

Derek Mahon

RED SAILS



Gallery Books

Red Sails

is first published
simultaneously in paperback
and in a clothbound edition
on 30 October 2014.

The Gallery Press

Loughcrew
Oldcastle
County Meath
Ireland

www.gallerypress.com

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ISBN 978 1 85235 614 9 *paperback*
978 1 85235 615 6 *clothbound*

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

Red Sails receives financial assistance
from the Arts Council.

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LOTTERY FUNDED

for Sarah Iremonger

Seaplanes

Once upon a time, stranded between flights, I started reading an abandoned copy of Arthur Hailey's *Airport* (1968). Recently I picked up an old Hodder paperback, much thumbed, of Jack Higgins's *East of Desolation* (1971), another macho fairy tale, described on the back as 'a thrilling read in the great tradition of Hammond Innes (*Daily Mail*): lower middlebrow, *Reader's Digest*-level to help the digestion, it tells about a plane crash in Greenland and a daring rescue. It's not 'Literature', but books of this kind often share a simple virtue: technical expertise, the practical knowledge of someone familiar with a subject from experience or at least from thorough research. The plane on the front of Higgins's book is a wrecked seaplane on the ice; a shocked young woman swoons in the arms of her rugged saviour. A seaplane! — in Canada a 'floatplane' because used so much on *inland* waters. (There are ski-planes too.) I was once in a boat on Lake Erie, a sea of industrial outflow (Cleveland, Detroit), though not in a floatplane. Short & Harland, the Belfast aircraft factory, featured in the news and in grown-up family talk in the 1950s, and I've longed to go up in a flying boat for as long as I can remember. Jack Higgins, in evoking the glamour of this particular machine, knew what he was doing; but he wasn't the first, not by a long chalk. There's arguably at least one such craft in Ovid (everything is in Ovid): Phaëton's chariot. Ceyx and Halcyone? It must have started with gulls, with geese and swans; when Columbus's ships made landfall at 'San Salvador' people came out to see 'the great white birds'.

Saint-John Perse, that now unfashionable poet, speaks in *Oiseaux* (1962, ill. Georges Braque) of a bird's 'nautical configuration'; how it takes the shape of a ship, 'the thorax formed like a hull, the ribcage like a keel, the bony forward deck, the bowsprit like a breastbone, the hollow shoulder lock where the oar of the wing engages, the stiff pelvis of the stern'. A sailor, devoted to boats and

birds, he had a keen sense of their affinity, their shared architecture, their sculptural lives. Seaplanes too offer this binary fascination. Other aircraft, though often graceful, are strictly functional; but flying boats — complex, decorative, yet strangely modest, even gauche — have special endearing qualities and legendary personalities. There are seaplanes of a sort in Ariosto, in the science fiction of Cyrano de Bergerac, in the *Arabian Nights*. There's certainly one in Swift, the flying island of Laputa, a scientific research lab in the sky. Lir's children, flying Dutchmen; Wordsworth's 'skycanoe', the crescent moon. Rimbaud's drunken boat turns into one for a moment, its underside '*taché de lunules électriques*', dappled with electric lunulae, with water-light reflections. Gatsby's hydroplane, which we don't get to see. There are seaplanes in Norman Mailer and in many old-fashioned adventure books for the young, Biggles and so on (everything is in Biggles). You see them in tourist ads for tropical places, perhaps even in actual tropical places too.

