

Queen's University of Belfast Boat Club

1969-1974 by Iain Kennedy.

I arrived at Queen's in October 1969 fresh from rowing in successful crews at CAI so it was naturally assumed success would continue. My father was not so sure, having said to me a month beforehand that Queen's didn't seem to be very good at rowing in recent years. From a rugby man this was a damning indictment but it didn't deter me as I was full of youthful exuberance and nothing would stop me from contributing to the re-emergence of Queen's. This may seem arrogant from a young man of 19 years, but there seemed nothing major wrong with a club which welcomed me with open arms. My abiding memory of Queen's from my schooldays was during a training week up in Coleraine when the senior squad stayed up in the boarding school. The men were exceedingly large and typified what university oarsmen should look and act like. It must have been 1967 for I remember John Martin was amongst them. Coleraine gave them a hard time on the Bann for these were halcyon years for the school club, having been among the top three fastest crews in Ireland in 1965. We raced Queen's novice crews in 1967 at the Novice Championships on the Bann, but were singularly unsuccessful as Queen's won the Championship convincingly and seemed set to produce good crews in the years ahead.

I suppose this was at the back of my mind when I arrived at the boathouse and met some members of that crew who were Seniors - Terry Higgins, Barry Gray and Henry Cassidy amongst them. Michael Green - the effervescent novice from 1968-69 - was also around. Billy Ryding, Graham Hamilton, Roy Fox the Captain and Jon Scourse from Somerset made up the nucleus of the Senior club. Ian Hanley, a psychology student, also rowed in our group but appeared to be torn between rowing and a beautiful girlfriend and various forms of mental torment resulted, which manifested itself one day when he just stopped rowing and refused to go on. I don't think he finished the season but this was not surprising as the crew was not that good. It was symptomatic of what was wrong with the club at this time. We all were encouraged and wanted to win "the Big Pot" but in retrospect the training never matched the desire. To have three trips on the Lagan was unusual; hard work in the old San Souci gym was regular but not everyone turned up. U.C.D. were ruling the roost at this time and were even training twice a day. If the rowing had matched the social life we would have been world-beaters.

However, there was one bright day in the season when at Queen's regatta on the Lagan we beat a fancied Garda crew and we were on the 'wrong station' - on the outside of the last bend where the Governor's Bridge now is. Celebrations were boisterous as Dusty Anderson, our coach, felt that this was the breakthrough Queen's that had wanted. I remember Jon Scourse at 2 a.m. on the Sunday morning kicking his newly won tankard up the Stranmillis Road and wondering why it was badly misshapen at 10 a.m., so he also thought a new dawn had broken. Unfortunately the momentum didn't continue as we never won another race, but we did compete in the Championship. There never was a photograph taken of this crew or the club so perhaps it was the year that never was. This was a great shame as there was a tremendous group of novices including John

Hendy, Paul Paulidis, Hume Jones, Jon Wain, Paul Sinte and Dave Wall who produced some stirring rows up until mid-summer as a heavyweight crew of real potential. Supplemented at the Championships by two hard lightweights in Andy Catterall and Andy Bratt, they made a strong attempt to win at Portadown. If they had won I'm sure the next year would have been different.

Jon Scourse, the captain in 1970-71, with his analytical brain and management skills was determined to make a fresh start. The Slieve Bernagh was the Senior boat but was beginning to show her age. No money was available for a replacement so Jon did the next best thing and bought new aerofoil riggers and appointed Donal Murphy as Chief Coach. Our first major outing was at Erne Head where Adrian Thompson was the intrepid stroke and the crew won in the slowest record time ever - it still stands - 28 minutes. The aerofoil riggers were obviously a success as the crew ploughed through the waves and passed a number of semi-submerged crews. The novices rowed the course without a rudder, coxed by sculler Billy Nelson. Despite trying hard and having a great deal of self belief no further successes ensued except a Senior IV victory at Athlone over a strong Neptune crew, whose club was just beginning a resurgence which has lasted until the present day.

