

Introduction

During the autumn of 1935 the author began to be interested in the history of rowing at Queen's University and opened a correspondence with T. G. Houston, a former principal of Coleraine Academical Institution. From him he learnt that during the 1860s there had been a boat club at Queen's College Belfast, but that this had faded when the members went down from the College. Professor W. B. Morton (Physics 1897-1933) was also approached to find out if any serious attempts had been made to revive rowing during his time at Queen's. The answer was a very definite no for, in those days, the first step taken by students in starting any new venture was to beg financial assistance from the staff and he had never been 'sounded'. Professor Morton would have been an obvious target for would-be oarsmen as he had rowed for Lady Margaret Boat Club when at Cambridge.

Nevertheless, there was still a belief, though unconfirmed, that several attempts had been made to start a boat club, but none of these got beyond the talking stage until F. G. Maunsell initiated the moves which led to the founding of the present club in the autumn of 1931.

Much of the material published in this account of the early days of the club has been obtained from former members, press accounts and club records; but among the last mentioned only those for 1931-1942 have survived. Indeed, it would not have been possible to have compiled the saga of rowing at Queen's without the willing co-operation of scores of former members who have taken endless trouble either in answering the author's queries or in providing constructive criticism of the text. If he attempted to name all those who have helped him, the list would run into several pages; nevertheless, this in no way detracts from his grateful thanks for their assistance.

Finally, the author and all those who have been involved in the compilation of this manuscript wish to thank Eamonn Doherty of Lady Victoria Boat Club for undertaking its duplication, and Margaret Pritchard for producing an excellent type-script of "Rowing at Queen's from 1864 to 1951".

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Unfinished Odyssey

Rowing began at Queen's on 6th May, 1864 when T. G. Houston, Matthew Leitch, S. J. McMullan, W. H. Dodd and several other students, who intended to stay in Belfast during the long vacation, founded the Queen's College Rowing Club. Houston was appointed secretary and Leitch treasurer¹. It was decided to proceed cautiously and to limit the membership to ten. As arrangements had been made to obtain a four-oared boat, the members were divided into two crews, who were to row on alternate days. The subscription was fixed at ten shillings (50p) 'to be supplemented when necessary'.

Permission to row on the Lagan Canal was obtained, and at the next general meeting of the club, on 26th April 1865, it was reported that they had greatly enjoyed rowing in 'a handy four-oared boat built for the club'. At the third general meeting, on 14th August 1866, a strong feeling was expressed that the club should procure a 'four-oared gig' and enter in some regattas in the course of the next season. But the club did not survive another season for the enthusiasts who had started the club began to drift apart in 'pursuance of their several careers'.

Two attempts were made to revive the club early in the twentieth century, but sixty years went by before rowing became established again at Queen's. During most of this period the only educational establishments in Ireland at which active rowing was taking place were Trinity College, Dublin, and Portora Royal School, Enniskillen; whereas during the same period many of the larger river towns, such as Coleraine and Galway, had flourishing boat clubs.

During the late 1920s several of the schools in Ulster started to row thereby preparing the ground for the rekindling of the sport at Queen's. This revival was due mainly to the preparatory work of Fred Maunsell (Arts) and John F. Doggart (Science). In October 1931 they began to take soundings about the support such a project would receive and, toward the end of the month, they came into contact with J. W. Rigby and D. B. McNeill. The former was a Campbellian who had rowed for a short time at Trinity College, Dublin, and then came to Queen's to read Chemistry; McNeill had been captain of Portora Boat Club and had rowed for Belfast Boat Club during his first year at the university. Neither Maunsell nor Doggart had any experience of river rowing but the former had been in the merchant service before coming to Queen's as a mature student.

The four, like the majority of undergraduates, spent long hours talking about what to do and finally decided to try to rent the ground floor of a vacant riverside factory at Ormeau Bridge and to approach Carrickfergus Amateur Rowing Club about the possibility of hiring equipment. Accordingly, on the evening of 19th November 1931, they went down in Rigby's car to talk the matter over with some of the Carrickfergus

¹ T. G. Houston became Principal of Coleraine Academical Institution; Matthew Leitch held the Chair of Biblical Criticism at Assembly College, Belfast (1879-1922) and was Moderator of the General Assembly (1897-1898); S. J. McMullan held the Chair of History and English Literature at Queen's (1892-1900), and was considered to be somewhat eccentric even in a university; W. H. Dodd became a Justice of the Queen's Bench in Dublin. The Hon. Mr. Justice W. H. Dodd and the Very Rev. Matthew Leitch were members of the First Senate of Queen's University.

