

Anniversary Profiles Liam O'Neill, Member #481



What motivated you to join the fledgling AAW?

I founded the world's first national turning organization [The Irish Woodturners Guild](#) in 1983. The officers of the IWG were all at Arrowmont in '86 to encourage the formation of the AAW.

When you look at your pieces from 1986, what do you see?

I see a huge love of wood as a material. Simple shapes are best where this natural beauty is concerned. I am still reluctant to move far from that philosophy.

If you could give your 30-years younger self some advice about being a turner what would you say?

Try and keep the ego under control. Let the quality of the work and the skill of your teaching do the talking.

Who or what was your greatest teacher?

John E. Shiel, who started it all by giving me an apprenticeship in 1968.



In the thirty weeks leading up to AAW's 30th Anniversary Symposium in Atlanta, we will be sharing the stories of members who joined in 1986 and are still members today. We hope you enjoy their memories and insights!

Click [here](#) to read this and other profiles online.

About Liam O'Neill

When 19-year old Liam O'Neill stepped into John Sheil's woodturning shop in 1968, he had never seen a lathe before, let alone turned. He'd left school early, and was working at dead-end jobs when the apprenticeship changed the course of his life.

Sheil had trained in the mid-1960s with the Dutch designer Maria van Kesteren at the [Kilkenny Design Workshops](#) (KDW), a government-funded research and development center of excellence for design. Sheil's Bagenalstown turning business was one of a handful of Irish workshops supplying salad bowls and lamps, boxes and other accessories to discerning design-savvy customers in London and San Francisco.

Soon, the young apprentice was turning prototypes from designers' drawings and doing production pieces for some of the best designers of the era.



Bagenalstown, County Carlow, early 60s

What was your funniest turning moment?

Back in 1991 I was teaching a class at Arrowmont. An elderly student named Irving R--- arrived with a dry, hard log of end-grain ashwood. He announced that he was legally blind and only used a 1.5" wide round scraper. He had made a 1" deep hollow in the end of the log at a previous workshop. On day three, he decided to help things along by drilling into the log on the drill press using a 1.25" sawtooth Forstner-type bit. The table suddenly tilted sideways, he had his hand on top of the wood, so the bit caught his finger.

(Change of scenery) Just after lunch I am called by a very excited student. "Come quickly, Irving has cut the top off his finger!" I rush to the scene and there on the drill press table was a very neat bowl-shaped piece of the end of Irving's digit. As the ambulance was called, I ran to the kitchen and requested a cup of crushed ice. The kitchen staff nearly fainted when I told them what it was for. I handed the paramedics the cup of ice with its grisly contents, and that was that. The ambulance left.

I returned to the class and we all carried on. Before dinner I decided to give a bowl demonstration. The students crowded round outside on the porch of the old turning shop and we got to the part where I took a nice final cut to dress the curve of the inside of the bowl. "Feel that curve," I said proudly, "That's the way you want it." Suddenly, in from the side comes this bandaged hand to feel the curve. Irving was back. You could have knocked us all down with a feather.

Irving was also a poet. I was looking through a book of his poetry that he gave me at Arrowmont and thought this quatrain was pertinent to the interview question about advice, above. It goes as follows:

*How like a doctor I would be
Full of blatant dignity,
Self-possessed and so replete
With knowledge and my own conceit.*

What was your happiest turning moment?

It would have to be when I first got the pesky bevel riding smoothly.

After finishing his four-year apprenticeship, Liam developed and ran a woodworking program at Retos, a rehabilitation center for adults with disabilities in County Clare, while continuing to develop his own ideas and skills on the side.

Inspired by his attendance at the 1980 International Woodturning Symposium at Parnham House, Dorset, England, where he was exposed to the work of [David Ellsworth](#), [Richard Raffan](#), [Ray Key](#), and [Jim Partridge](#), among others, he organized the first Irish woodturning symposium in 1982. In 1983, funded by a craft scholarship, he set off for the United States, where he spent time with a veritable who's-who of US woodturners: [David Ellsworth](#), [Ed Moulthrop](#), [Rude Osolnik](#), [Al Stirt](#), [Dale Nish](#), [Mark](#) and [Mel Lindquist](#). It was, he remembers, a baptism of fire. After returning to Ireland, he co-founded the [Irish Woodturner's Guild](#), the first national non-profit organization dedicated to the advancement and promotion of woodturning, and open to turners of all abilities.