Things were so bad by the Championships that Queen's had to be encouraged to row in the Pembroke Cup the following day, so low was morale - a far cry from the halcyon days of 10 years previously. It was really no one's fault. Perhaps the material wasn't there; perhaps the coaches had lost touch with modern methods - although Donal Murphy did bring coaches up to Belfast - Pat Tummon from Galway and John Cork from Emmanuel School Boat Club in London (which had been one of the most successful clubs in Britain). I can still remember his advice - keep it oily round the turn and relaxed on the slide. He also felt that students could only do two of three things; study, row or court women, but not all three. On reflection some of us disregarded this advice - others worked on a rotation of two out of three. Our education, however, was broadened in the best way and the club remained intact for the following season.

1970-71 saw the arrival at Queen's of a number of stalwarts who remain to this day - Andrew Wells, Stephen Lockwood, Greg Hamill and Donald Hutton, a small but eccentric and very aggressive cox from Methodist College. He was the archetypal red head who rolled his own cigarettes and drank copious amounts of alcohol and worshiped Mahler. When Scourse, Michael Green and Hutton got together for a song in the old minibus, it was a most rewarding experience. Wells, Lockwood and Hamill were members of a very unusual novice four who enjoyed their rowing immensely and remember vividly every event they attended. They may, in retrospect, have been the last crew from Queen's to experience the delights of the Drogheda regatta. There was a drinking session at the Stage Door Inn which culminated in races up wooden telegraph poles. Unfortunately Greg Hamill - now the richest man in the world! - won a pyrrhic victory as his pole had the skelfs the wrong way round for a quick descent. Andy Wells' sister, later to become a nurse, spent a memorable evening trying to get his nether regions 'de-skelfed'. Oh, for the simple pleasures of our youth!

1972 saw the Captaincy of Michael Green, whose enthusiasm could not be measured on any scale devised by any psychologist. He was known affectionately as the 'Grapeshot' captain as his approach was to fire everything at the target and hope that some of it would stick. A lot of it did and 1972 was a good year - probably the best for a long

time. Michael was a dapper captain who had been influenced by an American called Dave Budd - the brother of a 1964 Olympic medal winner for America - and Michael portrayed an optimism only found in American sport. Michael had been in a very good novice four with Budd, which won everything except the Championship. He had a strong liking for painting - this may have arisen from his association with Ken Morrow who was coaching at the time. Ken's dictum was "If it moves coach it - if it doesn't paint it". Michael, as House and Grounds, painted everything - oars, boats, boathouses, bank tubs, verses of songs on the shower walls - but most of all, his Standard Triumph car with its very own speed stripes. He got it precisely right - it didn't move, so he painted it! On one famous occasion Michael demonstrated its prowess up the Stranmillis Road by passing a bus half way up the hill, but on turning down Chlorine Gardens the car had obviously had enough and stopped stone dead at the Science Library - never to move as sweetly again.

This didn't bother Michael as the club was about to produce two fast crews - a Senior IV and a Junior VIII with Wells, Lockwood, Catterall, John Coburn, Dougal Ferguson, Leslie McDonnell, Robert Neill, Alan Cameron and Dave Perry aboard. Coached by Tony Hart, who had cut his teeth on a novice crew two years previously, this crew rowed in the last clinker eight (Slieve Na Man) when these were long out of fashion, and beat a good Trinity crew on the Lagan at Queen's regatta by two feet. It was the first regatta of the season and the first win for most of this crew. It appeared to them a win was expected and tradition was such that they couldn't be beaten. They should have won at Trinity a week later but so incensed their coach that they dared not fail again. The trailer was packed, there and then, and the crew was out on the water that evening for a very hard outing. The eight won well at Portadown and Limerick where they were presented with the "Bon Bon Basket" - a magnificent Epergne which was in dreadful condition but was returned cleaned and fit for the table.

