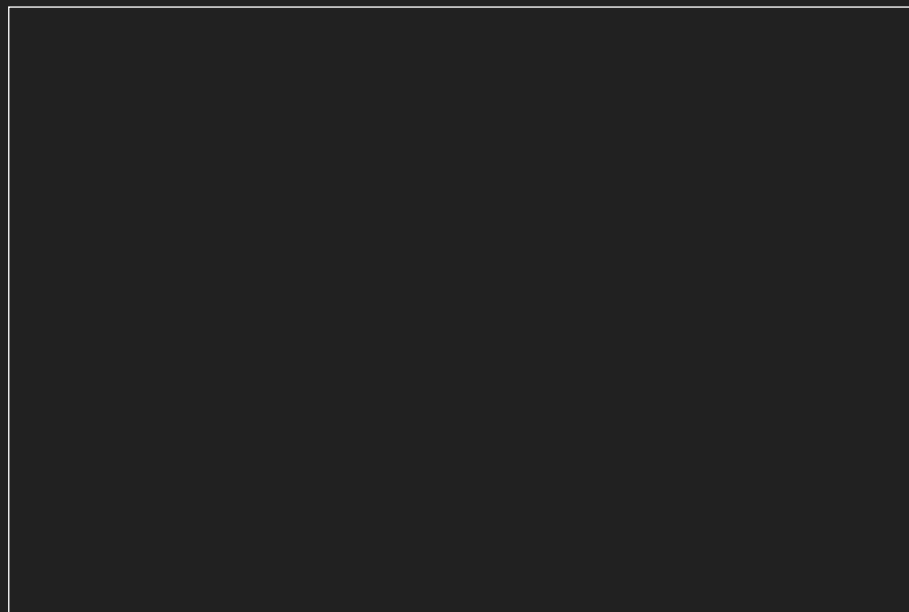


LILIAN BLAND

Re-Imagined

Carol Moore, Gwen Stevenson & Melissa Mitchell



Flying

Lilian Bland

Re-Imagined

Written by Carol Moore

Lilian Bland was the first woman in the world to design, build and fly an aeroplane, the "Mayfly" in 1910 in Randalstown, Co. Antrim.

The Western Morning News was a daily regional newspaper founded in 1860, and covering Devon, Cornwall and parts of Somerset and Dorset. The article titled "A Woman Air Pioneer" by Frank Ruhmund, can be found at the website:
<http://www.lilianbland.ie/>.

Based on the above newspaper interview which Lilian Bland gave on Tuesday 8th February, 1966, Carol Moore has re-imagined Lilian looking back on her life from her home in Cornwall.

We hope Lilian inspires you to challenge convention and to break down barriers.



Adventurer
Equestrian
Artist
Journalist
Photographer
Engineer
Aviator
Entrepreneur
Pioneer
Mother

A woman with dark hair is shown in profile, looking out a window. She is wearing a dark, textured jacket and white gloves. She is holding a white teacup and saucer. The lighting is soft, coming from the window, highlighting her face and the texture of her clothing.

Dreamer

A person who dreams or is dreaming.

'The dreamer, the visionary seer, not only sees, but does something, makes something.'

First thing in the morning, I do love to sit with a cup of coffee, peek out on my garden to see what's in bloom and what I might paint mid-afternoon, but not before getting down to the serious business of picking my horses for the day's accumulator. Usually Irish bred and outsiders, I have to say I'm jolly good at it and a seasoned gambler at the tender age of 86. Of course, I've loved horses from a young girl and before I moved here to Cornwall, I very much depended on them for my livelihood. In April 1912, aged 34, I had decided on a new adventure, (well I suppose I've always been impulsive) and left Carnmoney in County Antrim for Quatsino Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island. And an adventure it certainly was, beginning a new life with my husband and cousin, Charles Bland, in a log cabin in the middle of nowhere and surrounded by a forest and 200 felled trees. Well Charles was a lumber jack, so the location made perfect sense. After the initial shock, I knuckled down to life as a pioneer settler and I'm pleased to say that all my mechanical skills from tinkering with car engines to building my biplane, all stood me in great stead as I established a farm that would be self-supporting for us.

