

About the Wondering

A story pieced together by Vanda Carter



From www.naval-history.net

The **HMS Curlew** was a CERES-Class Cruiser ordered from Vickers-Armstrong at Newcastle in April 1916. She was launched on 5th July 1917 as the ninth Royal Navy ship to carry this name, first used in 1795 for a Sloop. The build was completed on 14th December 1917.

Heraldic data: Badge: On a Field Blue, a Curlew gold.



HMS Curlew motto: Solvitur ambulando: The question is solved by going on.

HMS Curlew: Details of War Service

December 1939

9th Sailed from Chatham, Kent to Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands to resume Home Fleet duties.

12th Under repair at Invergordon. Resumed Fleet duties on completion.

21 December 1939

**Letter from John J O'Callaghan, Leading Stoker, 27 Mess, HMS Curlew, c/o GPO
London**

Dear Mrs or Miss Elizabeth,

I saw your name under the heading of "Poetry" in the "Cork Holly Bough" and I thought to myself - just imagine, there's poetry in the family. Now, I wonder if you are really good and I also wonder how it comes that an O'Callaghan can have wandered as far away as Surrey with a name like "Cluanmeala" on the gate to hang your hat on.

About the wondering. I suppose it's in us. I have been wondering since I was thirteen. I am now twenty two.

To come to the point, Elizabeth. I am going to test your poetic powers. I am enclosing a short poem I received once from a girl who I am sorry to say I did not keep a date with in a place called Torquay. She wrote to me the enclosed poem - Nothing very heart-rending about it, but I consider it is very much to the point.

Now, will you see if you can write a poem either referring to the O'Callaghans in general or else giving me a severe telling off by calling me all the names under the sun. Don't forget though, you can call me anything you like, but don't call me early in the morning!

Well, Elizabeth, I have taken a bit of a chance, but seeing that it's Christmas time I hope you'll answer my request. For a while - cheerio - and I wish you a very happy Christmas.

I am, dear Elizabeth, Mrs or Miss,

Yours sincerely,

John O'Callaghan

PS. I am sorry I have no Christmas card - We are very far away from anywhere. Do not be surprised at no stamp - Free postage in the Navy.

From Google Translate: Cluain meala means 'honey meadow' in Irish Gaelic.

21 December 1939

From John O'Callaghan, Leading Stoker, 27 Mess, HMS Curlew, c/o GPO London

Dear Elizabeth,

I forgot to enclose poem so I am putting it in this time. Cheerio.

Yours, John.

Enclosed in the envelope, scribbled on the back of a shift rota, is the following limerick:

There was a young sailor from Cork,
Who asked me to go for a walk.
But I waited in vain,
For an hour in the rain,
For that lying young b--- from Cork.

From the Cork Evening Echo website: www.eveningecho.ie

'The Holly Bough' is a Christmas periodical published by the Evening Echo that brings to life the magic of Cork's Christmas past and combines it with the festive season of today, for Cork people at home and all over the world.

The Cork Holly Bough dates back to 1897, when it cost just one penny.

It has been published every year, apart from between 1941 and 1945 during World War II and in 1948, when there was a severe paper shortage.

9 January 1940

Letter from Elizabeth O'Callaghan West, Cluanmeala, New Malden, Surrey

Dear John,

I received your letter on 27th December and whether it was because the sun was shining or whether it was the curlew on top, I don't know (I have a weakness for curlews) I hadn't the heart to be angry with you and instead I felt mightily amused.

I decided there and then that you should have your poem which I have written as you requested and hope you like it and that it inspires you to mighty deeds like your ancestors.

I expect it gets a bit lonely for you out there. I love the sea and have sailed a lot but not under war conditions.

What part of Ireland do you come from? What do you look like? How long have you been at sea? I've got the wondering habit now. You're right - It is a family failing. All my family have it. So I must stop it this minute.

It feels strange writing to someone I've never seen and can't even visualise but I suppose it's the clan spirit that still prevails, the blood of Ceallachan in our veins.