Their season finished at the Championship in Cork where they narrowly failed to a Garda crew which contained two re-graded men and two of Ireland's best ever oarsmen, Christy O'Brien and Mick Ryan. Queen's had bought a restricted boat (The Finn) from Derry and adapted very well to the strange flat-bottomed craft. This was a remarkable crew who really showed no promise at the start (121 in the Head of the River) but as the season progressed the crew became greater than the sum of all its parts. They had rhythm, power and were superbly motivated by Tony Hart who stood no nonsense. This was obviously good training for his future years on the bench! An interesting footnote on this crew was that only one of them didn't wear glasses.

A senior four also emerged from nothing, comprised of Wynn Anderson, Tony Green, Michael Green and Iain Kennedy, coxed by the fiery Hutton. Donal Murphy coached the crew and at first they rowed in the old 'orange box' (an old fine four) and then graduated to a new 'Donoratico' four. I can remember one dark wet night on the Lagan just passing the four's house for the last time on the way to the top when the boat just ran and ran and we knew the season would be a good one. It was as if we had emerged from a dark tunnel and that mystical but tangible thing called team spirit had prevailed, and we would win races. Head races were won, Trinity regatta was won in controversial circumstances when U.C.D. crossed right into us on the Garda bend and were disqualified. The best lesson of all was learned on the Lagan where we led U.C.D. by three lengths at the Park gates or outfall only to be overhauled on the line. We knew we were fast but had not established a good race pace yet. This came, not at Henley where

Queen's had entered for the first time in years, but in the Blue Riband at Blessington. The weather was poor and there was an entry from Wallingford who had just won the Britannia Cup at Henley. Undeterred this Queen's crew came a good second beating all other Irish crews in the process and gave winners Wallingford a fine race. As there was no designated fours' championship, this event was deemed worthy of the name and blues were awarded to the crew. Michael Green's year had given Queen's back its self respect and the celebrations were anything but muted. Michael returned again in 1973 - it was just as well, as only for his mother's crew meals in Dunluce Avenue, many of us would have starved.

In 1973 I was fortunate to be elected Captain as I had miraculously returned for a fourth year at Queen's. Before describing the season, perhaps it would be useful to describe the role of Lady Victoria as Queen's members saw it. Without the club the Captain's role would have been difficult as the coaches came mainly from Lady Victoria. However, the graduate club to my mind was composed of men from the successful era who hadn't really the skills to remedy the problems at the Queen's club in the early 70s. Success certainly had been hard won by these men, but to a large extent the world had moved on but they had not moved with it. It may have been a case of 'nostalgia ain't what it used to be', but then it never was. I think they had a great love for Queen's rowing but were unable to translate this into levels of support which would transform the student club. New coaches were needed and new attitudes from Lady Victoria were essential - grafted onto the old nucleus, for this was a good tradition - but for the first two years the crews were in the shadow of previous great crews. By 1972 we were brash enough to recognise that we were in charge of our own destiny and should press on regardless. Donal Murphy drove this idea faster than some in the 'hierarchy' would have liked, but it worked and really there was very little alienation between the new Queen's and the rump of Lady Victoria. Tony Hart, a Trinity graduate, pressed home this new approach in 1973 when I asked him to coach the Senior crew, and with the purchase of a new eight called "Ronnie Teale", we set out with the expectations of a great season.

Ronnie Teale had been the Queen's finishing coach at Henley, but by the early 1970's he had become old and frail. He still had the courage to come to the Lagan and I can remember him sitting in a greatcoat in a chair in the Queen's launch watching the crews. He had won the Stewards Cup in 1926, so anything he said had to be listened to. His eyesight had become so poor that one year at Henley he had begun coaching the wrong crew! His prowess at drinking never deserted him, even in his 80s, but he was one of nature's gentlemen. I digress, however.

Tony Hart was ruthless in his selection and chose only those who committed themselves fully. He would never chase an oarsman, but when Des Browne a 6' 5" novice from the previous year decided to give up rowing, Tony took him aside in the old boathouse and informed him that a Blue was as useful as a degree (He is now a consultant paediatrician) and that he would be letting himself and his crew down by opting out. After ten minutes Des decided it would be wise to continue rowing.

