

Alfred Rohu interviewed on
Radio Éireann 1943. I was allowed to
listen to it in Headmaster's house,
Preston School, Navan, when I was there
in boarding school aged 10.

MR ALFRED ROHU.

L.M. : I have here, as our Personality of the week, Mr Alfred Rohu. You've probably been reading about Mr Rohu in the newspapers, for he and his wife have this week been celebrating their golden wedding. Mr Rohu is a remarkable man. He is eighty-three years of age, has been fifty years in the same business in Dublin, and goes to his shop at 9.30 every morning, as regularly as clockwork. He has travelled extensively and was for a time head of the Natural History section of the Museum at La Plata, near Buenos Aires.....Where exactly were you born, Mr Rohu?

A.R. I was born on Achill Island almost eighty-three years ago. My father was stationed there as an officer in the Coast Guard Service.

A. I was wondering about the name. Rohu....R---O---H---U. It doesn't sound very much like the sort of name you'd get on Achill..

A.R. As a matter of fact, my family comes from Brittany in Northern France. There's a branch of the Rohu family still living at Carnac.

LM. That sounds like the Huguenots to me.

A.R. You're quite right.....There's a family story that my grandfather

LM. That certainly has a romantic flavour.....Incidentally, Mr Rohu, how did you come to Dublin from Achill? I take it that must have been a long time ago?

A.R. It's a matter of well over seventy years.....Where my father was stationed was one of the wildest parts of the country. My mother used to tell me that during the stormy weather in winter sometimes there would be sand half way up the chimney.....It so happened that among our visitors one year was the famous Captain Neil Boyder. You remember him as the hero of the statue on the front at Dun Laoghaire.

LM. Wasn't he afterwards drowned in an heroic attempt at life-saving during a heavy storm in Dublin Bay?

A.R. That's the man..... It was thanks to him that my father was transferred from Achill to Malahide in County Dublin.

LM. Mr. Rohu -- just how did you begin to earn your living?

A.R. Strangely enough, I began work as a clerk in a lawyer's office. Then I went to Figgot's music show-rooms and then to Cramer Wood. But always at the back of my mind I had the idea of becoming a naturalist of some sort. Even as a schoolboy I used to spend most of my spare time

skinning out specimens of birds and small animals and working them up into models. Then when I grew up I naturally became more adept at it. In fact I became so good ~~xxxx~~ that even my father praised my work. I remember

one day being challenged by one of my brothers. That was while I was still in the music-shop. Said my brother to me, 'You'll never be a naturalist!'

LM. And so you took up the challenge?

A.R. I took up the challenge.....I looked round me for something to stuff ---something which no one had ever successfully stuffed before. Other people, I knew, had stuffed the eyes of fish.....Caterpillars were simple enough.....What, then, was I to stuff? At length I had a brain-wave..... I'd stuff a common garden snail.

LM. Horns and all?

A.R. Horns and all.....As far as I knew at that time I was the only person to have succeeded in doing it. It took me three attempts before I brought

LM. You must have been extremely proud. Did you exhibit it anywhere?

A.R. I ~~regarded~~ exhibited it at the famous Cork Exhibition of 1882 ---- exactly sixty years ago.....But the people wouldn't believe it- quite. Even if they didn't say as much, they regarded it as a fake, I think. Certainly they were highly sceptical of it.

LM. Well, I certainly must congratulate you as being, in all probability, the first man in the world to stuff a snail -- horns and all.

AR. That's as far as I know.

LM. And I suppose from that moment you turned your back on the music-shop?

A.R. I did.....You see I was anxious to travel in order to promote what I believed was my own particular genius for Natural History. I wanted to get away into some foreign country where there were plenty of tropical birds and beasts and butterflies --- a sort of naturalist's heaven on earth.

LM. And where did you decide to go to?

A.R. I made up my mind to go to somewhere -- almost anywhere -- in South America. And so, without a job or friends to welcome me, I sailed for Buenos Aires. What was even more important, alas! was the fact that I hadn't even a single word of Spanish.

LM. That certainly was very brave of you.

A.R. I don't think I realised it at the time, but I suppose it must have been -- especially my having no Spanish. But luck was on my side.

LM. And how was that?

