

Gravestone solves 1948 air crash mystery

HEADSTONES from a graveyard in rural Co Limerick; church records; a census from the 1900s; and DNA samples deciphered by FBI forensic experts.

Fusing evidence old and new, a 60-year-old mystery involving a puzzling plane crash, a frozen hand and rumours of a gold bullion was finally laid to rest with the help of retired Limerickman Maurice Conway.

A complex and intriguing tale, the 58-year-old Borrigone man was instrumental in cracking the case.

He is, it transpired, after almost nine years of painstaking research, a distant cousin of Francis Joseph Van Zandt, the owner of a mummified hand recovered from the wreckage of a 1948 air disaster.

"I got a phone call from America last October from an FBI genealogist — a woman called Colleen Fitzpatrick," explained Mr Conway.

"She was looking for the Conway's of Askeaton, as she was trying to find a DNA match for the only human remains from the 1948 crash," he said.

"It was very confusing for me at first, but once I started looking into it, I realised I probably was related to the man."

One of the worst commercial airline crashes in Alaskan history, Northwest Airlines Flight 4422, carrying 24 merchant seamen, crashed inexplicably (an investigation would later reveal its pilots had been blinded by the northern lights) into Alaska's highest mountain, Mount Sanford.

"The plane crashed and fell 3,000ft into a crevice," said Mr Conway.

"They were returning from Shanghai, and so rumours spread that it was loaded with gold."

With no survivors, the dangerous location of the ill-fated aircraft meant it lay untouched at the bottom of an icy ravine until 1994, when two adventurous pilots Marc Millican and Kevin McGregor undertook to find



Jennifer Hough
unravels a mystery that connects a mummified hand, gold bullion and a retired Limerickman

the truth behind the crash. But several expeditions proved fruitless.

"There are only two weeks in the year when you can make the trip to the crash site," he said. "This went on for several years and they found nothing."

Finally, in 1998, the two men discovered part of the wreckage, a propeller and part of the engine. The following year, they decided, would be their last.

"They went up in 1999 and planted 30 US flags — one for each victim and held a brief ceremony. For some unknown reason they decided to descend a different way than they ever had before."

There, sticking out of the ice, the men saw an arm — fully preserved by the ice.

"It was in the hands of the state to identify who it belonged to," said Mr Conway. "Trying to get a DNA sample from it was difficult, but forensic experts managed to, using a brand new breakthrough technology. They rehydrated the hand and were able to



Maurice Conway, above; the plane crash victim, Francis Joseph Van Zandt, left; and his mummified hand, below. After DNA tests, research of his family tree, library records and the census, Mr Conway proved he was related to Mr Van Zandt with the discovery of a headstone in Askeaton.



take a thumb print." The hand became the oldest identification of fingerprints by postmortem remains.

By a process of elimination, it was eventually matched to Mr Van Zandt, a 36-year-old merchant marine from Roanoke, Virginia.

Next, genealogists set about tracing the Conways, as Van Zandt's mother had been a Margaret Conway from Askeaton, Co Limerick.

"Colleen asked if she could send

me a DNA kit," said Mr Conway.

"It was a match and when she rang to tell me, I said 'so that's it now'. She said 'no, now we have to prove the relationship'."

Months later, after painstaking research of his family tree, Mr Conway finally had the answer so many people were waiting for.

"I visited churches, spoke to the priests, got library records, the census, and after five months found the an-

swer on a headstone in Mount Pleasant cemetery in Askeaton — an inscription that proved the connection."

I copied all the birth and death certs and sent them off to America."

Mr Conway maintains the mystery would never have been solved were it not for genealogists Chriss Lyon, Odile Loreille — and Ms Fitzpatrick who visited the Conway grave in Askeaton last year.

"So many people worked on solving

this case. But they are the real unsung heroes of the story."

And as well as discovering a past relative, Mr Conway has found some living ones too. "I have the names and number of a John Conway and his sister who I am related too. I intend to give them a ring sometime, when all this has died down."

And what of his long lost cousin's hand? "I donated it to the US forensic team for scientific research."



The five-star Merrion is the only establishment to win a Gold Medal Award for Excellence twice.

Merrion checks out with gold in elite hotel awards

HAVING collectively consumed 215 meals and clocked up 12,000km travelling throughout the country, a jury of 11 last night declared Dublin's luxurious five-star Merrion Hotel the best in the country.