Within weeks of getting the new boat it had been holed on the remnants of the old slip way for the ferry across the Lagan, opposite the old Commercial Boat Club. We all were despondent and looked a sorry sight marching up the footpath wet and messy. Wells and Green at bow pair rowed the boat home. However, the boat was repaired within 48 hours by George Major - a pleasant but old fashioned boatman, who having

informed our coach that the job was a long one, was told to have it ready for Sunday or else!! It was repaired and the crew began to win.

The Wylie Cup in Galway was a titanic struggle. Queen's had beaten University College Galway in a strange race. U.C.G. had not turned up for the race and although the umpire - Michael Johnston, later to be president of the IARU - waited 20 minutes, still Galway didn't appear. Queen's began the row over but half way down the course Galway appeared and the race was on. Queen's won and so the decision as to who would have to be awarded the race, had Galway crossed the line ahead, never arose. Queen's raced U.C.D. in the final - the biggest race of our rowing lives. U.C.D. were Irish Champions from '71 and '72 and had practically the same crew in '73, stroked by the red headed hard man from Roscommon - Martin Feely. This U.C.D. crew was nicknamed "the Animals". The crews were level at the last bend and then Queen's went ahead and surely the race was won, but the hand of fate appeared in the form of a boat-stopping crab and U.C.D. slipped through to win by a few feet. After the initial disappointment we all - including Tony Hart who had given us one of his Churchillian speeches before the race - realised Queen's had a fine crew at last.

A trip to Scotland saw a moral victory over Glasgow Argonauts (a three length win was discounted by an over zealous official who decided an infringement had occurred). Wins at Queen's regatta, finalists at Trinity, a win at Limerick, allied to Head of the River wins at Derry and Erne made sure the crew travelled to England in good form. Fifth place in the British University Championships gave encouragement for Henley, but again fate took a hand. I was injured and couldn't row and Isis beat us in a fast time by just over a length. U.C.D. had to beat the course record to beat Isis the next day, so we knew we were still fast. At the Irish Championships U.C.D. won by one and a half from Garda who were six feet ahead of Queen's - again with a substitute. In retrospect this was the closest Queen's have come to an Irish Senior Championship in over thirty years. Blues were awarded, but was the future rosy?

The novices and juniors had, to a certain extent, been neglected in pursuit of a good Senior year. Success had been so elusive for Queen's in the previous decade that perhaps the Senior end of the club became selfish in their single-minded pursuit of excellence. There were good novices and juniors but unfortunately enough effort was not directed towards their development. As a result the club struggled for the next season to recover lost ground. It wasn't long before it was recovered and this is due to the efforts of Stephen Lockwood and Charlie Charlton from the 1973 eight, who directly or indirectly produced the good novice eight of 1975 and the Henley juggernaut of 1976 - but that's another story.

For the record, Blues were awarded to Andy Wells, Michael Green, Des Browne, Charlie Charlton, Iain Kennedy, David Perry, Stephen Lockwood and the dynamo stroke Andy Catterall. Donald Hutton the red headed terrier was cox. Greg Hamill and Paul Sinte rowed in races at the end of the year and were valued members of the squad. Iain Kennedy and Donald Hutton helped Ireland to second place in the Home International Series. When one looks back on this short period of Queen's rowing it all fits into the big picture of Irish rowing. University crews could aspire to the heights of Senior Championships wins and realistically hope to win, but from 1973 until the present day very few real undergraduate crews have won - only 3 - and some of them had doubtful students on board. The reason is simple. Now rowers stay on and finish

their careers at over thirty years of age - thus they mature and develop hard racing instincts which the undergraduate finds hard to crack - even if he had time to do so. In Belfast in the mid-70's there wasn't even a senior crew to move on to, after college days. A few persevered and BRC was born again and the path to the top is there if young men wish to achieve greater glory.

There is still a place for the university club with its distinct camaraderie and ethos which is a nursery for other clubs. There is no point in moaning that things weren't like this in our day. Students should appreciate this unique experience with its lifelong solid friendships - which is after all one of the main benefits of the sport - and be firm in their endeavours to keep the present and the future university club vibrant.