Being born into the wealthy Anglo-Irish, Bland family, on September 28th 1878, this new life was a long way from the typical Edwardian family home of Willington House near Maidstone, Kent. Or maybe not so far, since settling for the life of a society lady held no interest for me. I took to horse riding early on, not the ridiculous custom of women riding side-saddle, but straddling them. Indeed, I dreamed of riding in the Grand National one day and applied for a jockey's license but was unceremoniously turned down. I learnt to be a fine shot and enjoyed fishing, so the outdoors was a world I felt very comfortable in; still do. By the age of 20 I had journeyed across Europe, studying music in Rome and art in Paris. No surprises there, as my father John Humphrey Bland, was an established artist and had himself studied in Paris. But the reality was actually a complex set of rules that governed all aspects of our lives at that time, especially for women, making me feel I needed to escape the straitjacket of many restrictive social norms.



Having or showing creativity or inventiveness.

"It's imaginative, yet grounded in the real world."

Imaginative

I wanted to be self-sufficient, earn my keep and make my own way in the world, whilst at the same time watching my mother fade away and die from a long illness. My father then decided we should return to Ireland to live with his widowed sister, Aunt Sarah, at Tobercooran House in 1900. By 1903, I was a professional journalist for certain Irish newspapers and London magazines and established myself as one of the first female press photographers. Nothing gave me more pleasure, than combining my pleasure of photography with my two other hobbies, horse and car racing. Capturing a photo at a notoriously dangerous jump or corner, where one always anticipated the potential high drama of an accident at speed, it proved a heady mix to see humans exercise such skill and dexterity without apparent fear. And it was also using my camera to photograph birds in Scotland that gave me the sudden impulse to one day fly.

It was the summer of 1908 when I was holidaying at the home of my friends, the Blackburn's. Each morning their daughter and I took the opportunity to leave at dawn and row across Loch Moidart, to spend the day capturing Great Black-backed Gulls in flight. I was mesmerised by their ability to wheel and soar. Their streamlined shape allowed the air to flow across their surface smoothly and an enlarged breastbone, helped with the force of thrust and propulsion needed for flying. Of course, I then discovered the Wright Brothers had reached the very same conclusion five years before and on the morning of December 17, 1903, Orville Wright took flight and soared into the air covering a distance of 120 feet. Of course, I should add that history books today are contesting their accolade as the first to fly, but that's a longer story that maybe I'll keep for my memoirs, if ever I get the time.

Back in County Antrim and walking the Carnmoney Hill almost daily, I shared my thoughts about birds in flight with Joe Blain, my aunt's gardener, also a keen outdoors person like myself. It was a full year since my Scottish trip that I received a postcard from my Uncle Robert in France. It was a picture of Louis Blériot's monoplane, Bleriot X1, celebrating his flight across the English Channel that July and importantly

Creative



Relating to or involving the use of the imagination or original ideas to create something.

"Any activity becomes creative when the doer cares about doing it right."

containing the dimensions of the plane. Pencil and ruler in hand I was already drawing simple designs.

Then came a perfect opportunity to see a number of English machines in person. It was the very First Blackpool Aviation Meet, held between the 18th – 23rd October, 1909 and I took the opportunity to take and record measurements, dimensions and design structures from as many planes as I could. I concluded quite quickly that English machines were too small, as were their motor bike engines and the tyre fabric laced across the wings, most unsuitable. Back home in my late uncle's workshop at Tobarcorran House, I wasted no time in formulating my own design, building a 6ft span model biplane glider and which, with Joe's help I successfully flew under tow on Carnmoney Hill.

During the winter of 1909, I made excellent progress constructing a full-size glider with a wingspan of 27ft 7 ins, a main frame made of ash, the ribs from sugar pine, a soft wood that could be steamed to form a curve. Of course, by now it was too big for the workshop and we moved it to the coach house to assemble. The airplane frame was then covered with unbleached calico and my own concoction of formalin and gelatine, which fixes and hardens when mixed together, making it both light and waterproof. Naturally there were many, many other parts to the design, but I imagine your readers would be bored with such precise details, so I won't discuss it here. Suffice to say the machine weighed 200lbs at this point and I christened it Mayfly, as in, it 'may' or 'may not' fly. I shouldn't have worried. The first tests under tow in February, 1910, proved it did successfully fly and in fact it proved that it was rather difficult keeping it on the ground.