I hope you had a happy Christmas and my best wishes for your happiness in the New Year.

Yours sincerely,

Elizabeth O'Callaghan West

From: <https://irishhistoryandgenealogy.wordpress.com/2008/01/22/clan-callahan-ceallachain>

Ceallachan (Callahan, Callaghan, Cellachan, Ceallaghan, Cellachain, Ceallachain) of Cashel (Caisal, Caisil), was the 10th century King of the Irish province of Munster from whom the family names of Callahan and MacCarthy and their variations (e.g. Callaghan, O'Callahan, O'Callaghan, MacCarthaig, etc.) were derived.

A description of the Battle of Limerick from a translation of the Caithreim Ceallachan Caisil - "The Triumphs of Callaghan of Cashel or The Wars Between the Irishmen and the Norsemen in the middle of the 10th Century"

by Prof. Alexander Bugge, Published 1905.

When Ceallachan perceived, that the soldiers were being slain . . . and that Clan Eogan was being slaughtered, then arose his wrath, his rage, and his vigour, and he makes a royal rush, caused by fits of mighty passion, at the nobles of the Lochlannachs [Norwegian Vikings], while the noble descendants of the race of Eoghan protect him.

Cellachan reached the warlike Amlaib and made an attack on the rough mail-coat of the warrior, so that he loosened his helmet under his neck, and split his head with hard strokes, so that the Lochlannach fell by him.

Then Suilleban [ancestor of the O'Sullivans] with his 150 brave, valiant swordsmen arrived to his defence, and he made a breach of savage ferocity through the centre of the heroic battalion of the Lochlannachs.

29 December 1939

From Elizabeth O'Callaghan West, Cluanmeala, New Maldon, Surrey

For John J O'Callaghan

At his request I have written this poem and to him I dedicate it. If his bravery is as much in evidence as his audacity, he bids fair to outdo his famous ancestors.

Elizabeth O'Callaghan West

To the O'Callaghans

O all ye O'Callaghans
Know ye your high degree?
Know ye the royal blood
That in your veins runs free?

Know thee of Ceallachan
Ceallachan Cashel
Son of a mighty clan
King of fair Munster?

Forty-second Christian king;
Line of McCarthy Mor –
Lost in antiquity;
Famed for their deeds of yore;
Mighty of strength and frame;
Ceallachan Cashel!
First bearer of your name;
Pride of far Munster.

Oft around the turf fires bright,
When the day's work is done,
You may still hear them tell
Of battles he has won.
Ceallach the warrior,
Ceallachan Cashel.
Foremost mid battle's roar.
Bravest of Munster.

Vikings trembled at his name
To him the honour goes
Of ridding finally
Munster from Danish foes.
Vikings looked frail beside
Ceallachan Cashel
Fled they like ebbing tide
Ceallach of Munster.

For in Limerick's Knock-Laingal
Leading the battle's throng
Cleft he their leader's skull
Through metal helmet strong,
With but a single blow.
Ceallachan Cashel
Laid his great forearm low.
Saviour of Munster.

Maybe in the long ago,
Bards sang his kingly ways
Down the years, I too would
Tender my modest praise.
Mighty of brain and brawn,
Ceallachan Cashel
Long may his name live on

Hero of Munster.

From: www.genealogy.com

The name 'Ceallach' was traditionally taken to mean 'frequenter of churches', but is now thought to be a much older word meaning 'bright-headed'. Alternatively it could be derived from Old Irish 'ceallach' meaning 'war or strife'.

HMS Curlew: Details of War Service

January 1940

Deployed for air defence duties in North Sea.

Nominated for transfer to 1st AA Squadron with Humber Force.

16th Took passage to Humber with call at Rosyth.

21st Deployed with Humber Force for convoy defence in North Sea.

