

O'Rourke, Madeleine C.

by Linde Lunney

O'Rourke, Madeleine C. (1951–2006), aviator and organiser of aviation events, was born in south Dublin in the spring of 1951, the daughter of Peter J. Byrne and his wife Olive (née Poole); there was an older brother. Her father was an electrical engineer with the ESB, and her mother had been junior and senior Irish amateur tennis champion in the 1930s. The family lived on Lansdowne Road, Dublin. When she was 16, she went to an air show in Ballyfree, Co. Wicklow (organised by aviation enthusiast Tim Philips (1938–2010), who operated a poultry business there), and was thereafter 'completely hooked' on all things to do with aviation. In 1971, aged 20, she joined the Irish Aero Club, one of six women out of 200 members, and was made social secretary. She went to work in sound engineering in RTÉ, and, as soon as could afford to, she took flying lessons.

In July 1972 she had her first solo flight, and on 17 November that same year, in St Mary's church, Haddington Road, Dublin, she married Colm O'Rourke, who also worked in sound engineering in RTÉ. In 1975 the couple joined the Dublin Ballooning Club (DBC), later the Irish Ballooning Association (ballooning was somewhat cheaper than flying a fixed-wing aircraft). Passionate about all aspects of flying, she was more than willing to help the organisations with which she was involved. In 1978, as secretary of the DBC, she helped produce a short history of the club to mark its tenth birthday. As a DBC official, she attended board meetings of the Irish Aero Club, and volunteered to be organising secretary of a proposed fundraising air show. With a budget of only £500 and no previous experience, O'Rourke and a small team of helpers pulled together a display, billed as an Air Spectacular, in Fairyhouse, Co. Meath, on 27 August 1978.

For the next nine years, O'Rourke and her team managed increasingly elaborate and popular shows, at first with small budgets and then with sponsorship from British Airways and Aer Rianta. Outsiders were amazed that the hugely complex events, with such potential for motor traffic chaos and outright disaster, were so successfully run; in the early years, the shows took place on racecourses and small airfields, with poorly developed infrastructure. During the first show, contact with the crucially important air traffic control at Dublin airport was via a public telephone box, and the man responsible for seeking clearance for events was given a pocketful of ten pence coins. Even when the displays were in Baldonnel airfield, the logistics of setting up catering, toilets, parking, and ticketing for over 100,000 visitors was the equivalent to running a medium-sized town, and would have been unprecedented in Ireland. The organisers had to put in place signage, PA systems, marquees, ground modifications, fencing, and lighting; on the day, they were responsible for the split-second timing of fly-pasts and acrobatic stunts, sometimes by antique machines and sometimes by modern combat planes travelling at hundreds of miles an hour.

O'Rourke acknowledged that Air Spectacular organisers had to have the patience of a saint, the arms of an octopus, and nerves of steel.

The 1987 event was the most ambitious and successful on which she worked; for the first time since 1922, the RAF officially visited the Irish state, when the famous Red Arrows performed before record crowds at Baldonnel. But O'Rourke believed in stopping while she was ahead, and this was the last show with which she was involved as organiser. However, her involvement with aviation did not stop. In June 1980 she became the first woman to fly a microlight in Ireland, on Sandymount Strand in Dublin; she had agreed that year to be first secretary of the Irish Microlight Aircraft Association to get the new organisation up and running.

O'Rourke was the ideal person to write *Air Spectaculars: air displays in Ireland* (1989), a well researched and knowledgeable volume, which was a major contribution to Irish aviation history, and in 1997 she produced a 75th-anniversary history of the Irish Air Corps, with an associated CD-ROM. She compiled a souvenir programme for the 2000 Air Spectacular, with contributions from thirty authors, and produced a number of videos on the history of flight, including one that was widely shown in schools in 1990. Always keen to share her enthusiasm for flying, she was responsible on the Irish Aviation Council for 'air education', liaising with schools to provide educational events. She was involved with many other projects, such as the production in her own home of several videos, including one on the fiftieth anniversary of the 1941 crash of an RAF plane in Wicklow. She researched and assisted in the production of many RTÉ radio programmes, particularly documentaries on aviation history, most notably a four-part series entitled *Spreading our wings* (October 2005), presented by Gay Byrne. Her regular *Sunday miscellany* radio appearances and letters to the newspapers on aviation topics, meant that her name was known to people outside the world of flying. Before she was 30, in 1980, O'Rourke was awarded the Paul Tissandier Diploma by the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale, in recognition of her outstanding contribution to sport aviation in Ireland, and in 1992 she received the World Aerospace Education Organization's award for outstanding leadership and support of aerospace education. She was elected to membership of the Royal Aeronautical Society in 1994.

Madeleine O'Rourke died in St Vincent's Hospital, Dublin, on 2 June 2006 after a short illness, at the age of 55. She was survived by her husband and daughter.

---

Madeleine O'Rourke, *Air Spectaculars: air displays in Ireland* (1989); *Ir. Press*, 18 Nov. 1972; *Ir. Independent*, 6 Mar. 1973; 12 June 1997; 11 Aug. 2008; *Ir. Times*, 31 July 2006; 'Madeleine O'Rourke: an appreciation', *Flying in Ireland* (Aug. 2006), 40–41

Downloaded from <http://dib.cambridge.org> by IP 100.103.238.216 on Tue Oct 27 01:55:56 UTC 2020 Dictionary of Irish Biography Online © 2020 Cambridge University Press and Royal Irish Academy. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.