Committee, the meeting taking place in St. Nicholas Church where their hosts were at bell ringing practice.

It soon became obvious that a considerable time would probably elapse before any arrangements could be finalised. So, on the suggestion of the Senior Rowing Master at Methodist College (F. J. Stratford), the four sought the advice of T. Forde Hall. At that time he was the secretary of Belfast Commercial Rowing Club and one of the most influential rowing men in Ireland, who became President of the Irish Amateur Rowing Union in 1937. He suggested that the 'club' should think about approaching B.C.B.C. about the provision of accommodation and of all the equipment needed for the commencement of rowing. On his advice, a formal application was made by the 'club' to which a tentative reply was received, suggesting that discussion should begin between the two parties.

It was now decided that the time had come to call a general meeting and to constitute the Queen's University Boat Club and to elect office bearers. The meeting took place in the McMordie Hall of the Student's Union in December 1931 when about 30 people were present. Professor Thomas Walmsley, Professor of Anatomy, was elected President; F. Maunsell, secretary; W. S. Craig (Arts) treasurer; and a committee of about ten members was also formed. Serious negotiations with B.C.B.C. were then opened and, toward the end of January 1932, an agreement was signed between the two clubs at a meeting which took place in the Union Hotel, Donegall Square South, Belfast. The presence of Professor Walmsley, who signed on behalf of the club, did much for the morale of the club and also indicated to B.C.B.C. that the boat club was a properly constituted club within the university. The other signature on behalf of the club was that of T. T. McCorry, an Arts undergraduate who had just been elected to one of eight university seats on the Students' Representative Council.

The agreement stated that Queen's would pay an annual rent of £50 for its first year and for this would be allowed the use of two side-seater fours, a side-seater heavy eight, and two tub pairs, together with the necessary oars and the use of the B.C.B.C. 'pleasure boats'; a reminder that in those far off days one could take one's girl friend for a trip on the tidal Lagan! The use of the other two B.C.B.C. boats - a new Sims centre-seater four and a fairly new clinker eight - was also permitted under certain conditions. All the boats had box riggers, i.e. fixed pins; indeed, at that time, the only Irish clubs to use swivel rowlocks were Trinity College Dublin and Lady Elizabeth, both of whom rowed from the same boathouse at Islandbridge on the Liffey. The raising of money with which to pay the rent caused no difficulty for, since his election as treasurer, Craig had been working hard to raise the money; this he did by calling personally on the more affluent Queen's graduates many of whom lived in either University Square or College Gardens. Indeed, but for Craig's work, the club would never have survived its first season.

As soon as the legal formalities had been completed, rowing began on Saturday 30th January 1932 when about a dozen Queensmen turned up at the B.C.B.C. Boat House in Balfour Avenue. More people drifted down during February when the club made the unfortunate discovery that two of its members, W. C. McClenaghan and G. A. Scott, would be unable to row for the club at regattas, as their rowing status, according to the I.A.R.U. rules of the time, was 'too high'. Their departure now meant that there was only one member left with previous experience of open regatta rowing. Toward the end

of March the committee decided that the time had come to appoint a captain and a vice-captain who would remain in office until the first annual general meeting, which would probably take place a few months later. Accordingly, J. W. Rigby was appointed Captain and D. B. McNeill as Vice-Captain.

In March the novelty of the club began to fade and, by May, attendance at the Boat House had fallen to nine or ten. Fortunately, at this most opportune time, the club received a set of eight oars from the Queens University Guild; an organisation which had been set up in the early 1930 to interest the local business community in the University and who, every year, made small donations to worthy causes within Queen's. The donors also paid the cost of painting the oars in club colours (green blades with two white chevrons separated by a black one)². It was also decided that crews would row in green vests edged with black and white and that club blazers would be white with black and green edging bearing appropriate insignia on the breast pocket to indicate the status of the wearer. Ties were also to be white with narrow green and white stripes. This was during an era when clubs were expected to be well established before using the university colours of royal blue, black and green; indeed, the boat club waited until October 1936 before adding blue to its colours, but several months before this, on 3 February 1936, the colours of the maiden and junior blazers had been changed from white to black.

