ huge library of them. In fact I copied charts covering my route from the Grand Cayman to Florida via the Yucatan Channel between Cuba and Yucatan into the Gulf of Mexico and the Florida Straits and Keys to Fort Lauderdale which lies to the east of the Bahamas x 6,000 N.M. I had expected placid sailing in these waters. Placid my ass! For most of the six days to Georgetown I was under reduced sail in fresh close reaching conditions which gradually came abeam and eased as I neared the Caymans. Two factors which gave me comfort skirting the many cays and shoals was, no shipping and this was off season for hurricanes. So not until the final day could I hoist full sail. The sailors bible or ‘The Ocean Passages of the World’ advised the windward passage into the Atlantic, between Haiti and Cub but as I expected to pick up the Gulf Stream which I did in the Gulf of Mexico which would assist me to Ireland, I chose this route. Also I picked up the East flowing Caribbean current a day or two before reaching the Grand Cayman which blends with the Gulf Stream in the Gulf. So the route I took served me well, as you will see later.

I could see the low-lying Grand Cayman as dusk settled into the night. As the lights started coming on with darkness, me mate as I called my passenger of two days flew off – a type of wading bird, brownish and smaller mini heron.

When I arrived off Georgetown (some naval captain currying favour no doubt named it after a regent) I could not pick the two green leading lights, with all the other lights blinding me and not forgetting my terror in Bluff, N.Z. I fooled around for an hour before I eventually picked up a mooring buoy, which I took to be a visitors mooring. And it was lucky that I did, I found out later that there are very stiff fines for anchoring in the coral reefs off Georgetown as it is one of the Worlds’ best skin diving areas.

‘Liane’ arrived next morning along with two cruise liners. For the ten days that I stayed there two if not three anchor off every morning. Grand Cayman has more banks (money) than New York though some of them are brass plate jobs, representing other banks, as it is a tax-free island. My main sponsor Tony O’Mara must have some cash stashed away there as I had a message from a banker whom Tony asked to look after me and that was nice as I was introduced to many helpful people even staying ashore at their apartments and houses.

It is an expensive place, so clean and its people are warm and friendly such a change from Panama and without mossies. One could walk alone all night here. I christened it the dollar factory island with the liners spewing out passengers daily to purchase duty free goods plus the jumbo jetting tourists. News travels fast. I was to receive another message, this time from an Irish ‘cailin’ with skin like velvet and eyes the colour of the sea. I can see my anchor on the bottom at 30ft after I moved from the mooring. Columbus discovered Cayman in 1503 and named it Tortugas after the abundance of marine turtles in its waters. Cayman was the only port I visited which asked me if I had firearms aboard, so I surrendered my hand grenades until departure. Spanish freebooters, pirates including Blackbeard, Ann Bonney and Sir Henry Morgan gave Cayman a lawless era. I must leave another paradise, my first glimpse of yet another beautiful part of the world in the West Indies.

**Chapter 18**

**To Fort Lauderdale USA – 22nd May 1996**

I had estimated the mileage and the number of days for the remaining two legs so that I could clear the hurricane season (July to November) for my Florida departure to the Shannon. ‘Liane’ delayed in the Caymans so this time I departed in the company of a cruise liner and as she passed ‘Loon’ I could see the passengers waving. I wondered if they recognised my flag?

I had a pleasant trip with sun, gentle winds to the Yucatan Straits which separates Cuba and the Yucatan peninsula and leads to the Gulf of Mexico. Rounding Cape San Antonia at the S/E end of Cuba on the 28th within easy sight of the sandy palm fringed beach, the waters changed from turquoise to indigo and aquamarine with the varying depths, another skin divers paradise.

Many cruise liners passed me at night in the Florida straits lit up like cities and on one of them which passed so close and up wind I could hear the band playing the Southern Rebel song ‘Look away, look away, look away, Dixieland’. And I pictured all the glamorous gals in off-the-shoulder and minis dancing away.

Off the famous Florida Keys I met the first sports fishing boat south off Rebecca Shoal. They came near as there was little wind and they asked if I had seen any Dolphin fish. I thought they meant Dolphin and said ‘no’. I asked what channel on the VH.F radio did the coast guard give a weather forecast. There was a nice lady in a bikini and sunglasses under a canopy on the fly bridge so I said “Thank you Mrs. Hemingway”. She did not reply and I didn’t blame her. But I felt cheeky, good and happy to be closing on this great continent again as I like America and Americans. The nearer I got to Cape Sable (or Cape Florida) the more electrical storms I me, mostly at night. One night I saw a non stop river of lightening snaking to the sea like an orange river in flood.