11 January 1940

Letter from John O'Callaghan, Leading Stoker, 27 Mess, HMS Curlew, c/o GPO London

Dear Elizabeth,

I was delighted to receive both your letter and poem two days ago. It came as a big surprise to me to hear from you at all because I fully expected to have you ignore my little request altogether. Anyway, I am deeply grateful to know that anyone could go to such bother for my sake. Your poem "To the O'Callaghans" must have taken up several hours of your time. You certainly don't seem to have forgotten your history; one point however you seem to have omitted and that was you seem to have forgotten that we O'Callaghans were once High Kings of Ireland. Ever heard of "An Ard Re O'Ceallachain"?

Now you never told me about yourself at all, never mentioned how long you had been in England or where you hailed from. Some part of Cork I should imagine. Also, do you work hard and what else do you do for a hobby besides writing poetry? By the way, it will interest you to know that my brother is an artist in Dublin; he is going to the College of Art there, won a Scholarship last February. Have you won many prizes for your poems? It is one thing that I could never have enough patience for. Don't forget, next time I hear from you, I want lots of news about yourself.

As regards myself, I will answer all your questions, or should I say queries. My part of the Emerald Isle is Cork, by the lovely River Lee. What do I look like, well I'm certainly no oil painting and any way I can't praise myself up too much because these letters are censored on board. Otherwise I would tell you I am quite good looking. As they say in the song, I am a lad of twenty two summers and have spent five of them in the Navy. I spend my spare time, if any, reading any war news and also reading some of the Ship's Library books. I wish I had some good Irish books here. I must bring some back from leave with me.

You didn't have much to say about Christmas either, or did you spend it quiet too. I have just had a few letters from home and they seem to have had rather a good time even in spite of the situation. They are looking forward to see me soon, but believe me, they are not half so anxious as I am. Myself and all the lads are longing to go home, but I suppose duty calls so we must be as cheerful as we can until the lucky day comes. How long is it since you have been back to the old country. I left there last August bidding them goodbye for two and a half years. We were supposed to be going on a commission to the Mediterranean.

And now that it is getting so late I am thinking of saying goodnight to you and once again I thank you for your lovely poem. So for awhile I wish you all the best. And please write soon.

I remain, Dear Elizabeth,

Yours truly,

John

'An Ard Re' means 'The High King' but there is no sign of An Ard Re O'Ceallachain among the much-disputed lists of the legendary High Kings of Ireland. However, a king called Ceallach is recorded as reigning from 640-654AD. Elizabeth's hero, Ceallachan Cashel was chief of the Eoghanacht of Munster clan who were descendants of the High King Ailill Aulom (155-234AD).

From The Irish Times, Friday 27 June 2014

www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/why-did-the-irish-volunteer-as-british-officers-in-wwii-1.1846436

Why did the Irish volunteer as British officers in WWII?

Motives ranged from loyalty, peer pressure, family tradition and idealism to career prospects, adventure and the appeal of travel.

This September marks the 75th anniversary of the outbreak of the second World War, a war in which Ireland remained neutral yet, according to the British government, 42,665 Irish citizens volunteered for service with the British armed forces. Research by Richard Doherty suggests that the real figure may have been as high as 66,000.



From www.tartanregister.gov.uk

The Callaghan tartan is numbered 7299 in the Scottish Register of Tartans. In the absence of a Scottish or Irish tartan for Callaghan, Peter Callaghan designed this tartan in 2007 using dark blue for Scotland and green for Ireland, accentuated with traces of red and yellow.

HMS Curlew: Details of War Service

February to March 1940 - Humber Force deployment in continuation.

February 1940

Letter from Elizabeth O'Callaghan West, Birmingham, England

Dear John,

Sorry for not writing sooner but I've been rather busy.

I was glad you liked the poem and must confess I hadn't heard of Ard Re Callachan. Where did you hear about him? The family history I acquired from the Irish Times series or Irish family names which also gave the family crest and motto which is "Fidus et Audax" which means "Faithful and Bold". They didn't mention the Ard Re which seems a serious omission! I expect they only mentioned Ceallachan Cashel as he was the founder of the family and from him it took its name.

Still, I can sympathise with your feelings for after all an Ard Re should not be so easily overlooked. Tell me more about him!