The opposite of an airship? A seaplane of course. Brian Moore, in *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* (1965), set in Belfast in 1941, captured a true moment of reminiscence: 'In the afternoon silence above him, a growl of engines. From a corner of the sky they came, great planes of a sort he had never seen before. He stood staring, sure that they were bombers crossing the mountain, bearing down on the city . . . But the planes droned on over the Lough, turning in formation as they went out to sea, towards England, towards Europe, far away to that faraway war.' (Were it not for that 'great' these might have been flying boats from Lough Erne, of which more in a minute.) Seamus Heaney has a poem in *Seeing Things* (1991) about the monks of Clonmacnoise when that 14th-century 'ship appeared above them in the air' — 'as if it were on the sea', continues Kenneth Jackson's version (*A Celtic Miscellany*, 1951): literally a *flying boat* and not unlike the helicopter above the island abbey in Moore's *Catholics* (1972): 'Do you know, Father, that's the first flying machine of any description that has ever landed on Muck.' Lowell, in the 'Quaker Graveyard', has 'supercilious winged clippers' ('supercilious', the etymology, is brilliant), those fast 19th-century China tea-trade sailing ships whose designation Pan Am adopted for their transatlantic fleet in the 1930s. The 'Yankee Clippers' berthed at Foynes, ten miles downstream from

Shannon, on the southern, Limerick side of the estuary; the terminal building is now a museum.

Why flying boats? Since bad weather might force an aircraft down at sea, the early manufacturers thought from the beginning in terms of floats. So, Clippers and Short 'C' flying boats. Short Bros. completed their first in 1935. Two years later their *Caledonia* (Imperial Airways) flew from Foynes to Newfoundland: tip-tilted nose, four engines mounted on raised wings for landing on water. Castle Archdale on Lower Lough Erne, Co. Fermanagh, hosted long-range Sunderlands and (US) Catalinas from 1940 to 1944 to deal with U-boats in the Atlantic — an arrangement kept quiet at the request of the nominally neutral Dublin government since it involved overflying a few miles of 'Éire', the Donegal Corridor. Castle Archdale had its own control tower, hangars and workshops, accommodation, canteens and a hundred moorings. The planes carried bombs, depth charges, torpedoes and mines; they dealt with the U-boats, then moved on. All this, once supposedly under wraps, has long been common knowledge, the details quickly found online; search engines do the work for us. The Lough Erne flying boats were a different kind of search engine: you saw the enemy's subaqueous search engines and went for them in the open — a conflict of two elements, three when they opened fire. Contemporary search engines, panoptic but sedentary with Coke and cookie — Google and the like — also had tactical origins ('Need to Know') and initial development funds from the Defense Dept. in Washington. Defence, (re)search-and-destroy, are now computer games; the spy networks of old are a worldwide web of playstations. Quaint relics of vintage travel, Sealands and Sandringhams, take on a retro glow. But they will be back, together with the new, improved airships once again on the drawing boards at Friedrichshafen, Lake Constance.

Meanwhile there are slow seaplane start-up projects, slow and 'Slow', if they ever get off the ground, the water. Can we recapture the magic of those hedge-hopping wave-clippers with their friendly human scale, their double charm, their whispered promise in repose? No desolate acres of tarmac. They need less elbow room and so prefer quiet places like lakes and coves where they can be close to natural growth, dramatic contrasts (broken silence, engine

roar) startling grass and tree: ‘The lilac listens to the thunder too’ (G. Singh). Thales (*fl.* 585 BC), pre-Socratic, of the Milesian school, believed the whole world to be made of water; if so, life is a swim. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Wind, Sand and Stars (Terre des hommes, 1939, tr. William Rees 1995)*: ‘Waterspouts stood in apparently motionless ranks like the pillars of a temple. On their swollen capitals rested the dark and lowering arch of the storm, but blades of light sliced down through cracks in the arch, and between the pillars the full moon gleamed on the cold stone tiles of the sea . . . Seen from such a height, the waves have no relief [relief as in ‘low relief’] and the fog patches seem immobile. But great white palm leaves seem to cover the surface, marked with veins and flaws and petrified in a kind of frost, and the seaplane crew know that this is no place to put down.’ This is an early flying boat, the first to make the transatlantic crossing from Dakar to Buenos Aires. The things we’ve lost. We need to get back in touch with air and water, cloud and tide, windsock and shed; to cultivate slow flight, green planes, earth-conscious aviation, save energy, dispel the anxious tedium of the airline scam, the new fear of flying, and avoid the horrors of Dublin Airport and Thieffrow. ‘Man’, a reed but a thinking reed (Pascal), indulge the imagination!