Later another boat appeared an open one this time and three guys were hauling in fish goodo. They came alongside and put one on deck for me and they said it was a Dolphin fish – the most beautiful multicoloured fish I had ever seen which made excellent eating and a great change from tinned sardines. As I round Florida and head North for Fort Lauderdale I am on the axis of the Gulf Stream which is assisting me 7 knots.

Before sundown on the 30th I moor on the municipal docks in this Venice of the USA and make for the nearest phone box and eating-house. With the Gulf Stream I made it to Fort Lauderdale in 8 pleasant days and nights, 90º cabin temperature by day but I am used to it by now. But still wear my Tassie wide brimmed sun hat. Could have called into Havana for a few cigars, as I could see the glow of the city lights one night. Only 90 N.M. separates Cuba from Florida in the Straits. That night before my arrival I was awakened at 1400 hours to the VHF radio roaring through interference and my first thought was that I had slept through the radar alarm and that a ship was approaching. No sooner was I in the bunk and the radar alarm beeped for a ship passing my starboard side. I could not switch it off in case another appeared, as this is a very busy coastal traffic area. So I get up and make tea, as my sleep is banjaxed. But the good side is it is a perfect night and even though an early half moon has gone I can read the compass by starlight. There is hardly a swell as what breeze is there is just filling the sails. My first morning was taken up with the usual customs and immigration and booking into the municipal docks at 39c per ft per day, which is ok considering the fabulous marinas in this only fabulous city of stretch limos, high rise buildings, luxurious riverside homes (some owned by film stars) and restaurants and the river traffic of pleasure and tourist boats of every size and shape.

After all this is a sun city and the entrance from seawards at port Evergaldes will bring you up through the intercoastal waterways to Maine. At 1800 hours I walked to the PO and when on my way to the market I discovered that even though I was approximately 20/25 miles from the mouth of the port Everglades I am only a stones throw to the ocean. And how beautiful the beach is lined with palm trees and the road behind it is also lined with palm trees on both sides. I am sitting on a raised terrace outside a café having a pizza and coffee, watching the young and the old walking and jogging skating and cycling along the wide footpaths with many swimming in the war gulf stream shore. No wonder Florida attracts people from distant countries with its sunny climate. So nice for me to come ashore and to relax and enjoy a little luxury before my Atlantic crossing.

Back on Loon since 2000 hours I had two beers before I got back and bought grub. Also I had what pizza I could not finish and a pot of eat after I got back. So I will have a restful evening and maybe even a G&T before el bunko.

**Chapter 19**

**The Last Leg – Across the North Atlantic through the Bermuda Triangle**

**(40 days)**

**‘Look always on the motive, not on the deed’ (W.B. Yeats)**

13th June 1996 and I am one day out of Fort Lauderdale. Not too much sleep last night five ships, two of them cruise liners and we were becalmed after midnight which didn’t help too much. I can’t believe this will be my seventh Atlantic crossing. There is a medium swell and the Island of Bermuda lies 700 N.M. to the North East. When we pas it to starboard we have no rocks but clear water for nearly 3,000 N.M.

Fourteen days out and I am lying ahull to a northerly gale since sundown yesterday. And when I rise from the bunk in the pre-dawn light and open the hatch I can only see the bows and the bridge and the masthead lights in one of the ships bearing down on me at a range of a quarter of a mile. It is my own fault though I am 70 N.M. from Bermuda my radar alarm has been beeping for no apparent reason off and on recently so I had switched it off on the previous evening so that I could have a decent nights rest. Straight away I got on the VHF radio and said ‘you are coming straight for me and I am off your bow’. No reply! And I repeated the message, still no reply. My engine had gone kaput again sometime before and I wondering if I would have time to hoist a jib. But I knew that it would be too late when a voice replied ‘how far away are you?’

I say ‘an eight of a mile’ but by this time I could just see the ships starboard side coming in line as I was drifting downwind before the gale, so I said ‘if you turn to port I will be ok’ and he did immediately.

I thanked him and we chatted and he promised to send a message to Shannon radio on Valencia Island which is situated some 100 miles as the crow files from the S.W. cost of Ireland to my home in Limerick. He advised me of the Southern limit of drifting ice in the North Atlantic.

