# COLUM McCANN

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *LET THE GREAT WORLD SPIN*
WINNER OF THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

# TransAtlantic

BLOOMSBURY

TransAtlantic

*by colum mccann*

TransAtlantic

Let the Great World Spin

Zoli

Dancer

Everything in This Country Must

This Side of Brightness

Songdogs

Fishing the Sloe-Black River

# COLUM McCANN

# TransAtlantic

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

First published in Great Britain 2013



*TransAtlantic* is a work of fiction. All incidents and dialogue, and all characters with the exception of some well-known historical and public figures, are products of the author's imagination. Where real-life historical or public figures appear, the situations, incidents and dialogues concerning those persons are fictional and are not intended to change the imagined nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.



Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP

www.bloomsbury.com

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 4088 2937 0
Trade paperback ISBN 978 1 4088 4126 6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Title page art © Getty images/Hulton archive
Book design by Barbara M. Bachman

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

*This novel is dedicated to Loretta Brennan Glucksman.*
*For Allison, and Isabella too.*
*And, of course, for Brendan Bourke.*

*The author wishes to thank the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation for a grant to help write and research this novel.*

No history is mute. No matter how much they own it, break it and lie about it, human history refuses to shut its mouth. Despite deafness and ignorance, the time that was continues to tick inside the time that is.

– EDUARDO GALEANO

# 2012

THE COTTAGE SAT AT THE EDGE OF THE LOUGH. SHE COULD HEAR the wind and rain whipping across the expanse of open water: it hit the trees and muscled its way into the grass.

She began to wake early in the morning, even before the children. It was a house worth listening to. Odd sounds from the roof. She thought, at first, that it might be rats scuttling across the slate, but she soon discovered that it was the gulls flying overhead, dropping oysters on the roof to break the shells open. It happened mostly in the morning, sometimes at dusk.

The shells pinged first, silent a moment as they bounced, followed by a jingling roll along the roof until they tumbled down into the long grass, spotted with whitewash.

When a shell tip hit directly, it cracked open, but if it dropped sideways through the sky it wouldn't break: it lay there like a thing unexploded.

The gulls swooped, acrobatic, upon the broken shells. Their hunger briefly solved, they flapped off towards the water once more, in squadrons of blue and grey.

Soon the rooms began to stir, the opening of windows, cupboards and doors, the wind off the lough moving through the house.

# Book One

1919

# *c l o u d s h a d o w*

IT WAS A MODIFIED BOMBER. A VICKERS VIMY. ALL WOOD AND LINEN and wire. She was wide and lumbering, but Alcock still thought her a nippy little thing. He patted her each time he climbed onboard and slid into the cockpit beside Brown. One smooth motion of his body. Hand on the throttle, feet on the rudder bar, he could already feel himself aloft.

What he liked most of all was rising up over the clouds and then flying in clean sunlight. He could lean out over the edge and see the shadowshift on the whiteness below, expanding and contracting on the surface of the clouds.

Brown, the navigator, was more reserved – it embarrassed him to make such a fuss. He sat forwards in the cockpit, keen on what clues the machine might give. He knew how to intuit the shape of the wind, yet he put his faith in what he could actually touch: the compasses, the charts, the spirit level tucked down at his feet.

IT WAS THAT time of the century when the idea of a gentleman had almost become myth. The Great War had concussed the world. The unbearable news of sixteen million deaths rolled off the great metal drums of the newspapers. Europe was a crucible of bones.

Alcock had piloted air-service fighters. Small bombs fell away from the undercarriage of his plane. A sudden lightness to the machine. A kick upwards into the night. He leaned out from his open cockpit and watched the mushroom of smoke rise below. His plane levelled out and turned towards home. At times like that, Alcock craved anonymity. He flew in the dark, his plane open to the stars. Then an airfield would appear below, the razor wire illuminated like the altar of a strange church.

Brown had flown reconnaissance. He had a knack for the mathematics of flight. He could turn any sky into a series of numbers. Even on the ground he went on calculating, figuring out new ways to guide his planes home.

BOTH MEN KNEW exactly what it meant to be shot down.

The Turks caught Jack Alcock on a long-range bombing raid over Suvla Bay and pierced the plane with machine-gun fire, knocked off his port propeller. He and his two crewmen ditched at sea, swam to shore. They were marched naked to where the Turks had set up rows of little wooden cages for prisoners of war. Open to the weather. There was a Welshman beside him who had a map of the constellations, so Alcock practised his navigation skills, stuck out under the nailheaded Turkish night: just one glance at the sky and he could tell exactly what time it was. Yet what Alcock wanted more than anything was to tinker with an engine. When he was moved to a detention

camp in Kedos, he swapped his Red Cross chocolate for a dynamo, traded his shampoo for tractor parts, built a row of makeshift fans out of scrap wire, bamboo, bolts, batteries.

