

Cahill, Hugh

by Terry Clavin

Cahill, Hugh (1883–1966), commercial aviation pioneer, was born in Dublin on 23 June 1883, the first of three sons of Matthew Cahill, a publican of Lower Rutland Street, Dublin, and his wife Martha (née Shaw), who had previously been widowed and had a daughter from her first marriage. Hugh first became a carpenter, but by his late twenties was running a successful decorating and window cleaning company. In 1915 he married Caroline O'Connor, who was from a family of hansom cab operators from Donnybrook, and settled with her in Glasnevin, Dublin. They had three sons and four daughters. A notably far-sighted and enterprising businessman, he initiated assorted ventures throughout his career, one such being the only firm in Ireland selling taximeters.

In 1923 Hugh established a garage at Cross Guns Bridge, Glasnevin, that sold and hired out new and second-hand cars, provided a motor parts and engineering service, and driving lessons. Despite his lack of mechanical expertise, the business prospered, particularly the engineering works, which employed skilled mechanics on specialised machinery to manufacture spare parts for garages, workshops and private vehicle owners otherwise reliant on expensive imports. Also fitting and maintaining engines for fishing boats and most of Dublin's private buses, the works functioned on a twenty-hour a day basis at peak periods. He separated the engineering works from the motor business by building a new garage and petrol station across the road in 1931.

Through friends in the Irish Aero Club he became fascinated with aviation in the late 1920s, taking flying lessons in England. With businessman and qualified pilot James C. Malone as his minority partner, he founded Ireland's first commercial airline in July 1930, formally registering Iona National Airways Limited in 1931 with a capital of £2,500. He bought a Desoutter – a three-seater, enclosed cabin monoplane – and was on board for its ill-fated flight (29 July 1930) from its factory in London toward Baldonnel military airbase, Co. Dublin, which ended in a forced landing north of Liverpool. The damaged Desoutter never reached Ireland while Cahill, though unhurt, never flew again.

Operations began at Baldonnel that September with the arrival of another Desoutter and a de Havilland Gipsy Moth, the latter an open cockpit, two-seater biplane. Iona offered an air taxi service, short 'joy rides' and flying lessons as well as banner towing and aerial photography for newspapers. Flights were mostly within Ireland with occasional forays to the Isle of Man, mainland Britain and even once to Paris: these foreign excursions often involved delivering photographs taken on one side of the Irish Sea for publication in newspapers based on the other.

As the Irish Air Corps had priority at Baldonnel, he rented land at Kildonan in Finglas, Co. Dublin, officially opening Ireland's first civil aerodrome there on 8 June 1931. This site comprised a clubhouse for staff and customers; a hangar capable, after a subsequent extension, of housing twenty light aircraft; and a flat, grassy field with enough runway to accommodate the largest aircraft. Crowds flocked to Kildonan at weekends for joy rides while the Iona aircraft also sought custom by touring the country, often landing illegally on beaches and fields. The Desoutter needed too long a run up for such work so by summer 1931 his fleet consisted of three Gipsy Moths.

In June 1932 Kildonan became the first civil aerodrome in Ireland to be licensed for customs facilities, which permitted flights coming from outside the state to land there, facilitating the many visitors arriving later that month for the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin. Cahill leased a Junker aircraft for ferrying dignitaries and journalists to and from England, as Kildonan bustled with activity during the congress. Buoyed by this success, he bought an enclosed four-seater de Havilland Fox Moth, a single-engine biplane with an impressive 360-mile range. This was with a view to initiating regular Galway–Dublin, Cork–Dublin and London–Dublin passenger routes, but the government's refusal of subsidies meant it came to naught.

Ill at ease within the elitist Irish Aero Club, he founded the National Aero Club at Kildonan and in May 1933 recruited renowned pilot Sophie Peirce-Evans (qv) ('Lady Heath') whose celebrity attracted enormous interest and led to the establishment of flying schools for women and juveniles. That summer he drew 15,000-strong crowds to Kildonan by organising an air pageant involving the Irish Air Corps (5 June) and by inviting the famed English aviator Sir Alan Cobham to visit with his air circus (1–2 July).

Losing money and disillusioned by the government's indifference, he closed down Iona National Airways in November 1933, selling his aircraft and Kildonan, which remained a functioning airfield until 1938. Nonetheless his promotion of civil aviation paved the way for the founding of the national airline Aer Lingus in 1936. Former Iona pilots and engineers played a formative role in Aer Lingus' early development, but Cahill was denied a seat on the Aer Lingus board because of his support for the main opposition party, Fine Gael.

His garage and engineering works maintained a brisk trade. During the Emergency (1940–45), it performed repairs that could no longer be done abroad, playing an important role in keeping the Irish Shipping fleet seaworthy. Thereafter the works went into decline, as the type of engineering required changed. Despite suffering also from the manner in which Stephen O'Flaherty (qv) cornered almost all the agencies for the most popular continental cars, Cahill held his own running a small chain of garages and filling stations.

Small in stature and slightly deaf, he enjoyed pranks and golf. He died in Dublin on 13 March 1966 and was buried in Glasnevin Cemetery. In the 1960s, his eldest

son Pearse Cahill (qv) re-established Iona National Airways beside Dublin Airport at Cloghran, Co. Dublin; offering flying lessons, chartered flights and mail deliveries, the venture went into liquidation in 1994.

GRO (birth, marriage cert.); NAI, Census of Ireland, 1901 (24 Summerhill Place, Mountjoy, Dublin); 1911 (36.1 Lower Rutland St., Mountjoy, Dublin), www.census.nationalarchives.ie; *Freeman's Journal*, 24 July 1923; 15 Feb. 1924; *Ir. Independent*, 6 Sept. 1930; 9 June, 11 Dec. 1931; 15 Jan. 1932; 29 Aug. 1981; *Flight Magazine*, 12 Sept. 1930; 20 Feb., 3 Apr., 17 July, 20 Nov. 1931; 19 Feb. 1932; *Ir. Times*, 9 June 1931; 15 Jan., 8 Apr., 17 June 1932; 22 May, 6 June 1933; 27 May 1957; *Ir. Press*, 16 Jan., 25 Apr. 1932; 28 Nov. 1933; 27 July 1967; 18 Mar. 1970; *Evening Herald*, 18 Feb. 1933; 3 Feb. 1948; *Aero-Ireland*, vol ii, no. 4 (1980); Liam Byrne, *History of aviation in Ireland* (1980); John O'Donovan, *Wheels and deals: people and places in Irish motoring* (1983), 201–02; Katherine Butler, 'Kildonan, 1933–1936: a memory', *Dublin Historical Record*, vol. 37, no. 3–4 (June–Sept. 1984), 123–36; Donal McCarron, *A view from above* (2000); John Haughon, *The Silver Lining: Lady Heath, Kildonan – a golden age of flying* (2003); Lindie Naughton, *Lady Icarus: the life of Irish aviator Lady Mary Heath* (2004); Michael Traynor, *Iona National Airways: Ireland's first commercial airline* (2004)