When I asked did he not see me on his radar as I have a radar reflector on my mizzenmast he said in rough sea conditions the wages distort small objects on the radar screen. So one never stops learning and especially by ones mistakes. So I won’t be caught with my pants down again.

I am on a different heading since the longest day of the year – 21st of June. Up till then I was sailing parallel to the US coastline, some 70 to 100 N.M. off shore until I reached the latitude of Chesapeake Bay, where the Gulf Stream turns from N/E to E by N. Why it is called a stream I don’t know as it equals 25 times the volume of all the rivers of the world.

My engine failure doesn’t worry me as I bought a new solar panel in FLA, which is ample for my batteries in these days of short nights. I begin to put on more clothes as we make North especially so if the wind is northerly. I had been in t-shirts and shorts for over a year in the tropics where ice was sold by the ton. Before leaving FLA, I had bought a second hand handheld GPS in what the owners called the biggest ship chandlery in the world, as this is my final leg and I wanted to be sure. The accuracy of both is amazing, as there as only a difference of 2 to 3 seconds of latitude and longitude between them. I skirt the southern end of the Grand Banks of Newfoundland and find that I can’t get enough to eat in this colder climate but I am happy as we are averaging 100 N.M. per day with only one gale so far. No shipping sighted since my near escape with the Greek ship. A big change from drawing the curtains to avoid the sun and from being naked to oilskins. I still see the odd Portuguese man of War and also flying fish, with bird life aplenty.

On the 8th of July I am half way across the North Atlantic, and from thereon I only meet with good conditions. In fact one day was so fine and the sea state so good, I painted the cabin top, for something to do. The chart is well worn lately, checking upon the remaining miles, for how often does not finish the remaining miles of a circumnavigation.

21.7.96, day 37, saw my first trawler 70 N.M. off the continental shelf. Last night’s rain was the worst I have seen since the tropical storms of 27 hours in the Cayman Islands when I filled my water tanks off the deck, as the inlet plug is on deck. When am I going to see shop and get a message home? 100 N.M. now to the mouth of the Shannon.

At 2200 hours I receive a garbled weather forecast from Shannon (Valencia island radio station) on the VHF radio. So I will try contacting them tomorrow. Monday, July 22nd 1230 hrs, if I sail 80 N.M. in the next 24 hours I twill be a night entrance into the Shannon. 0800h wind light speed 3 knots and gannets cruising and diving. 1130h I have my last onion with macaroni and grated cheese with powdered eggs and salami.

I have this nice feeling that I am in Ireland as I am again listening after an absence of three years to Irish radio stations on my transistor radio. If the sky clears I should be able to see Mt. Brandon (3129ft) as it is a notable landmark and reputed to be visible at 50 N.M. from seawards. 1600h, eventually made contact with Shannon radio who kindly put me on to my son Dan. 1640 Brandon range of mountains now visible off my starboard bow and also the Blasket islands renowned as being the most westerly point of Europe and the next parish to America as the sun has appeared. 2200h Loop Head Lighthouse, the most northerly headland of the mouth of the Shannon, flashes me a welcome light, which came a beam at 0345h. As the wind freshened from the N.W. so I shortened sail, as I had advised I would be arriving at Kilrush Creek Marina at 1000h.

**Chapter 20**

**Back to the Burrow**

**Nothing succeeds like success**

From Loop Head to the marina at Kilrush is only 18 N.M. so I had to anchor off Querrin after daylight and oh to see the 40 shades of green again. My support committee had arranged an arrival reception for 1000h at the marina, so this gave me invaluable time to tidy the boat and myself. As I was having a bath in a basin of hot water, I heard shouting and fog horns from friends who sailed down to escort me and as I put on my jocks and came on deck they must have thought that this was my normal sea attire. They all started laughing, cheering and waving. So I hauled the anchor after dressing ad sailed the remaining few miles up to the marina. After drinking champagne while going through the lock gates, courtesy of two lovely cailins from Atlantic Charters, I entered the marina to find another Hong Kong of welcome sail and power boats, bunting and flag waving people. There were so many people on the finger jetty I tied to that it sank to ankle level and I honestly think that but for the boards moored to it, it would have gone down further, who knows.

Gerry Bourke, a good friend of my son Dan told me later “I was just about to take off my jacket and swim”. Anyway it was a happy day for all, especially for me and my ‘Loon’ and ‘Toyota – O’Mara – Limerick’ and ‘Cragganowen, the living legend, the home of the Brendan Boat’, family and good friends and supporters and sponsors without whom this day would not have been possible.