I’ve been waiting sixty years to go up in a seaplane. I’ve flown in glass-bottomed helicopters and quivering eight-seaters (Inverin-Aran, Athens-Paros), been in long-distance 747s, in cramped air buses of the bucketshop budget business, and even once in a parked B-52. I’ve been in the usual rowing boats, motorboats, ferries and mailboats, swingboats at Barry’s Amusements, warships open to visitors, an 18th-century frigate, the *Cutty Sark*, a trawler, a Guinness barge, a Thames houseboat, a docked submarine (drinks party; woman overboard), four or five yachts, a *bateau mouche*, currachs and cabin cruisers — but have never yet stepped into a seaplane rocking gently at its mooring. Why not? Opportunity lacked somehow; it’s never happened. So when a new outfit, Harbour Flights (Ireland) Ltd., Mountshannon, Co. Clare, posted its tentative first prospectus, with environmental impact information and a route map linking various likely points around the country, I was on to them in a flash; there was even to be a short hop from Cobh to Kinsale. No Saint-Exupéry, I decided this was the one for me — to start with, at any rate, for a sense of it: a morning’s

fun. But that was four years ago and I’m still waiting. Perhaps it will never happen. Just as well maybe, it might be a disappointment: so much is a disappointment now that so much is unreal. Contemporary kitsch might ruin the raw experience: a plethora of health-and-safety precautions, Sinatra (‘Come Fly with Me’), continual tiresome announcements. I console myself with Thales’ belief that the world itself is water. We have our own water wings, we are already in flight.

The Japanese noticed this in the 17th century — *ukiyo-e*, the ‘floating world’ — and it sustained them culturally for two hundred years. Those old prints: skiffs pitch in troughs between mountain peaks; women mate with cephalopods in a provisional, evanescent quasi-reality. The vocabulary of *hokku* reflected this with amphibious geese and dripping cranes, the ambiguous silence of ponds, the pictorial quality of bird voices on water. Bashō, from *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*:

*Over the darkened sea
only the voice of a flying duck
is visible, soft white.*

Seaplanes exist on another plane from conventional airbuses of the gas-guzzling kind. They retain an intimate bird-like character, light and heavy both and faintly comical in that regard; the gravid undercarriage, the picture-book propellers and kiddie floats make a warm, maternal image. Seen in this light, cold water is not so cold nor the sea so perilous:

*Who now hath quite forgot to rave
While Birds of Calm sit brooding on the charmed wave.*

Everything is in Milton, though mostly in *Paradise Lost*. Poetry once recognized a celestial ocean, the ‘seas of Space’. The pelagic, the buoyant, the airborne are invariably features of art conceived as escape from mundane laws — baroque Ascensions, Gerard Dillon’s levitating ‘Sea Bed’; the poetry of departures, *l’adieu suprême des mouchoirs*, the infectious last (the long?), the ultimate goodbye of handkerchiefs as in old travel posters. (Who waves a Kleenex at a jumbo jet?) There’s a rich poetry of the nutrient earth, from Hesiod

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to Heaney, which anchors the flown kite, the hot-air balloon; but Yeats's 'lonely impulse of delight' remains central to the poetic enterprise, in its romantic guise at least. 'Intermediate in nature between land and sky' (Thoreau), like Walden Pond itself — 'sky-water', crowded with clouds — seaplanes are even more romantic than biplanes. Open water, which 'unsettles the principle of horizontality' (Joseph Brodsky), in this respect another kind of air, is chaotic, random, ungraspable; air and water, acting together, demonstrate the infinite ramifications and subtleties of existence. Does the splash of the inorganic as it strikes a tranquil surface represent an affront, or does water get a kick from the intrusion? What do the reeds think?