A.R. On board the ship I made friends with a highly influential Englishman -- a Mr Harman, who was going out to manage a gold mine in the Argentine. He seemed to be very impressed with my audacity or courage or whatever you like to call it. He was so much impressed, indeed, that he even offered me a good job on his gold-mine. And then he discovered that I knew no Spanish, and that was the end of that..... On the way out
Santos

small birds and a few lizards..... Later on, I treated Mr Harman and a number of his friends in my cabin to the sight of my skinning and ^{preserving} stuffing them. They were astonished, and very soon my name went round the wharf.

LM. I shouldn't wonder.

A.R. Eventually we reached Buenos Aires. As I told you, I had neither friends to go to nor a job. Quite by accident I ran into Mr Harman again. He introduced me to a Mr Gibson, a big estancia owner, who told me the glad news that anything in the way of animals or birds shot in the Argentine had to be sent to London if they wanted them stuffed. Thanks to Mr Gibson, I got letters of introductions to the Directors of the Museums at both Buenos Aires and La Plata, about sixty miles away.

LM. And what happened?

A.R. Well, there was nothing doing at Buenos Aires -- for lack of funds-- and so I made my way up to La Plata..... La Plata at this time was a very small place. Even so they had a museum and were just finishing building a second one when I arrived.

LM. I suppose La Plata with its two museums couldn't have been much ^{small Irish} bigger than most/provincial towns?

A.R. As a matter of fact it was much smaller.....Well, when I arrived they were moving the specimens and exhibits from the old museum to the new. I thought I'd look on for a bit and see what their stock was like before presenting my letter of introduction to the Director. Naturally enough, I was particularly interested in their stuffed animals and birds, most of which were very badly stuffed indeed. I remember saying to myself as I watched them, 'What rotten work! If only I got a chance of doing the job I'd almost do it for nothing!' At length, a busy little man in spectacles and looking like a professor came out, whom I at once spotted as the Director. Luckily for me, He spoke English well and soon we were deep in conversation. He told me, unfortunately, that he'd no work for me, but that perhaps I'd accompany him in his carriage as far as the new Museum.

LM. Which, of course, you did?

A.R. It was a beautiful building -- but I soon discovered faults in it -- especially in the way they were arranging their Natural History exhibits. I think the Director was a little bit taken aback at my criticisms. At length I said to him, 'But where are your fish and reptiles?' To my surprise, he told me that they had NO Fish or Reptiles in their collection ---- for the simple reason that their taxidermist couldn't stuff them!

LM. I bet you had something to say to that?

A.R. Of course I, as a self-taught taxidermist, was an all-round hand. In a flash I had whipped out of my jacket pocket -- what do you think?

LM. Don't tell me it was your old friend the stuffed snail?

A.R. Indeed it was - horns and all. At first the Director wouldn't believe that it wasn't artificial. As he put it in Spanish, it was 'Impossible.' However, I saw by the look in his eyes that I'd bowled him over and that I was as good as employed.....Which I was.

LM. And how ^{long} did you stay in the Argentine, Mr. Rohu?

A.R. Only about two years, when I went down, first with cholera and then with enteric fever. On doctor's ^{ADVICE} I came home to Ireland.

LM. And started up as a taxidermist and furrier?

A.R. That was fifty years ago ---at No. Seven what was then Great Brunswick-street.

LM. And this week you and your charming wife have been celebrating your Golden Wedding.....I suppose that must have caused no end of a thrill among the family connections?

A.R. Not at all....I'm afraid they're quite used to that sort of thing in our family?

LM. Used to Golden Weddings?

A.R. If you must ~~xxx~~ know, ours was the fourth Golden Wedding in the family. My father and mother and my three brothers all had Golden Weddings.

LM. Well, don't ask me if that's a record. I shouldn't be surprised if it were. In the meantime, Mr Rohu, would you like to pay a tribute to your wife.

A.R. I'd like to say -- as I've said before, this week -- that she's the tugboat that has drawn me safely into harbour, and may God bless and keep her!

LM. And may I, too, say God bless and keep her.....Thank you, Mr Rohu, and you, Mrs Rohu, for bringing this grand little man safely into harbour. Good night to you!