

John De Courcy Ireland (1911-2006) Maritime Historian



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maritime historian
(*The Marine Times*)

De Courcy Ireland, John (1911-2006), maritime historian, sailor, teacher, peace activist, humanist and linguist, was born on 19 October 1911 in Lucknow (Lakhnau), the capital city of the province of Uttar Pradesh in northern India. He was born to an Irish Catholic mother and an Irish Anglican father from County Kildare, who was serving the British Army. His father died of typhoid in China on the eve of the First World War, just three years after John was born. De Courcy Ireland was educated at Marlborough High School in London, but spent much of his childhood with his grandparents in Galway, Ireland, developing a lasting attachment to the country.

Despite receiving a history scholarship to New College, Oxford, shortly before his seventeenth birthday, he decided to travel to Brittany, France, to work on a Dutch merchant ship. De Courcy Ireland's travels and travails on this ship bound for Argentina also took him to Spain, Brazil and Uruguay, among other destinations, instilling in him a lifelong interest in maritime affairs. The young man was said to have been 'deeply distressed' by the poverty and inequalities of wealth that he witnessed in Brazil (*Dr John de Courcy Ireland, Obituaries, The Irish Times, 8 April 2006, p. 14*).

On his return from the high seas, de Courcy Ireland did finally attend university in Oxford, where he met his wife, Beatrice Haigh from Dún Laoghaire in Dublin. The couple married and moved to Manchester, where they both joined the Labour Party. One year prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, de Courcy Ireland and his wife left England and moved to Ireland. Together with Betty, he spent time on the Aran Islands, off the west coast of Ireland, and in Donegal in the Northwest of the country, learning the Irish language, which he added to his repertoire of European languages. In 1942, he accepted a teaching post at St. Patrick's Cathedral School in Dublin and a year later joined the Maritime Institute of Ireland, an organisation of which he was Honorary Research Officer when he passed away.

In the late forties, de Courcy Ireland became involved in the Vocational Education Committee and it was during the years 1949 to 1950 that he considered emigrating to Argentina and teaching in South America. These plans never came to fruition and in 1950 Trinity College Dublin awarded him a PhD for his research on Irish maritime history. In 1959, he was one of the founders of the National Maritime Museum in Dún Laoghaire and in 1966, he published the first of many historical works, entitled *The Sea and the Easter Rising*.

From 1968 to 1986 de Courcy Ireland worked as a teacher at Newpark Comprehensive School in Blackrock, Dublin, and in 1984 he ran in the elections for the European Parliament as a Democratic Socialist, winning 5,350 votes. He served as voluntary secretary of the Dún Laoghaire lifeboat station for over twenty-five years, was a founding member of the Campaign against Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in Ireland and a member of the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement. The historian's attachment to China, stemming from his father's death and his mother's brief residence in Beijing, led him to foster links

between Ireland and the Asian country. In recognition of this work, the Chinese government appointed de Courcy Ireland honorary ambassador to China.

According to Desmond Branigan, the President of the Maritime Institute, de Courcy Ireland 'worked tirelessly to spread at home and abroad the story of the huge contribution made by Irish men and women down the years to international maritime affairs' (Branigan, Desmond. 'Message from the President' in *Iris na Mara - Journal of the Sea*. Journal of the Maritime Institute of Ireland. 1:1, Winter 2002, p. 3). One of these stories was that of William Brown from Foxford, County Mayo. In 1995, de Courcy Ireland published a biography of Brown, the founder of the Argentine navy, entitled *The Admiral from Mayo*. Thereafter, the historian was appointed a member of the Instituto Browniano in Buenos Aires. His major contributions to historical research centred around Irish people serving in foreign navies and merchant lines. His 1986 publication, *Ireland and the Irish in Maritime History*, chronicles the exploits of, among others, Irish seamen in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela and includes an account of the life of Admiral Patricio Lynch of Chile.

John de Courcy Ireland was a tirelessly enthusiastic man, travelling the world throughout the ninety-four years of his life, always making a point of arriving by ship. He was a family and community man, active in many local organisations in south Dublin, as well as in national and international ones. He dedicated his life in Ireland to, in his own words, making successive Irish governments 'realise that they lived on an island and needed the sea.' In the area of links between Ireland and Latin America, the maritime historian's many works of research contributed to the recognition of widespread Irish involvement in independence movements in nineteenth-century South America.

His wife Betty died in late 1999 and John de Courcy Ireland died just over six years later in Clonskeagh Hospital in Dublin, on 4 April 2006, after a long illness. He is survived by his three children, seven grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.

Claire Healy

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