I was interested to hear that you hailed from Cork. I've never been there myself although I was in Glengariff a few years ago and loved it when I went to visit my birthplace a few miles from Killarney. The country around there is so beautiful - I hated leaving it. It was the first time I had really seen it as I had left there when a child. Most of my childhood was spent in Derry and in Donegal, which is grand country, wild like Kerry. From there I went to

Roscommon for a short time and then to England where I married and added the West to my name. I have lived there since, most of the time in London.

I liked London. It had so much of interest to offer, at any rate before the war, although I've often pined for the wild loveliness of Ireland and the sound of an Irish voice.

Birmingham is not very interesting although there is a wonderful art gallery here.

I was also interested to hear that your brother was an artist. I too, although I can't draw a straight line, have always been interested in art and have often visited the various art galleries in London and wherever I happened to travel. I suppose because

I love all beauteous things,
I seek and adore them,
God has no better praise,
and man in his laborious days
is honoured for them.

That was written by an English poet, Robert Bridges, and I think just about sums it up.

You ask me what other hobbies I have besides poetry? Well, I study astrology and if you can find out what time of the day you were born and give me the date, month and year, I shall exercise my brains a little more on your behalf and see what the fates have in store for you. The time of day is most important so it is up to you.

I must finish now and I hope you have survived the awful weather. Wishing you the best of luck.

Yours truly,

Elizabeth O'Callaghan West.

HMS Curlew: Details of War Service

April 1940

8th Transferred to Scapa Flow for duty with Home Fleet after German invasion of Norway.

Deployed with Fleet units to provide air defence cover during support of military operations.

9th Passage to Norway to join Fleet Units for air defence.

16th Deployed at Namsos to provide AA defence during landings (Operation MAURICE)

19th Deployed at Namsos to provide air defence during landing of French troops.

21st Return passage to Scapa Flow.

23rd Deployed with HM Aircraft Carriers GLORIOUS and ARK ROYAL, HM Cruiser BERWICK and screen of six Home Fleet destroyers during passage to Narvik to provide air defence (Operation DX.)

(Note: The aircraft carriers were also taking RAF GLADIATOR fighter aircraft for use in Norway)

24th Under heavy and sustained air attacks which caused some damage.

28th Relieved by HM Cruiser SHEFFIELD.

May 1940

1st Detached from air defence duties off Norway and took passage to Scapa Flow for repair and replenishment.

5th Resumed air defence duties off Norway

Deployed with HMS ARK ROYAL, HMS GLORIOUS, HMS BERWICK and Fleet destroyers in support of military operations.

24th & 25th Deployed as AA Guardship at Ofotfjord.

May 26 1940

From www.U-boat.net

HMS Curlew (Capt. Basil Charles Barrington Brooke, RN) was sunk in Lavangsfjord, Ofotfjord near Narvik, northern Norway in position 67°32'N, 16°37'E by German bombers on 26th May 1940.



HMS Curlew bombed and sinking off Skaanland
From www.world-war.co.uk/gashboat.php3

Here, not unsurprisingly, the story becomes confused. We catch a glimpse from the testimony of a sailor on board HMS Coventry which was close by the Curlew when the Luftwaffe attacked:

From www.world-war.co.uk/gashboat.php3

During brief spells when the bombers were less persistent, British Army Royal Engineers assisted by Royal Marines from H.M.S. Curlew managed to construct a landing strip at nearby Skaanland and a few Gloucester Gladiators and Hurricanes were able to come to our help. They were hopelessly outnumbered but it did make a difference. One fighter was worth a lot of guns -- but don't tell that to the Admirals! Unfortunately they arrived too late to prevent Curlew being blown to bits before the disbelieving eyes of the men who had just completed work on the temporary runway. Cairo was also damaged but managed to carry on... On 28 May 1940, H.M.S. Cairo received two direct hits causing a number of casualties. She survived the onslaught but had to be sent home, stopping on the way to bury her dead. She took the survivors from Curlew home with her.