Teddy Brown, too, had become a prisoner of war, forced to land in France while out on photographic reconnaissance. A bullet shattered his leg. Another ruptured the fuel tank. On the way down he threw out his camera, tore up his charts, scattered the pieces. He and his pilot slid their B.E.2c into a muddy wheatfield, cut the engine, held their hands up. The enemy came running out of the forest to drag them from the wreck. Brown could smell petrol leaking from the tanks. One of the Krauts had a lit cigarette in his lips. Brown was known for his reserve. *Excuse me,* he called out, but the German kept coming forwards, the cigarette flaring. *Nein, nein.* A little cloud of smoke came from the German's mouth. Brown's pilot finally lifted his arms and roared: *For fucksake, stop!*

The German paused in midstride, tilted his head back, paused, swallowed the burning cigarette, ran towards the airmen again.

It was something that made Brown's son, Buster, laugh when he heard the story just before he, too, went to war, twenty years later. *Excuse me. Nein, nein.* As if the German had only the flap-end of his shirt sticking out, or had somehow neglected to tie his shoelace properly.

BROWN WAS SHIPPED home before the armistice, then lost his hat high in the air over Piccadilly Circus. The girls wore red lipstick. The hems of their dresses rose almost to their knees. He wandered along the Thames, followed the river until it crawled upwards to the sky.

Alcock didn't make it back to London until December. He watched men in black suits and bowler hats pick their way amid the rubble. He joined in a game of football in an alley off the Pimlico Road, knocking

a round pigskin back and forth. But he could already sense himself aloft again. He lit a cigarette, watched the smoke curl high and away.

WHEN THEY MET for the first time in the Vickers factory in Brooklands, in early 1919, Alcock and Brown took one look at each other and it was immediately understood that they both needed a clean slate. The obliteration of memory. The creation of a new moment, raw, dynamic, warless. It was as if they wanted to take their older bodies and put their younger hearts inside. They didn't want to remember the bombs that had dudded out, or the crash or burn, or the cell blocks they had been locked into, or what species of abyss they had seen in the dark.

Instead they talked about the Vickers Vimy. A nippy little thing.

THE PREVAILING WINDS blew east from Newfoundland, pushing hard and fast across the Atlantic. Eighteen hundred miles of ocean.

The men came by ship from England, rented rooms in the Cochrane Hotel, waited for the Vimy to arrive at the docks. It came boxed in forty-seven large wooden crates. Late spring. A whip of frost still in the air. Alcock and Brown hired a crew to drag the crates up from the harbour. They strapped the boxes to horses and carts, assembled the plane in the field.

The meadow sat on the outskirts of St John's, on a half-hill, with a level surface of three hundred yards, a swamp at one end and a pine forest at the other. Days of welding, soldering, sanding, stitching. The bomb bays were replaced by extra petrol tanks. That's what pleased Brown the most. They were using the bomber in a brand-new way: taking the war out of the plane, stripping the whole thing of its penchant for carnage.

To level out the meadow, they crimped blasting caps to fuses, shattered boulders with dynamite, levelled walls and fences, removed hillocks. It was summertime but still there was a chill in the air. Flocks of birds moved fluidly across the sky.

After fourteen days the field was ready. To most people it was simply another patch of land, but to the two pilots it was a fabulous aerodrome. They paced the grass runway, watched the breeze in the trees, looked for clues in the weather.

CROWDS OF RUBBERNECKERS flocked to see the Vimy. Some had never ridden in a motorcar, let alone seen a plane before. From a distance it looked as if it had borrowed its design from a form of dragonfly. It was 42.7 feet long, 15.25 feet high, with a wingspan of 68 feet. It weighed 13,000 pounds when the 870 gallons of petrol and the 40 gallons of oil were loaded. Eleven pounds per square foot. The cloth framework had thousands of individual stitches. The bomb spaces were replaced by enough fuel for 30 hours of flying. It had a maximum speed of 103 miles per hour, not counting the wind, a cruising speed of 90 mph and a landing speed of 45 mph. There were two water-cooled Rolls-Royce Eagle VIII engines of 360 horsepower and a turnover rate of 1,080 revs per minute, with twelve cylinders in two banks of six, each engine driving a four-bladed wooden propeller.

The onlookers ran their hands along the struts, tapped the steel, pinged the taut linen of the wings with their umbrellas. Kids crayoned their names on the underside of the fuselage.

Photographers pulled black hoods over their lenses. Alcock mugged for the camera, shaded his hand to his eyes like an ancient explorer. *Tally-ho!* he shouted, before jumping the nine feet to the wet grass below.