**Chapter 21**

**The Aftermath**

It is an enigma when you are at sea, you think of home and its comforts, and when on land, ones thoughts turn seawards, for the land, though beautiful can be dull after a time, when compared to the sea with its many challenges. But this autumn day as I write I am happy, for outside the leaves are in a flurry, as they are swept before gale force squalls that leave ships and tall trees bereft of their sails. I attend receptions both urban in Kilrush and civic in Limerick harbour, my local sporting and sailing clubs, honour me. Inishcealtra S.C. of which I am a past commodore erected a stone plaque to me on their club grounds. I am asked to give lectures and also to guest speak at various functions. One of these was an invitation from the Transport Association of Ireland and I said when asked “but I don’t know anything about transport” and my friend from CIE said “didn’t you transport yourself around the world?” The monies from the lectures were most useful, as I found I was in debt on my credit card account upon my return. One is not earning when voyaging. But I would not have it any other way. The media gave me coverage and I am a celebrity for a while. I often wonder if I were a rich man would I have planned each chartered course and travelled each and every highway” Yes, I think I would. People I meet nearly always ask “are you going away again?” and if it is a lady, I say “yes, if you will come with me?” One lady took the wind out of my sales when she said “I will come with you any time but not on the ocean!”.

No, my ocean ramblings are over, but if I was younger I would, for if you like it there is nothing nicer, I was always happy out there and in tune with my boat, the oceans and the wind and the sky. But now in the autumn of my life I am content about all the lovely ports and countries and the people I met. “Were you ever lonely?” “What was the nicest place you visited?” “How did you manage for food and water?” “How did you put down the time?” “What did you do in the strong winds?” “Were the seas big?” No, I was never lonely at sea, if I was confined to barracks due to bad weather, I often thought of those in jail, and how tough it must be. But I am a child of the sea, and free, and the sun and blue skies always appear.

It is very difficult for me to choose a favourite country or port that I visited simply because they were all very beautiful and different. But if I had a chance to visit one or two, I would certainly love to go back to Gordons Bay RSA and Tasmania’s Port Esperance, where I found peace and tranquillity. In Dover after meeting the worst conditions in my three years voyaging. I also found the same in Albany in S.W. Oz. Maybe it was because I love nature that I shun big cities and crowds though I am not a loner by any means. Food and water was never a big problem, as water from the sails during rain, or showers, was nearly always available from the great reservoir in the clouds. I found salami lasted very well, as did onions, apples and even untreated eggs, though I had dried eggs and long life powdered milk, potatoes, oatmeal, peanut butter, etc. I never used the oven on my gas cooker as gas was always hoarded. Instead I relied on hi-fibre biscuits which are every wholesome. I was never bored and if time permitted I read and found I could read a good book three times and still enjoy it. A daily journal, even in port was never a chore. I never tired of watching the seas and waves, even in gales, as water has always fascinated me. On land I often stop at bridges and admire streams and rivers after all, I am a Piscean.

I have already described storm tactics by lying ahull and what big seas and dangerous waves are like. Weather and its symptoms I found are the same, as are cloud types where I voyaged. The reversal of the seasons and of the high and low-pressure systems in the different hemispheres took some getting used to. As did the time differences when going from either east to west, or west to east. So now I have my faithful ‘Loon’ on a mooring in Poulnasherry Bay (Hole of the Oysters) on the Shannon Estuary, which has an area of some 12,000 acres of water and I am the only boat in it, which is beautiful. There are plenty of shellfish and fish in it and also such wildlife in its creeks, marshes and mudflats. If I feel like it I can always slip the morning and sail down to Dingle or up to the Aran islands, which lie off and protect Galway Gay, both of them only a day’s run.

I have no desire to sail the oceans again, for I have them in my mind and head and that is nice for me and also satisfying, for I realised a great dream, though I was never ambitious. Money was always there if at times scarce, through my support committees, friends, sponsors, etc. Age has nothing to do with it, health in mind and body is and I have been blessed with both. I still feel young now at 72, and I was 70 when I returned in 1996. So I have been a lucky man in many ways and lived to tell the tale. I will only have happy memories for the autumn of my life, for I realised a great dream.

The oceans are great levellers, and give one a new outlook on this hectic land whirl, never to be forgotten. When I am aboard ‘Loon’ I often rise to the pre dawn light, like I did when voyaging and view the dawn lighting up the estuarial mudflats, tidal waters and marshes and islets. It is a special time and like any birth it gives an inner feeling of great peace and life.