

## Dónal Gilhoys (1920 - 25 February 2012)

Dónal Gilhoys (he used *Gilhuys* in his earlier life) died on the 25<sup>th</sup> February 2012 at the age of 92, at Monasteraden, Co. Sligo. He is survived by his long-time friend and former partner Lina Postema.

Dónal was born in the Netherlands in 1920 to Dutch parents. His aunt lived in Dublin where she was married (hence his Irish name) and many childhood holidays were spent with her in Ireland. It was these early trips to Ireland that forged in Dónal a love of the landscape and country. It contrasted with the Nazi-occupied Amsterdam that he lived in during World War II, and which he recalled in his memoir *The Plane to Auschwitz* (Gilhoys 2007). On the arrival of liberating forces to the city, Dónal became a translator for the Canadian Army as he was bilingual. He moved to Ireland as a young man and lived in Dublin for about twenty-five years with his Dutch wife (they later separated), and ran a small shop in Blackrock. It was at this time that Dónal first discovered caving, as a consequence of his interest in mountaineering. He became friendly with Jack Coleman who soon became a significant influence and source of inspiration in his caving life. They caved together and it was Coleman who suggested to Dónal that he investigate caves in Mayo, a karst landscape which was at that time largely unexplored. Though close in age, Dónal considered Coleman a mentor and his untimely death in 1971 was a cause of great sadness. Dónal moved back to the Netherlands sometime around the late 1970s, but returned to Ireland in 1988 with his partner Lina Postema and lived in Sligo for the remainder of his life.

Dónal initially caved with the Irish Caving Club, contributing to their journal, *The Irish Caver*. He was a member of the Irish Speleological Association from the time of its establishment in 1966, becoming a stalwart of the club. He had several articles published in *Irish Speleology*, and was involved in the production of several of the earliest volumes. Dónal took part in organising an Irish caving expedition to Norway in 1973,

and on another occasion to Spain. In Ireland he caved from Cavan and Fermanagh in the north, to Kerry in the south. Some of Dónal's most important work was undertaken in Tipperary where he spearheaded the exploration of Pollskeheenarinky, taking it from several hundred metres of rift and chambers to a magnificent system 1.7 km in length. On the Mayo-Galway border he discovered many new caves including Pollnagot and Pollpuisín, as well as making a large extension to Pigeon Hole. In Leitrim and Sligo, Dónal led the exploration and recording of hundreds of small pots and karst features. In 1995, Dónal was involved in the discovery of human bones in Sramore Cave, Leitrim, which were radiocarbon dated to 4000 BC, making this one of the oldest burial sites in the country.

As a caver, Dónal was distinguished by his meticulous recording and publishing of cave features, especially those that were obscure or remote. His descriptions are remarkable for their precision, that of Lios Carrigeen, Tipperary, for example, beginning – *'The entrance is a small hole 60-80cm high, between rocks. A downward sandy crawl (60-90cm wide) and 60cm-1.2m high bordering on an unstable rocky boulder area on the west side, runs at an angle of 15-35° to the top of a 3.7m long rocky slope, which is 1.5m wide and 1.8m high at its highest (at the bottom)' (Irish Speleology 2.3, p.38)*. Following his death, his voluminous field notes and notebooks were transferred to the SUI library and contain a wealth of data for cavers and scholars to consult.

Dónal lived a long life and was actively exploring caves into his eighties, in later years accompanied everywhere by his beloved dog Cappi. An expression that he sometimes used was - 'In a cave, the mask comes off'. Certainly, caves were one of the places that Dónal was happiest and he made an important contribution to the sport in Ireland.

- P. Barry and M. Dowd