From some time in June 1940: An undated newspaper clipping from among the posthumous papers of Elizabeth O'Callaghan West:

HMS Curlew bombed, sunk - Four officers and five ratings lost

The Admiralty announced today that HMS Curlew, an anti-aircraft cruiser of 4290 tons, has been sunk as a result of a bombing attack off the North coast of Norway. Four officers and five ratings lost their lives and the next of kin have been informed.

The Curlew carried a compliment of 400.

In announcing the loss, the Admiralty point out that during the recent successful operation in the Narvik area, British warships have been heavily engaged in bombarding enemy positions on land and in protecting occupied coastal areas and convoys.

Many Shot Down

They have been exposed to incessant bombing attacks in the course of which many enemy aircraft have been destroyed. The confined and dangerous waters of this coast restrict freedom of movement so greatly that occasional losses are inevitable. It was while engaged in these most arduous operations that HMS Curlew was struck by bombs and subsequently sunk.

Difficulty experienced in ascertaining names of survivors has prevented this announcement from being made before.

From: <https://en.wikipedia.org>

In the 1650s the O'Callaghan clan were violently dispossessed of their ancestral home and lands in Cork by the Cromwellian Plantation. The chief and his immediate relatives were

forcibly relocated to County Clare, near the town now called Callaghan's Mills, but the clansmen remained in County Cork.

The chief's line in County Clare eventually died out, and the title passed to a line of O'Callaghans that had fled to Spain with the 'Wild Geese' in the early 18th century.

17 September 1649

Letter from Oliver Cromwell to the Hon. William Lenthall, Speaker of the Parliament of England justifying the massacre of Irish Catholics at Drogheda.

From 'Oliver Cromwell's letters and speeches with elucidations'.

I am persuaded that this is a righteous judgment of God upon these barbarous wretches, who have imbued their hands in so much innocent blood and that it will tend to prevent the effusion of blood for the future, which are satisfactory grounds for such actions, which otherwise cannot but work remorse and regret.

List of casualties from the sinking of the HMS Curlew in May 1940

From www.naval-history.net

CALLEJA, Domenico,	Leading Cook (O),	E/LX 21330	MPK
FERRETT, Horace H,	Engine Room Artificer 4c,	D/MX 59462	MPK
HINGE, Harry H,	Act/Sub Lieutenant,	RNVR,	killed
JACKSON, Dennis H,	Paymaster Sub Lieutenant,		killed
MERRY, Aubrey M L,	Ty/Paymaster Sub Lieutenant,	RNVR,	killed
PHILLIPS, Samuel,	Stoker Petty Officer,	D/JX 78150	MPK
TREAGUS, Harold,	Petty Officer Writer,	D/MX 49698	MPK
WEEKS, Albert E,	Chief Petty Officer Stoker,	D/K 57143	MPK
YATES, William,	Paymaster Commander,		killed

It appears from this list that Leading Stoker John O'Callaghan survived the sinking of HMS Curlew. However, a shadow of doubt is introduced by the following request on the World Naval Ships internet forum:

From www.worldnavalships.com

November 2007

hi, bit of a long shot this, my mother in law last saw her father in 1939/40 when he was on hms curlew, i know she was sunk in 1940 in norway, could anyone tell me what happened to the crew after the sinking. he was not listed as a casualty. his name was charlie walters, and that is all the info i have. curlew i believe was a ceres class cruiser. thank you. hooky

One person replied:

August 2009

I have a mate that saw the curlew hit by a bomb but has no idea of what became of the crew after they came ashore. The bomb hit the rear of the ship above the tea room.

A further internet search throws up another glimpse of story. This man must have worked alongside John O'Callaghan in the ship's Engine Room:

Testimony of Leading Stoker Patrick James Roche, HMS Curlew crew survivor
From www.forcez-survivors.org.uk/biographies/princecrew/rochepj.html

Paddy jumped out of his bunk and found himself up to his chest in Arctic water, he tried to escape through a hole in the hull. His face was badly cut and he became wedged but was pulled through by a Maltese steward who then tied him to a barrel and helped him to jump into the sea.