The confidence of the members was given a great boost by the arrival of the oars which was followed by the holding of the club's first races on the Lagan. The Vice-Chancellor, Sir Richard Livingstone, and the Dean of the Faculty of Commerce, Professor Hugh Owen Meredith, both of whom had rowed for their colleges in their undergraduate days, came down to the river to support the club in an 'unofficial fixture' with Methodist College Belfast. The Queen's maiden four, which was in training for Portadown Regatta, rowed against the M.C.B. first four and a 'scratch' boat, cobbled together on the day of the race, was pitted against the college's second four. The Q.U.B. maiden four lost and the other boat won. This was not particularly surprising for three of those in the 'scratch' boat - W. C. McClenaghan, G. A. Scott, D.B. McNeill - had several seasons of competitive rowing behind them.

A fortnight later, on 15 June, the maiden four rowed at Portadown Regatta where it lost to Dundalk in its first heat³; nevertheless, this initial appearance of Queen's at an open regatta was given a warm welcome by the rowing fraternity and favourable comment from the local press. The four was then reconstituted as an under age four (Senior B) and obtained silver medals⁴ for coming second in the Tailtean Games which were held at Drogheda at the end of June. The crew was composed of W.H. Stevens (M.C.B.) (bow), D. B. McNeill (Portora), A. E. Cunningham (M.C.B.), H. Cunningham (M.C.B.) (stroke), J. D. C. Adam (R.B.A.I.) (cox). It was coached by R. G. Baskett, formerly secretary of Reading University Boat Club and, at that time, lecturer in Agricultural Chemistry at Queen's. He was appointed to a chair in 1935 and was knighted in 1966,

² The cost of oars, including painting and carriage, came to £20.00 They were fabricated by Aylings of Putney and were described as 'solid'. The other standard Ayling oars at that time were known as 'single girder', 'double girder' and 'tubular'. The latter were the most expensive costing £2.50 per oar.

³ The crew consisted of W H Stevens (bow), J W Rigby, A E Cunningham, H Cunningham (str), J R McWhirter (cox).

⁴ D. B. McNeill's medal is now in the Ulster Museum, Belfast.

by which time he had become Director of the National Institute of Dairy Research at Reading. In 1937 he succeeded Professor Walmsley as President of the Boat Club.

The first annual general meeting of the club was held in May 1932 when A. E. Cunningham was elected captain; W. S. Craig treasurer; and among those elected to the committee were W. H. Stevens and C. E. Stuart. The problems confronting the new management were formidable, for numbers were well short of expectation and, despite the good offices of T. Forde Hall relationships between Queen's and B.C.B.C. had become strained. Indeed some of the committee felt that the club should try for accommodation at Belfast Boat Club at Stranmillis, but this proposal did not get very far. Another difficulty was the annual grant from the University Games' Fund. The club was expecting its first anniversary during the session 1932-1933 when it would become eligible for support from the Games' Fund and, at the appropriate time, was allocated a sum of £75 (£50 of which was for rent). The amount, though modest, created considerable ill feeling among the other outdoor clubs which had to take reduced grants to enable this payment to be made⁵. On the other hand, the fact that the club only received £25.00 of un-allocated spending money was not entirely unexpected by the committee, many of whom felt that several successful seasons would have to elapse before the club's running costs would be adequately funded. The need for money to take the club through its early days had been foreseen and, even before towing had begun, it had been decided to charge a membership fee of 37 1/2 p per session which was paid into a private account which the club opened with the Belfast Savings Bank.

In December negotiations began with B.C.B.C. about the rent for the coming season and this was finally agreed at about the same figure as previously, an amount which included £26.00 which was credited towards the 50p per week which B.C.B.C. paid to a senior citizen (William McKinley) for keeping an eye on their premises whenever Queens were rowing. Indeed, it may now be said, after a lapse of fifty years, that one of the major factors contributing to the survival of Queen's University Boat Club in the 1930s was that never once during that period did B.C.B.C. charge more than a nominal rent.