The Dublin landmark was presented with the hospitality industry's highest accolade at this year's Hotel & Catering Review Gold Medal Awards having beaten off very stiff opposition.

Hundreds of hotels, restaurants, caterers and hotel groups across the country were competing for the coveted Gold Medal Award for Excellence at the awards, which celebrated their 20th anniversary this year.

A total of 14 category awards were presented this year, honouring Ireland's elite hotels, restaurants and caterers.

Organised by Hotel & Catering Review, Ireland's leading magazine for the hospitality industry, the awards recognise and reward excellence within the hotel and catering industry.

Following its triumphant win in the five star hotels category, sponsored by BWG Foods, the Merrion went on to beat the 13 other category winners at the event to scoop the supreme award. It is the only estab-

lishment in the Gold Medal Awards 20-year history to win a Gold Medal Award for Excellence twice.

"The Merrion Hotel is a very worthy winner of this prestigious award," said Sarah Grennan, editor of Hotel & Catering Review and chairman of the Gold Medal Awards jury.

"Since it first opened its doors 10 years ago, the Merrion has wowed all its guests and customers with its charming and professional service, fantastic food and wine offering and its sumptuous surroundings," she said.

Peter McCann, general manager of the Merrion, who accepted the award, said: "Since opening in 1997, the Merrion Hotel has established itself as the epitome of relaxed grandeur. We are delighted to once again receive this very prestigious award."

Among the winners were:

- **Gold Medal Award for Four Star Hotels:** The Brehon, Killarney, Co Kerry.
- **Gold Medal Award for Three Star Hotels:** Killeen House Hotel, Killarney, Co Kerry.
- **Gold Medal Award for Country Houses & Townhouses:** Rathsallick Country House, Duntlavin, Co Wicklow.
- **Gold Medal Award for Fine Dining:** MacNean House & Restaurant, Blacklion, Co Cavan.
- **Gold Medal Award for Bistros:** Bijou, Rathgar, Dublin 6.
- **Gold Medal Award for Ethnic Restaurants:** Saba, Dublin 2.

Passengers tell of 'hysteria' during Ryanair takeoff

by Conall Ó Fátharta

TERRIFIED passengers on a Ryanair flight have described scenes of "mass hysteria and panic" during an aborted takeoff from Portugal's Faro airport on Saturday night.

More than a dozen passengers sitting beside the wings started shouting "fire, fire, stop" as the aircraft travelled down the runway, forcing the pilot of the Shannon Airport-destined flight to abandon takeoff.

Panicked passengers also complained of a strong smell in the cabin.

Yesterday, a number of the 180 passengers on board accused the airline of playing down the incident.

"They described scenes of chaos as passengers left their seats and screamed at the pilot to stop the plane as it hurtled down the runway."

Ken O'Grady, who was travelling with his wife and three-year-old daughter on the flight to Shannon, said the smell on board the aircraft was so overwhelming, people were trying to access oxygen.

"I can only tell you what I saw, but people were standing up out of their seats behind me saying that they could see sparks outside."

"They were screaming and begging the pilot to stop the plane. The smell was horrendous. It was an overpowering smell of plastic burning, like you had left a pot on the stove and it had melted," he said.

"My three-year-old was terrified and my wife was just in bits. I mean I saw men coming off that flight in tears. People were just shattered by the whole

experience," he said. Passengers went on to say how they could feel intense heat coming through the floor.

Another passenger said: "People in the middle of the plane were screaming that they could feel the heat coming up through their runners."

"There was a residue of smoke in the plane and that smell was not the smell of a bird, it was a chemical-type smell. Somebody witnessed sparks outside also. Everybody thought if it took off it would explode."

Mr O'Grady revealed after the flight stopped he witnessed what seemed to be fire engines outside the aircraft. Passengers were then taken off.