I had always intended the Mayfly would accommodate an engine, so it had to be stronger and heavier than the glider design. From May there was no doubt it would be able to lift both a pilot and an engine as witnessed by Joe, myself and four members of the Royal Irish Constabulary. I had instructed them to hold on to the wings at the



Having the ability to create or design new things or to think originally

"She learned to be inventive with the most unpromising of materials."

corners, while Joe held the tow rope, but when it suddenly left the ground of its own accord, the four constables let go, leaving Joe to single-handedly bring it back to earth. I had instructed the Manchester firm, A. V. Roe to make a two-stroke engine at a cost of £100 which would be attached on an American elm mounting, but frustrated by the delay, I took the ferry to acquire it and brought it back myself. Still awaiting a petrol tank but eager to test the engine, I improvised with a whiskey bottle, which fed the fuel to the carburettor via dear Aunt Sarah's ear trumpet. With most of petrol pouring out, it flew momentarily before stopping, but at least it worked. When the new petrol tank arrived and with further modifications and reconstruction, including new Palmer tyres, the Mayfly now weighed 526lbs.

To really test the machine, I needed a flat field and took up Lord O'Neill's offer to use his deer park on his estate at Randalstown, near Antrim. The dreadful August weather delayed our inaugural flight, but on a calm day on August 31st, 1910, the Mayfly left the ground and flew 30ft. For the next six months up until February, 1911, I continued adapting the design. Excited by my plans, including extending the wingspan to 30ft, I placed an advertisement in Flight magazine, offering 'Irish Biplanes, from £250 without engine'.

The truth is that building planes is very costly and I lacked the resources to move my designs forward. Anyway, my father thought that I might kill myself if I suddenly dropped from the sky and encouraged me back to earth with a 20hp Ford T car that I collected from Dublin. A driver was instructed to drive me back, but my usual curiosity took over and I insisted I take over. How hard could it be, I thought. After all I was the first woman in the world to design, build and fly my own biplane. I did go on to take out a sub-agency for Ford T cars in Belfast for a short time, but then Ontario beckoned, and I was onto my next adventure. I was blessed with a daughter Patricia, but after her death in 1929 of a tetanus infection, aged 16, I became unhappy and discontented, returning to England in 1935 and eventually settling down in beautiful Cornwall.

Inventive



Persistent

Continuing firmly or obstinately in an opinion or course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition.

"A most annoyingly persistent woman"

Resourceful

Having the ability to find quick and clever ways to overcome difficulties.

"I enclose two photos of my biplane, the "Mayfly". I made her entirely myself, with the exception of the metal clips, and of course the sockets, strainers etc., were bought from English first. I think she is the first biplane made in Ireland... Today I had three men to assist me, two of them knew nothing about it, and she ran the rope through their hands and soared up 20 ft before anyone was prepared. Fortunately, the third man and myself had hold of a long rope, which saved the situation, in fact we got the machine soaring beautifully..."





"When the engine starts, the draught from the propellor lifts the tail and the tip of the skids off the ground, and the machine balances on the two wheels; the third wheel in front only comes into action over rough ground, and to prevent the machine from going on her nose; it answers the purpose admirably..."