Toward the end of the season the first of the two fours⁶, which the University had decided to buy for the club, arrived at the boat house; this was a light clinker four built by Sims of Putney. The second boat, a somewhat heavier four, arrived from Banhams of Cambridge in March 1934. During the summer term of 1933 the club was represented at the principal regattas in the North by a junior and maiden four⁷. The junior boat had already rowed against Glasgow University on the Lagan on 29 April when the home crew won by two lengths. The same crew reached the finals at two local regattas later in the season but never won any of these. And the maidens, despite some close finishes, never survived more than one heat. Nevertheless, the season ended with the club feeling that, at last, it was beginning to find its feet.

⁵ In the 1930s the annual enrolment fee at Queen's was £3.15; for this subscription a student had free membership of the Students' Union (or Women's Student's Hall) and of any other clubs and societies he/she wished to join.

⁶ The total cost of the two boats was about £200.00, including carriage from London to Belfast by the Clyde Shipping Company.

⁷ Junior Four: W H Stevens (Science), 2 N Gault (Science), 3 H Cunningham (Engineering), D B McNeill (Science), J D C Adam (Science) cox.
Maiden Four: W S Craig [bow] (Arts), S Hill (Dentistry), R W Timmins (Engineering), C E Stuart [stroke] (Medicine), J D C Adam [cox] (Science).

The second annual general meeting was held in October 1933 at a time when a group of irresponsible students were forcing themselves into the meetings of the smaller clubs and societies and then electing 'impossible' people to office. The President was particularly worried that the group might come to the Boat Club meeting, so the precaution was taken of having all nominations for office submitted to the secretary several days before the meeting. No unpleasantness took place and the meeting proceeded smoothly, during which the following elections were made for 1933-34: captain D B McNeill; vice-captain W S Craig; secretary S Hill; treasurer C E Stuart; and among those re-elected to the committee were H Cunningham and R W Timmins. Later in the season J M Boyd, who had coxed for four years at Portora, was co-opted onto the committee as freshman's representative.

In general the season was uneventful with a small increase in active membership (maximum number at the boat house was 26, this occurred on 29 October) and the boating of a maiden eight. The latter lost to University College, Dublin on St. Patrick's Day 1934; but the club did derive some satisfaction from this fixture, which was held on the Liffey, for the junior four won - thereby justifying themselves after their defeat by Glasgow two weeks previously on the Clyde. The four, which was coached by Captain Westropp George - who had, at one time, coached the senior eights at T.C.D. - was considered to be very fast and would probably have been successful at junior level (Senior B) if they had entered for regattas. At the dinner after the event, in Jury's Hotel in College Green, Dublin, the idea of holding a triangular regatta involving Glasgow University, U.C.D. and Queen's was discussed at considerable length, but the project was received with little enthusiasm by the Irish Amateur Rowing Union. This august body at first refused to countenance such an event unless it was rowed as a formally constituted regatta at which the status of winning crews would be affected. After months of haggling these conditions were modified to allow non-status races, provided these were rowed between crews representing recognised universities and colleges, that they took place outside the rowing season, and had been previously sanctioned by the I.A.R.U.⁸ At the time, the union was conducting a campaign against private non-status races as it believed such events were becoming a paradise for bookmakers. Until the 1950s bookmakers often attended regattas and many oarsmen persuaded their friends to put money on the 'other crews' so that, in the event of losing, they would have the 'where-with-all' with which to drown their sorrows!

At the third annual general meeting, held in October 1934, Harold Cunningham (A. E. Cunningham's younger brother) was elected captain; being the first brothers to have held the Captaincy of the Club. Some thirty years later, two brothers A.R.E. and N.V. Kerr were also Captains. Before entering Queen's in 1931, Harold had rowed in the M.C.B. first four and was in the crew which won the School's Event at Trinity Regatta in 1931, the first rowing trophy to be won by M.C.B. At the same meeting R. W. Timmins was elected vice-captain; W. H. Stephens, secretary; and R. McKay, treasurer. The season which followed showed a marked increase in both membership and activity. At the Triangular Regatta held on the Lagan in March 1935 Q.U.B. boated three fours against Glasgow and the same crews, together with a junior and a maiden eight, against U.C.D. later in the same season a scratch senior four rowed in the Connor Cup. A week later this crew and a maiden eight went to Portadown Regatta. Neither boat got very far,