THE NEWSPAPERS SAID anything was possible now. The world was made tiny. The League of Nations was being formed in Paris.

W. E. B. Du Bois convened the Pan-African Congress with delegates from fifteen countries. Jazz records could be heard in Rome. Radio enthusiasts used vacuum tubes to transmit signals hundreds of miles. Some day soon it might be possible to read the daily edition of the *San Francisco Examiner* in Edinburgh or Salzburg or Sydney or Stockholm.

In London, Lord Northcliffe of the *Daily Mail* had offered £10,000 to the first men to land on one side of the Atlantic or the other. At least four other teams wanted to try. Hawker and Grieve had already crashed into the water. Others, like Brackley and Kerr, were positioned in airfields along the coast, waiting for the weather to turn. The flight had to be done in seventy-two hours. Nonstop.

There were rumours of a rich Texan who wanted to try, and a Hungarian prince and, worst of all, a German from the Luftstreitkräfte who had specialized in long-range bombing during the war.

The features editor of the *Daily Mail*, a junior of Lord Northcliffe's, was said to have developed an ulcer thinking about a possible German victory.

– A Kraut! A bloody Kraut! God save us!

He dispatched reporters to find out if it was possible that the enemy, even after defeat, could possibly be ahead in the race.

On Fleet Street, down at the stone, where the hot type was laid, he paced back and forth, working the prospective headlines over and over. On the inside of his jacket his wife had stitched a Union Jack, which he rubbed like a prayer cloth.

– Come on boys, he muttered to himself. Hup two. On home now, back to Blighty.

EVERY MORNING THE two airmen woke in the Cochrane Hotel, had their breakfast of porridge, eggs, bacon, toast. Then they drove through the steep streets, out the Forest Road, towards a field of grass sleeved with ice. The wind blew bitter blasts off the sea. They rigged wires into their flight suits so they could run warmth from a battery, and they stitched extra fur on the inside flaps of their helmets, their gloves, their boots.

A week went by. Two weeks. The weather held them back. Cloud. Storm. Forecast. Every morning the men made sure they were carefully shaved. A ritual they performed at the far end of the field. They set up a steel washbasin under a canvas tent with a little gas burner to heat the water. A metal hubcap was used as a mirror. They put razor blades in their flight kits for when they landed: they wanted to make sure that if they were to arrive in Ireland, they would be fresh, decently shaved, presentable members of Empire.

In the lengthening June evenings, they fixed their ties, sat under the wingtips of the Vimy and spoke eloquently to the Canadian, American and British reporters who gathered for the flight.

Alcock was twenty-six years old. From Manchester. He was lean, handsome, daring, the sort of man who looked straight ahead but stayed open to laughter. He had a head of ginger hair. A single man, he said he loved women but preferred engines. Nothing pleased him more than to pull apart the guts of a Rolls-Royce, then put her back together again. He shared his sandwiches with the reporters: often there was a thumbprint of oil on the bread.

Brown sat on the wooden crates alongside Alcock. He already seemed old at thirty-two. His bum leg forced him to carry a walking stick. He had been born in Scotland, but raised near Manchester. His parents were American and he had a slight Yankee accent that he

cultivated as best he could. He thought of himself as a man of the mid-Atlantic. He read the antiwar poetry of Aristophanes and admitted to the idea that he would happily live in constant flight. He was solitary but did not enjoy loneliness. Some said he looked like a vicar, but his eyes flared a far blue, and he had recently got engaged to a young beauty from London. He wrote Kathleen love letters, telling her that he wouldn't mind throwing his walking stick at the stars.

– Good God, said Alcock, you really told her that?

– I did, yes.

– And what did she say?

– Said I could lose the walking stick.

– Ah! Smitten.

At the press briefings, Alcock took the helm. Brown navigated the silence by fiddling with his tie clip. He kept a flask of brandy in his inside pocket. Occasionally he turned away, opened the flap of his tunic, took a nip.

Alcock drank, too, but loudly, publicly, happily. He rested against the bar in the Cochrane Hotel and sang *Rule, Britannia* in a voice so out of tune that it was loaded with whimsy.

The locals – fishermen mostly, a few lumberjacks – banged on the wooden tables and sang songs about loved ones lost at sea.

The singing went on late into the night, long after Alcock and Brown had gone to bed. Even from the fourth floor they could hear sad rhythms breaking into waves of laughter and then, later still, the *Maple Leaf Rag* hammered out on a piano.

*Oh go 'way man*
*I can hypnotize dis nation*
*I can shake de earth's foundation*
*with the Maple Leaf Rag*