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# Colby Library Quarterly

Series II

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## JAMES CONNOLLY AND HIS BOOKS

by ERNEST C. MARRINER

AMONG the many authors who have written about the sea and the men who sail it none has surpassed James Brendan Connolly in prolific publication, in variety of maritime scene, in vivid account of adventurous incident, and especially in depiction of character. Many a land-lubber American owed to Connolly his knowledge of and admiration for the intrepid Gloucester fisherman, as book after book flowed from Connolly's pen between 1902 and 1943.

For a quarter of a century it was anyone's guess where Connolly found the sources of his characters and his incidents. Everyone knew that he had chosen his scenes at first hand, for he had been with the Gloucestermen on many a voyage and had sailed the world's oceans in many kinds of craft. But were his people and their deeds figments of his own lively imagination? Only a few of Connolly's close friends really knew, and they didn't talk. Then, in 1927, Connolly wrote *The Book of the Gloucester Fishermen*, a historical account of the real captains and their crews who made Gloucester the great fishing port of the whole Atlantic Coast. Here, for the first time, appeared as fact some of the spectacular incidents found in the earlier stories. Finally, in 1948, Mr. James A. Healy, New York broker and life-long friend of Connolly, presented to the Colby College Library his famous autographed collection of Connolly's books. These copies, with their priceless flyleaf inscriptions, reveal intimate sources hitherto unsuspected.

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Most of Connolly's writings are short stories, collected into volumes bearing such titles as *Out of Gloucester*, *The Deep Sea's Toll*, *The Crested Seas*, *Open Waters*, and *Wide Courses*. Two are novels: *The Seiners* and *Steel Decks*. In 1930 a choice selection of all the short stories appeared in a volume called *Gloucestermen*. It is upon certain incidents and characters in these books that the autograph inscriptions, as well as factual accounts in *The Book of the Gloucester Fishermen*, cast light.

One of Connolly's best stories is *A Fisherman of Costla*. Its simplicity, its sense of the dramatic, its deep human understanding, and its portrayal of character place it on a high level among stories of the sea. It tells of a fisherman of the Arran Islands, who carried an American lawyer across terrible seas to Kilronan, not for money, but "for Dannie Costello's childer," whose inheritance the lawyer was trying to save. Connolly's forebears had come from the Arran Islands. Was this a story he had heard from relatives? It was much more than that, for on the flyleaf of the Healy copy of *Out of Gloucester* (New York, Scribners, 1902), the author has written: "A Fisherman of Costla is my own father as I knew him years ago."

Probably Connolly's favorite character is Clancy. He first appears in *Out of Gloucester* as a kind of sea-roving Robin Hood, aiding the "have-nots" at the expense of the "haves." Too unstable to be more than a sailor or at most a mate, he is nevertheless the central figure of this and several other stories. In fact he became the hero of Connolly's first novel, *The Seiners* (New York, Scribners, 1904). Who was Clancy? Was this adventuring, swashbuckling sailor, living by his wits and his strong arms, someone whom Connolly knew? These flyleaf inscriptions give us the answer. One of them reads: "Clancy is based on the character of my eldest brother, Pat." Another is even more informative: "The Clancy of this book was my playboy older brother Pat, now dead, Lord rest his soul, and a better story teller than I am, people who knew us both have said."

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Connolly's "tallest" tale is of the *Wicked Celestine*, the unlucky, ungovernable ship which rolled over in a complete revolution in a terrible gale. Did any ship ever do such a fantastic thing? Connolly insists that one did. In his *Book of the Gloucester Fishermen* he identifies the real ship as the *Onward*, and cites as proof of the incredible revolution that, when it was over, the anchor chain was wound around the bow and the ballast in her bottom was lying on top of the fish in the pens.

Another memorable story is *Dory Mates*, depicting the undying loyalty of dory partners to each other, and their sacrifice in time of crisis. This is the somber story of an older man's care of the boy who shared his dory, a boy whose father had once saved the man's life. Why shouldn't he place his own jacket about the freezing boy? Why shouldn't he let his fingers freeze curved so they could still pull the oars? When the boy, in spite of all efforts, died, why shouldn't he battle sea and storms and awful fatigue to get the body to shore? Did anything like that really happen? In the *Book of the Gloucester Fishermen* Connolly relates the true incident that provided the basis for this story. Howard Blackburn in the *Grace L. Fears* went through just such an experience. He lost all his fingers and half of each thumb, set up a little tavern in Gloucester, but in spite of his handicap could not stay ashore.

Our literature contains few such stories of racing ships as those in Connolly's volumes. Wesley Marrs drives the *Lucy Foster* from Reykjavik to Gloucester in nine days and ten hours. Tommie Ohlsen speeds the *Nancy O* home from Norway in sixteen days, coming in days ahead of the racing yacht, *Valkyrie*. But the race to end all races was the one described in *The Seiners*. Maurice Blake, getting command of the *Johnnie Duncan* through the scheming of the crafty Clancy, wins the famous race of the fishing boats at a celebration in the old home port. All of these races are founded on fact. The real skipper who beat the *Valkyrie* was Tommie Bohlin in the *Nannie Bohlin*, a captain whom Connolly

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knew well and, with a somewhat ironical touch, later persuaded to sail on Dr. Stimson's big yacht, the *Fleur-de-Lys*. The race described in *The Seiners* was the memorable Fisherman's Race during Anniversary Week at Gloucester. Three great captains led the field: Maurice Whalen in the *Harry Belden*, Tommie Bohlin in the *Nannie Bohlin*, and Saul Jacobs in the *Ethel Jacobs*. Long afterward it was known as "the race that blew," so strong was the gale. It gave rise to a statement often repeated in Connolly's stories and used in the citation for his honorary degree at Fordham University in 1948. Its origin Connolly attributes to a fisherman who watched the race and shouted: "The Harry Belden wins, the able Harry Belden, sailing across the line on her side and her crew sittin' out on her keel."

Though these examples are only a few of the ascertained sources, they are sufficient to show that James Brendan Connolly knows whereof he writes, and that, if necessary, he can document his incidents by chapter and verse. Not without reason did the Fordham citation call him "the dean of American sea-story writers." \*

\* In addition to the titles mentioned in this article, the Healy Collection includes *Coaster Captain* (New York, Macy, 1927), *Master Mariner* (Garden City, Doubleday, 1943), *Navy Men* (New York, John Day, 1939), *An Olympic Victor* (New York, Scribners, 1908), *Sea-Borne: Thirty Years Avoyaging* (Connolly's autobiography; Garden City, Doubleday, 1944), *Tide Rips* (New York, Scribners, 1922), *The Trawler* (New York, Scribners, 1914), and *The U-Boat Hunters* (New York, Scribners, 1918). All these books contain autograph inscriptions by Mr. Connolly. He reached the age of eighty on October 28, 1948, an occasion commemorated the next day by a meeting of the Colby Library Associates.