⁸ In 1930, when M.C.B. began to row from the B.C.B.C. Boat House, the college crews had to be made honorary members of the B.C.B.C. so that friendly races could be rowed between the club and the college without causing offence to the I.A.R.U.

but it was the first occasion on which the club had sent an eight to an open regatta. In August W. H. Stevens and H. Cunningham obtained bronze medals at the University International Student Games at Budapest. They, along with M. W. Gibson, had been attending an International Scout Conference in Hungary and had been persuaded to enter, the bait being several days of splendid hospitality, broken by occasional outings in a coxless pair on the Danube. News of the entry filtered to the I.A.R.U. through the press and they were most definitely not amused!

It was in this season that the club obtained an eight of its own by purchasing a second hand clinker from D.U.B.C. for £40.00, including carriage. Shortly after the arrival of this acquisition the club became involved in its first major accident. On the evening of 25 February 1935, the junior eight with T. C. C. Davis as cox, were out in B.C.B.C.'s best clinker eight when they collided with the ferry, which used to ply between the foot of Hatfield Street and the Ormeau Park. The bows of the eight went through the side of the rowing boat which was working the ferry. The two craft remained afloat, nobody was injured but the boy who operated the ferry was somewhat shaken. Queen's accepted full responsibility for the damage, and the eight had to be taken to London by the Clyde Shipping Company where a new bow was put on it by its original builders - H. Sims of Putney.

Throughout Cunningham's captaincy the club was maturing rapidly and, by the next season, had become really established. The office bearers for 1935-36 were R. W. Timmins, captain; C. E. Stuart, vice-captain; W. E. N. Maxwell, secretary; and J. M. Boyd treasurer. One of the first actions of the new committee was to engage in competitive rowing within the club by changing the Christmas Regatta into an inter-faculty event which, in its first year, was won by a four of third year medicals. Hitherto the regatta had been a light hearted affair held at the end of term when the crews were drawn from a hat and, after the rowing was over, those who were able made their way to the 'Hatfield' where they remained until their money had run out. From 1936 onwards, the Hatfield became a mere staging post on the way to the Students' Union where the club held its first annual dinner on Saturday 12 December 1936. Among the guests were Professor Meredith regaled in his rowing blazer which had, once, been white. The proceedings at the first dinner went off with great decorum; but on many subsequent occasions the learned professor often entertained the assembled company with his own personal rendering of the ballad 'One Fish Ball'.

Shortage of boats, which had already become apparent in 1934-35, became very serious in Timmins' year. Fortunately, Jack Fitzpatrick, the rowing captain of Belfast Boat Club, who had rowed with McNeill in a winning Ulster Cup crew in 1931, lent his club's shell eight and four to the club, and Timmins who had at one time rowed for Portadown, was able to borrow a tub pair from his former club. From its beginning Queen's always looked forward to having its own club house. This became a possibility in 1935 when Colonel A. B. Mitchell, Chairman of the University's Athletic Field Committee, became interested in the project and began to sound some of his more affluent friends about financing such a project⁹. The site most favoured was immediately downstream of the premises at present owned by Lamont at the Stranmillis round-about. However, money was not forthcoming and the scheme lapsed and the club had to wait until 1950 before occupying a boat house of its own.

⁹ Queen's University was very short of money throughout the inter-war years and was in receipt of less public funding than any other university in the United Kingdom.

In March 1936 three fours travelled to Glasgow for the Triangular Regatta, in which Q.U.B won all their races against U.C.D. but only their third boat managed to win its race against Glasgow. At the time Glasgow University did not row in eights, so U.C.D. held a friendly non-status fixture with Q.U.B. on the Liffey at the end of the month. This was the first time in which Q.U.B. had boated a full range of three eights (senior, junior and maiden) at a regatta. The first crew lost by two feet, the second won and the third, which was almost a social boat, lost by only one and a half lengths. Fifteen of the sixteen oarsmen in the first two boats volunteered for service in the armed forces during the 1939-45 war. All obtained commissions and only one, W. E. N. Maxwell, did not survive to return to civil life. Of the others one was awarded the D.S.O. (D. G. C. Whyte), two won M.C.s (R.B. Myles and G. Patton) and another became President of the Methodist Conference several decades later. The third boat also had a very creditable war record with members serving in the British and the Irish forces, their bow (W. Fagan) becoming an officer in the Eire Army.