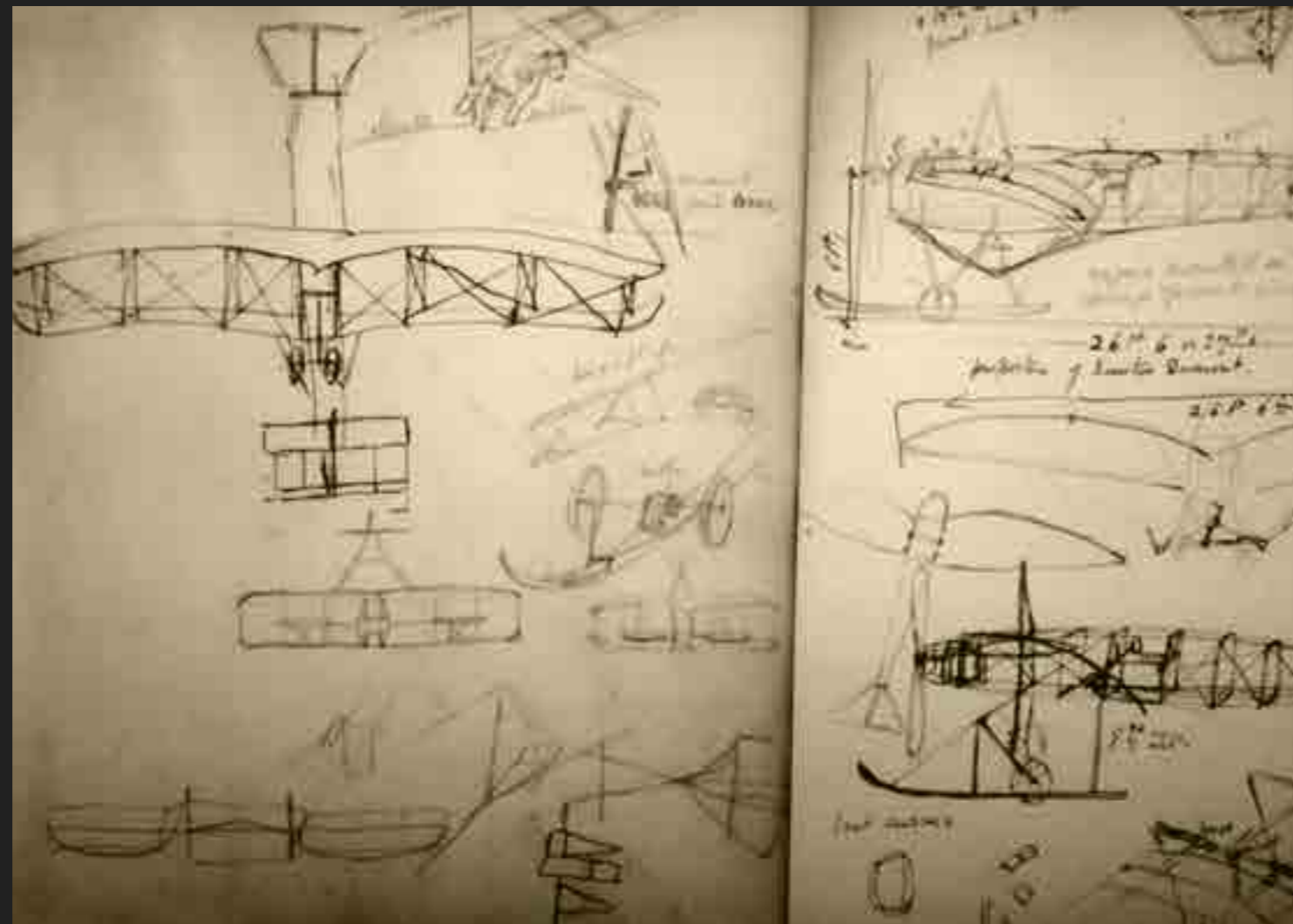


Unconventional

Not based on or conforming to what is generally done or believed.

Curious

Eager to know or learn something.



Lilian travelled alone to Manchester to collect her engine from A. V. Roe. On the train home two passengers asked the purpose of her baggage. "To make an aeroplane." she replied. "What is an aeroplane?" was the response.



"I have seen them fly, and looked over all the flying machines; they are all made very much the same way and they looked smaller than I expected... The few English machines are, I imagine, no good – much too small and fitted with motor-bike engines... most of them are covered with tyre fabric, lashed on like lace boots sewn or tacked... the wheels are on castors with small sprigs."

Strong

Able to withstand force, pressure, or wear.



"I had proved wrong, the many people who had said that no woman could build an aeroplane and that gave me great satisfaction."



When Lilian moved the "Mayfly" onto Lord O'Neill's estate, the field was also the home of a bull. Lilian wrote: "If it gets annoyed and charges, I shall have every inducement to fly!"





