

# Scholar and explorer

## Con O'Leary

CON O'LEARY, a committed mountaineer who spent most of his life exploring Ireland's uplands and other mountainous areas in Europe and beyond, died peacefully in Cork in June 2010 at the age of 84 years.

While teaching in Dublin in the early 1950s, Con was a member of Na Fánaithe, an active hillwalking club which explored the Wicklow hills using the An Óige hostels as bases. When Na Fánaithe members visited Kerry and the Reeks, Con already knew the mountains there very well and even referred to JC Coleman as Jack!

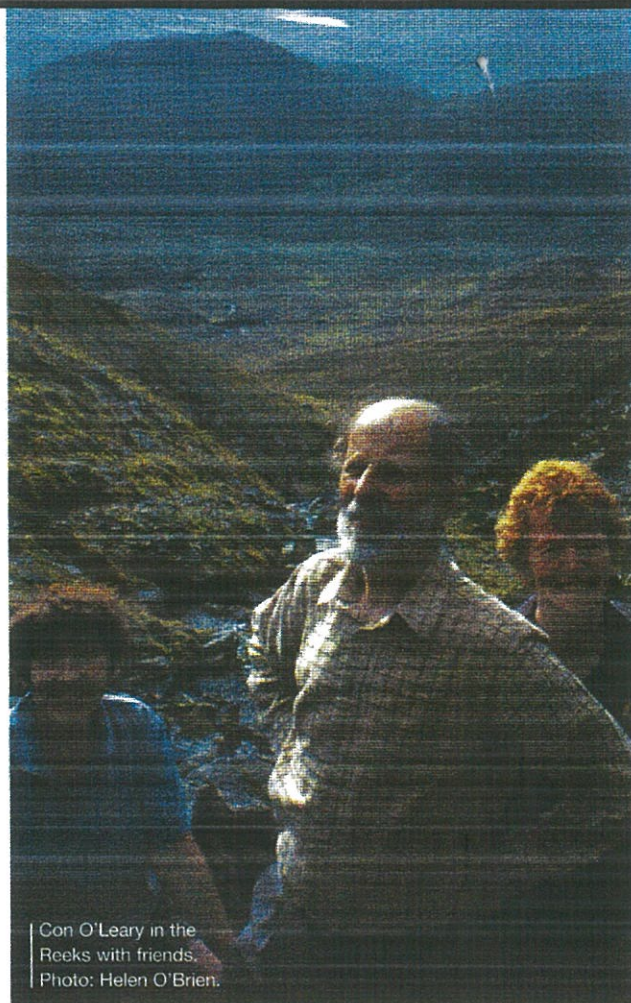
Subsequently, Con O'Leary was a member of the Cork Mountaineering Club (CMC), which he joined at its inception in 1975.

He brought with him a lifetime of mountaineering experience, having, for example, climbed the Matterhorn with a guide in the late 1960s and having otherwise climbed extensively in the French and Swiss Alps, in the Pyrenees, in Crete and in Morocco's Atlas Mountains. His great knowledge of Greek and Roman history and of philosophy led him to travel widely in Italy and Greece, and he once spent a total of eight weeks in Turkey. In fact, I wonder if Con first ventured into the mountains because he thought it was his duty as a scholar to explore the world?

He served on the first CMC committee in 1976-'77 and was CMC's Chairperson from 1978-1980. In his real-life capacity as a lecturer in mathematics at UCC, Con added a valuable dimension to UCC's regular mountaineering slide-shows and talks by providing hospitality for the many well-known climbers who graced these occasions. This hospitality was eagerly sought-after to gain access to Con's wonderful personal collection of mountaineering literature.

Con was essentially an explorer. He taught himself mountain skills in order to be able to venture far and see more. The fact that Con learned these skills at a time when mountaineering was a minority activity, indulged in only by a few eccentrics, makes his achievements all the greater. He was also an accomplished skier, displaying again the fine balance and poise which turned his rockclimbing into poetry in motion. He continued to ski regularly until he was well into his seventies.

While Con frequently expressed the desire to remain in his "mountaineering comfort zone," his modesty tended to hide the fact that this zone was impressively extensive. He was, in fact, a gifted mountaineer, at home both in Irish hills and in the Alps, on rock, on snow and on steep ground. He completed all the major walks and peaks in Ireland, Wales, Scotland and the Lake District. His navigation skills were sure, if not very precise. If you asked for a



Con O'Leary in the Reeks with friends.  
Photo: Helen O'Brien.

bearing, you were likely to be told NNE but the only occasions that he was ever lost were when he ended up following someone else who "needed the navigation practice."

He enjoyed meeting people and was a willing mentor to new club members throughout the years, whether encouraging people to participate in the Reeks Walk, to try a day's rockclimbing at the Old Head of Kinsale, to spend a summer's evening rockclimbing at the Quarry in UCC, or to plan mountaineering trips abroad. Con (with some friends) pioneered rockclimbing at the Old Head of Kinsale in the early 1960s and later compiled the rockclimbing guide to the area.

Con was always good fun to be with. In recent years he loved to spend time with members of CMC in Kerry and to join CMC social occasions, where we will miss his fine rendition of "Sliabh na mBan" as *Gaeilge*.

Farewell, Con. May you have found more mountains to explore and discovered even greater wonders to see. *Ní bheidh do leithéid arís ann.*

**Máire Ní Mhurchú**  
**Cork Mountaineering Club**

*Con O'Leary, born February 22nd, 1926; died June 21st, 2010*



Photo by Heather Johnston