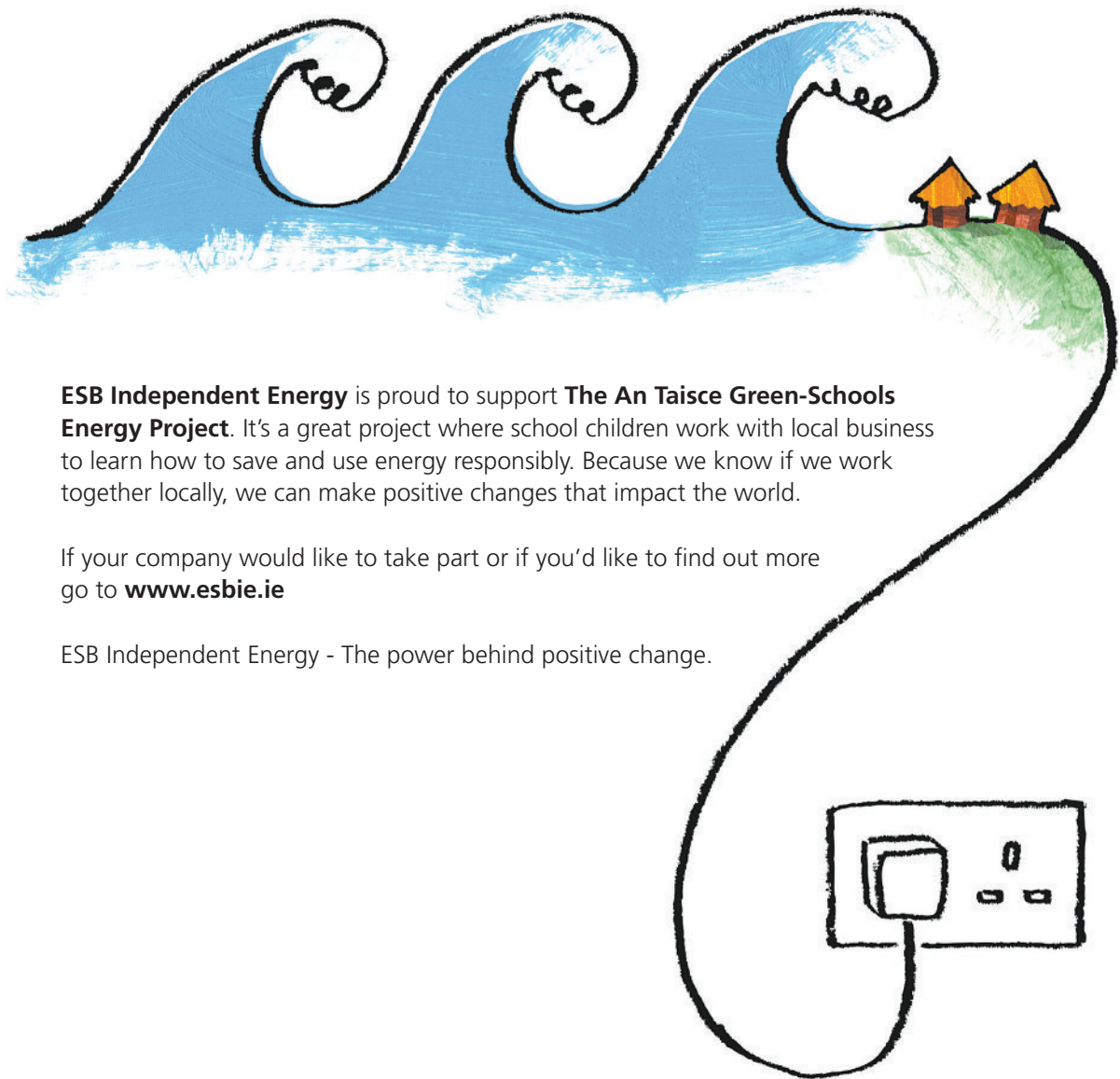
"People were bunny-hopped off the plane and into the terminal. What I witnessed there was a disgrace, a new low in my experience of flying over 20 years. In the 12 or 13 hours I was there, I didn't see a single person in a Ryanair uniform. We got nothing, no information, no accommodation, not even a cup of tea."

According to a statement issued by Ryanair at the time, the aircraft was grounded due to a bird strike which occurred as the plane landed in Faro.

However, yesterday, while denying there was "mass hysteria" on the aircraft, the company admitted about 10 to 15 passengers at the exits beside the wings started shouting "fire, fire, stop" as the aircraft was travelling down the runway.

The takeoff was subsequently aborted and the flight was delayed for about 15 hours.

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