

## **Dr Con O'Rourke: A major contributor to the Institute of Biology of Ireland**



Dr Con O'Rourke (1936-2019), son to Tomás O'Rourke and Ruby Sheehan, was born in Dublin. His passion and interest in science was first nurtured by his mother, Ruby, who had a scientific background as a graduate of UCD. His schooling in Colaiste Mhuire, Parnell Square further

encouraged, developed and deepened this interest.

Con graduated in 1959 with a BAgrSc degree from UCD. Here, as students, he met his wife of 56 years, Anne Cullen, a native of Wicklow. Later he obtained his PhD from Cornell University in New York. On graduation in 1964, he returned to Ireland to work as a research scientist and scientific editor with ACOT (now Teagasc) in Carlow and Dublin. He retired from Teagasc in 2003.

Alongside his full-time employment, he unselfishly and, on a voluntary basis, shared his time and expertise with a number of scientific organisations. He was a committed voluntary officer of the Royal Dublin Society which he joined in 1982, serving on the Council for Science and Industrial Applications, the Board of Management, and later Chairperson of the RDS Committee of Science and Technology. He was a most active member of the Institute of Biology of Ireland and, with others, he pioneered the Biology for Today series of seminars aimed at final year students in second level schools. He served as President of the Institute of Biology of Ireland, and in 1989 he was awarded a Fellowship of that organisation. Other academic roles undertaken by Dr O'Rourke include Clerk of Convocation of the National University of Ireland, extern examiner to a number of Regional Technical Colleges and a committee member of the Royal Irish Academy.

Con had a private pilot's licence. This he achieved while working with Teagasc. He was an early pioneer of adding aerial photographs to the ongoing research with Teagasc. Those who worked with him would describe how, through an open cockpit of a small plane, he would photograph crops while steering the plane with his knees. He is also reputed to have, in 2000, flown a three-seater plane to the Scottish islands of Barra and Tìrè in search of the plant, Morning Glory (*Calystegia soldanella* (syn. *Convolvulus soldanella*). This is a species of

bindweed, but also known as “The Prince’s Flower”, a title attributed to Prince Charles Edward Stuart (Bonnie Prince Charlie) who sowed it on the Scottish island of Eriskay when he landed there in 1745 to lead the Jacobite rising. It is alleged that Con had a conviction (true or false), that this plant linked Mo Ghile Mear (Bonnie Prince Charlie) to Ireland. Con had a great love of the Irish culture, its language, folklore and the wild natural



Figure 2 *Astragalus danicus* (purple milk vetch)

environment. He was a fluent Irish speaker. This interest brought him as a regular visitor to the Aran Islands, in particular Inis Meáin. There he conducted on a voluntary basis nature courses through Irish for trainee teachers, tourists and the general public. I was fortunate to be among a group of Institute of Biology of Ireland members who visited Inis Meáin with Con over the weekend of June 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> 2014. His enthusiasm and inspirational approach to sharing his knowledge was indeed infectious

and avidly displayed from the moment we set foot on the island. Since he was well known on the island, both he and the party that he was leading were given a Céad mile Fáilte. From then onwards and in a natural organic way we explored the cultural heritage and the natural enviro



Figure 1 Teach Synge

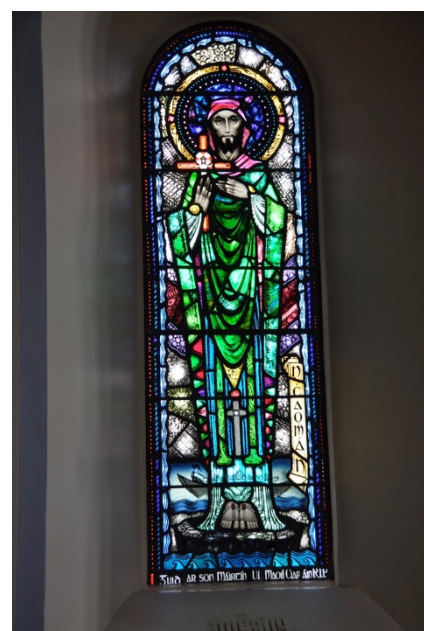


Figure 3 Harry Clarke Studio window

onment of the island. The dedication, integrity and enthusiasm of the man were such that I remember clearly his search by moonlight for an island-elusive plant, **Astragalus danicus** (purple milk vetch) that he had found a number of years previously. His satisfaction when he found it again was clearly palpable. The memory of this dedicated and committed

scientist at work will remain deeply ingrained in me for a very long time. Just like my personal experience, he had inspired the many future generations of scientists, and those members of the public at large that he encountered through his passionate work not only in Biology and the Ecological sciences, but also with his knowledge and love of the island culture and heritage. I also remember on that weekend sitting in Synge's chair, visiting Teach Synge and museum and imbibing the beauty of the craftsmanship of the Harry Clarke studio window in the Church of our Lady and St John. He always worked to promote awareness of the uniqueness of the Aran Islands and this interest culminated in the publications of A Nature Guide to the Aran Islands and *Dúlra Oileáin Árann*.

He is sadly missed by his loving wife Anne, daughters Niamh and Maeve and son Brían, his extended family and his many friends.

**Ar Dheis Dé go raibh a h-anam dílis.**