

# A TALE OF DERRY'S GREAT ADVENTURER

DECEMBER, 1987, brings the 40th anniversary of the disappearance of one of Ireland's most remarkable adventurers and a great story-teller, Captain Charles John McGuinness, from Derry.

It was in the "Derry Journal" of 8th December, 1947, that "Onlooker" noted the loss of Captain McGuinness when the ship "Isalt," floundered off the southern coast of Ireland.

If there was one word you couldn't use to describe Captain McGuinness, it would be "Onlooker," for if there was action and excitement going in any part of the world during his lifetime, from 1893 to 1947, it seems he was in the thick of it.

The War of Independence, the First World War, the rum-running during the Prohibition in the States, the Antarctic expedition of Admiral Byrd, the Spanish Civil War . . . these were the events which formed the backdrop to his exploits. Add the occasional shipwreck, romance in Tahiti and a spell as an assistant harbour master in Soviet Russia and you have the half of it.

## RUNAWAY — AT FOUR!

Captain McGuinness was born in Lower Road, off William Street, in Derry, on 6th March, 1893, the son of a sea captain. The family had a tradition of seafaring going back generations and Charles John was bent on continuing it. He first ran away at the age of four and after several more attempts, finally managed a post on ship at fifteen. He had his master's mariner's certificate before he was 20.

His experiences in the years following, up to the summer of 1931, are brilliantly described in his book "Nomad, Sailor of Fortune," released in the late '30s and well read at the time, particularly in his home city. It's a remarkable account and still so compressed that friends like Derry republican, Neil Gillespie, could say it didn't tell half the story.

Still it has chapters such as "Shipwrecked in the Pacific," "Chinese Pirates and a Romance," chapters telling of his role in helping Frank Carty make an historic escape from Derry Jail, of his own escape from Ebrington Barracks, of his involvement in the famous Byrd expedition to the Antarctic (for

## By Martin McGinley

which McGuinness was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal and met President Hoover), and about his hair-raising exploits as a rum runner off the U.S. east coast during Prohibition.

## "HENNESSY," THE BACKGUARD

McGuinness' panache carries into his writing, and "Nomad" is full of good humour and has great style. Here he tells of a bit of a heart-thumper as



Captain McGuinness wasn't always so well protected against the Russian cold. He noted that he spent one winter in latitude 70 degrees north in summer underwear after most of the clothing was stolen by ungrateful Russians when he was "absent on the work of building up socialism."

he made his way out of Derry, dressed as a priest after his escape from Ebrington Barracks, where he was held under the name of "Hennessy." "An amusing incident occurred at Rossville Street, but the affair gave me a sudden fright. We were stopped by a policeman who saluted and requested that we make a detour as the street was blockaded, and we marked the presence of many uniforms.

"What's the trouble, my son?" I asked, with a canonical inflection and a benign lift of the eyebrows.

"Sure they're looking for that murdering backguard, Hennessy, your reverence. He's loose from the barracks at Ebrington, but I think we have him cornered."

"God bless you, my son, and I hope you find the backguard!" I said urbanely.

McGuinness' most notable achievement in the War of Independence was gun-running from Germany to Ireland, which he accomplished with his usual aplomb in 1921.

McGuinness' wit and good humour in books such as "Nomad" and "Behind the Red Curtain," an account of his adventures in Russia, belie his reputation as a tough customer. Desmond Greaves tells in his book on Liam Mellowes, about one occasion when it was decided to try to recover some money from a German arms dealer who wouldn't come up with the goods: "A confrontation was arranged in a solicitor's office. McGuinness was present. He had lived up to his reputation as a tough character. During his few weeks in Germany he had knocked out four Swedes who offended him in a bar, put his fist through the glass

## DERRY SENSATION.

### Escape of a Prisoner.

### FROM MILITARY CUSTODY.

### GREAT ACTIVITY IN THE CITY.

How the "Derry Journal" recorded Captain McGuinness' escape from Ebrington Barracks in Derry, in the issue of July 4th, 1921.

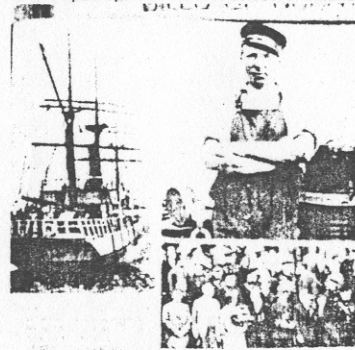
screen of a taxi whose driver he thought was taking him for a ride, and had tattoo marks removed from his wrist without an anaesthetic. He could be a terrifying spectacle when accompanied by a revolver. A considerable sum of money was recovered and earmarked for financing a fresh (gun running) expedition."

## IN THE BITTER NORTH

The account in "Nomad" concludes with rum running in the States in 1931, after which McGuinness followed his instinct and decided to sample life in the Soviet Union. "To know a place you have to go there and see it for yourself. It may not prove the most comfortable way of gaining knowledge, but it always proved most effective," he wrote.

In the main, his two years in the bitter North left him sadly disillusioned with the Workers' Republic, although with another stock of stories to recount in "Behind the Red Curtain."

Less information is readily available on his exploits in the Spanish Civil War, his next great adventure. A note in the "Behind the Red Curtain" book on "The Author," almost certainly written by the modest Captain himself, notes — "When civil war tore Spain apart he set out hotfoot for Madrid,



Some photographs connected with the Byrd Antarctic expedition, with McGuinness posing for a news cameraman before leaving ship at New York.

Barcelona, Lerida and other spots of intrigue, bloodshed and sudden death. How McGuinness tramped across the Pyrenees into France when sleet, snow and rain swept mountain passes would provide material for a separate book."

I don't know if the book was written, but McGuinness did make a series of broadcasts about his experiences on Radio Eireann and wrote about them in such publications as the "Irish Catholic" and "Hibernia."

*Anyone with more information or anecdotes about Captain Charles John McGuinness should contact Joe Mulheron at Bishop Street, tel. 268539. Joe is trying to piece together further details of the Derryman's life story.*

His name crops up again in a characteristically daring scheme during World War II to ship a German spy back to his motherland in return for the release of Frank Ryan, the Irish leader on the republican side during the Spanish Civil War, who was then in a German prison. McGuinness was arrested and spent 3½ years in Arbour Hill Prison for his pains.

## MYSTERY

It was perhaps inevitable that there should be romance and mystery even in the final account of the adventures of Captain Charles John. His body was never recovered after the foundering of the "Iselt" in 1947, from which the lifeboat had been launched, and in the years that followed there were reports that he was spotted alive and well. Even "Onlooker," reporting the loss of Captain McGuinness, felt compelled to add — "The mystery of his own fate is on the lips of everyone in Derry and Inishowen."

For Captain McGuinness, who spent his life cheating death, it was a final masterstroke. But let "Onlooker" have the word on the man in conclusion — "Captain Charles McGuinness was easily the most intrepid, the most daring and the most colourful adventurer that Derry ever produced. Wherever there was risk or danger, wherever skill and courage were demanded, he, if he could possibly manage it, was there."