During the year two very competent coaches became associated with the club, J. D. Barbour and F. J. Stratford. The former had rowed in the trial eights at Cambridge and the latter was a graduate from King's College London, who taught at M.C.B. and was considered to have been one of the best and most audible coaches of his time on the Lagan.

Timmins was succeeded by J. B. Kyle, an Oxford graduate who had been a school master before coming to Queen's to read medicine. One of his first actions on becoming captain was to invite O. W. McCutcheon (captain of Portora and of T.C.D. during the 1920s) to join the coaching panel. The season opened well with an average attendance at the Boat House of about fifty, with a recorded maximum of sixty-five at the end of October. The Christmas races were again won by a medical crew and at the Triangular Regatta Q.U.B. and U.C.D. each won four of the nine races for fours, and the other went to Glasgow. The races had been limited to fours, so a fortnight later two eights from U.C.D. came to Belfast. The crews came by train and arrived safely, but their boat, which was sent by road, was held up by snow at Dundalk. At the time there was only one eight fit to use for racing at Belfast, as the fine boat, borrowed from B.B.C., had been wrecked toward the end of the Christmas Term. This meant that the racing part of the fixture was cancelled, but the social events went off as planned; indeed, the author has vague recollections of travelling in a tram of happy, singing oarsmen making their way from dinner, held in the Queen's Hotel at the Albert Clock, to the Boat Club Hop in the Students' Union.

The captain in 1937-38 was T. T. Baird¹⁰ with R. B. Myles as vice-captain. His year was a memorable one during which the McConnell Lock and Weir were brought into use on the Lagan, the Athletic Field Committee assumed responsibility for payment of the club's annual rent to B.C.B.C. and Queen's entered for the Wylie cup for the first time. The completion of the weir enabled racing to take place at any time in the day, whereas, previously, this had only been possible for about three hours on either side of high water. This new facility had been in use for several months by the time of the visit of Glasgow University on 26 February 1938 when the first event to take place, over what the Belfast Newsletter described as the 'New Course', was a race between second

¹⁰ Baird rowed at Haileybury and, during the 1939-45 War, served as a surgeon lieutenant when he coached his ship's whaler to win the Far Eastern Championship at Trincomalee in 1944.

fours. This was won by Queen's and, later in the day, the race for the first boats also went to the home side. In May, the junior and the maiden eights travelled to Dublin for the Wylie Cup, an event which was won by U.C.D., this being the first occasion in which the trophy had left D.U.B.C. The Q.U.B. boats did not disgrace themselves for the juniors won from D.U.B.C. but lost to U.C.D. in the final, and the maidens lost their heat to U.C.D.; the margins in the three races varying from one and a half to two and a half lengths. Later in the season the first eight went to Durham where they lost to Armstrong College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne but rowed a dead heat against St. John's College, Durham. This was the first occasion in which a crew from Queen's rowed in England.

The assurance of sufficient depth of water for holding races at all states of the tide enabled B.C.B.C. to revive the Belfast Regatta which had been in abeyance since 1896. The event took place on Saturday 2 July 1938. This was after the end of the season so there were no entries from Queen's, but the club was involved for McNeill had been commissioned by the British Broadcasting Corporation to give an eye-witness account of the proceedings which were broadcast from Belfast on the evening of the regatta. The weather for the regatta was reasonable compared with that experienced in 1896 when only one boat completed the course. This was a scull manned by Joe Wilson, who in 1938 was secretary of Bann. The President of the 1938 Regatta was T. V. McCormick of B.C.B.C. who was to have coxed a four at the 1896 event, but the bad weather caused his race to be cancelled.

The completion of the McConnell Weir brought in a new rowing era on the Lagan; and the departure of Craig, Cunningham, McNeill and Timmins from Queen's signalled that the pioneering days were over. However, many of the pre-war members spent a considerable part of the 1939-45 War in uniform and, on a certain Saturday evening in March 1945, Bradford Myles, Billy Craig, D. B. McNeill and several other boat club members dined together in Florence; fortunately, none of them knew that Queen's had just won the Wylie Cup, otherwise