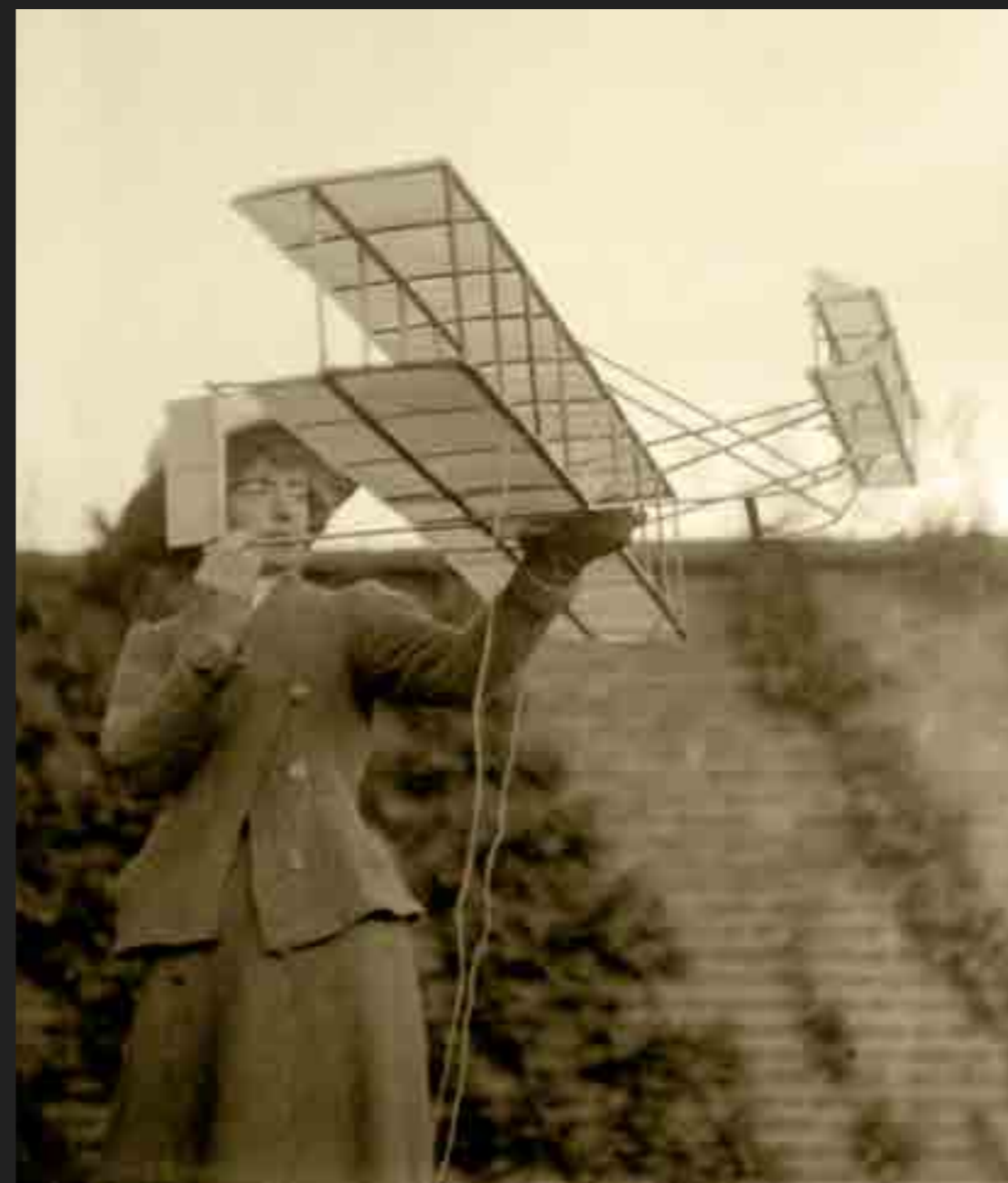
lilianbland.ie

The lilianbland.ie website is a project started by Madeleine O'Rourke in order to compile all the available material about Lilian in one place. The site is being developed as a tribute to Lilian's memory and to her achievements.

Colm O'Rourke has kindly granted permission to reprint these images. We hope you enjoy them.













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GWEN STEVENSON

Artist

Phone : +00 44 785 174 0306

Website : www.gwenstevenson.com

Mail : gwen@gwenstevenson.com

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Onwards and Upwards

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