He was rescued and given rum, he objected since he was a Pioneer (a Catholic temperance organisation) but accepted the spirit as medicine.

On the train South through Scotland the survivors were treated as heroes but gradually began to meet Dunkirk survivors moving North (in early June 1940) and received less attention.

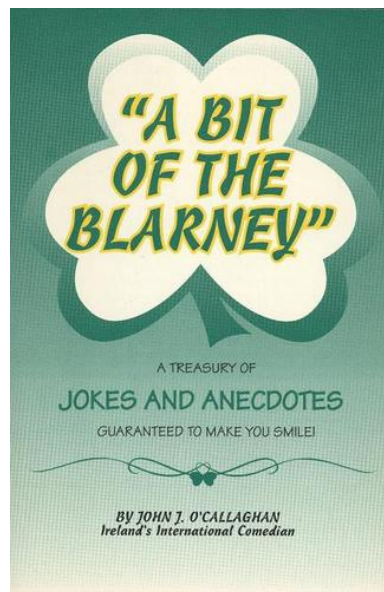


Some of the survivors from HMS Curlew in 1940
Photo contributed to www.battleships-cruisers.co.uk by James Roche

We do not know whether John subsequently corresponded with Elizabeth after the sinking of the Curlew or after the end of the Second World War. No other letters have been preserved.

From Amazon.com 2013

A Bit of the Blarney (paperback)
John J O'Callaghan (author)



A treasury of jokes and anecdotes guaranteed to make you smile by John J O'Callaghan, Ireland's international comedian.

Be the first to review this item

Price: \$6.95 & eligible for FREE Shipping on orders over \$25.

Temporarily out of stock.

Paperback: 132 pages

Publisher: Hot to Trot (November 1992)

Amazon Best Sellers Rank: #12,366,852 in Books

From www.callaghan.info

In 1994, a Spanish lawyer, Don Juan O'Callaghan of Tortosa was recognised by the Genealogical Office of Ireland as the senior descendant in the male line of the last inaugurated O'Callaghan chief.

There are many John O'Callaghans name-checked on the internet, but none who answer the description of an Irishman from Cork, born around 1917 and enlisted as a stoker in the British Navy. After his ship goes down, this John O'Callaghan disappears from view, at least for the time being.

It is uncomfortable to admit it, but it would have been a neater conclusion and more dramatic if the name of John O'Callaghan had appeared on the list of crew killed when the HMS Curlew went down. But life is not tidy and it can only be good, if that is what happened, that this young man's life did not end in 1940 in the freezing waters of a Norwegian fjord.

Unlike fiction, true stories about real people are often inelegant and inconclusive. Letters get lost, promising friendships falter. But in the vast ocean of doubt and muddle, disappointment and unknowing, the restless curiosity of every O'Callaghan is, as always, free to roam.

As digital connectivity grows exponentially, people whose lives have been lost from sight for decades or centuries are reappearing in the landscape. And strangers who have never met, disconnected by accidents of time and place, diaspora and war are discovering the literal truth of their shared imaginings.

Unfortunately the young lady of Torquay's poem was not preserved and I took the liberty of making up the bad limerick to fill the gap. As far as I know, everything else in this story is true.

In case you are wondering, Elizabeth O'Callaghan West was my great aunt.

Voices

Poem by Elizabeth O'Callaghan West 1943



There are voices I remember,
That forever haunt my dreaming,
Calling sadly, calling sweetly,
Calling me incessantly,
Through the daytime and the night time,
With a low, insistent pleading,
Like the plangent voice in seashells,
That re-echoes their loved sea.

They are the voices of my people,
To the exile - sweetest music;
They are voices of lost loved ones;
Youth's fair dreams, that ne'er came true,
They are voices of wild beauty,
That in chorus faint and rhythmic,
Fill my heart with hopeless longing,
For the glory once it knew.

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