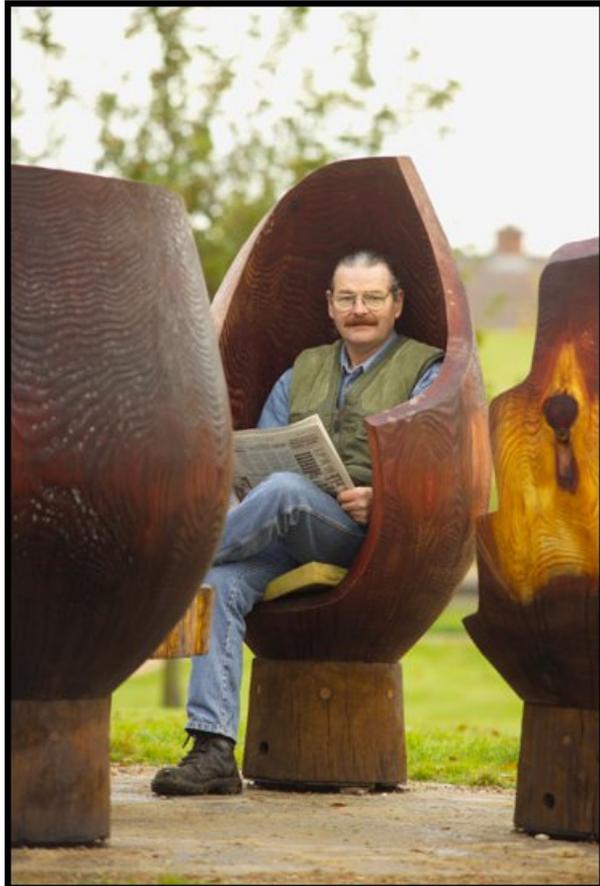
In 1992, Liam moved to Spiddal, Galway to concentrate on sculpture, and in 1997 designed and built a lathe for the large scale pieces he is well-known for today. He has taught and exhibited work in the U.S., Australia and Ireland, and has work in many private and public collections around the world.



Liam and Cathy, his wife of more than forty years, live in Spiddal. They enjoy time canoeing and camping with



Liam O'Neill demonstrating large scale turning at the [Figge Art Museum](#) in Davenport, Iowa, 2014. Below, this image gives a sense of the scale of his larger work.



This installation, *Conversation Circle*, was inspired by the area of the same name at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Tennessee. The seats are arranged to encourage relaxation, conversation, or meditation.



What is your favorite tool. and why?

I am proud of the fact that I authored the Irish-grind gouge concept. I saw Mick O'Donnell had ground his gouge back a little further at the sides than was

friends and family, and have enthusiastically imported the game of Mexican train dominoes, learned from friends in Arizona, to Ireland.

The O'Neills are active in the local Baptist church, where Liam is an elder. They have four adult children: Paul, an occasional woodturner and a musician in Galway; Niamh, a complementary healthcare practitioner, also in Galway; Eoghan, a mature student in Adelaide, Australia; and Niall, who is an IT specialist in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania. They have five grandchildren.

You can learn more about Llam O'Neill and his work on his [website](#).

Liam [presenting](#) on his work in 2014 to the Mid-Maryland Woodturners Club.



-Tib Shaw

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normal; I took it back a lot further and the rest is history. David Ellsworth was the first major US turner to adapt it to suit his own work. I am bemused nowadays when I visit the US clubs. There are hardly any straight across gouges available. The Irish grind has become the standard. Both grinds are useful.

What do you see as the biggest change in the field?

The sheer volume of new concepts and ideas which continue to enrich the craft of woodturning.

If you couldn't be a woodturner, what would you do instead?

I enjoy history. I am writing a historical novel based on the history of my native place.



This sculpture, Brothers, was commissioned to commemorate the Irish patriot brothers Padraic and Willie Pearse

Do you still have American Woodturner back issues? Where do you keep them?

They have pride of place on the bookshelves in my office.



Liam O'Neill. Untitled, 1986. Yew, 13" x 9.5". AAW Permanent Collection.

Has being a part of AAW affected your life and work? How?

The main benefit for me is the network of local chapters. It makes organizing teaching trips so easy. The general dissemination of knowledge, which is facilitated by being part of such a large network benefits every member.

What's your favorite project/piece?

My favourite piece of my own work is the walnut vessel used in the Irish peace process. While it is not the most beautiful piece that I ever turned, there are people alive today who may have been victims of the bomb or bullet if the peace deal had not been done.



The Peace Bowl

Liam O'Neill



Liam O'Neill stands on the battle site near where the tree once stood.

were treated as a fifth column of the Nationalist South.

In the late sixties, Catholics in Ulster began demanding civil rights and equal opportunities. The largely Protestant security forces attacked their marches and a thirty-year spiral of violence and retaliation led to 3,500 deaths.

Partition

Ireland has four provinces and three of them had Catholic nationalistic majorities. The province of Ulster, on the other hand, had a majority of Protestants who were determined to remain part of the United Kingdom. In the treaty negotiations that followed, Ireland was partitioned.

The government of the state that developed in Northern Ireland enjoyed a majority, but felt vulnerable to what they perceived as the nationalist threat.

By fair means or foul, they would ensure that the minority would never be in a position to change the status quo.

Meanwhile, in the 1960s in the United States the civil rights movement marched on Washington, DC, to hear Martin Luther King Jr. speak.

The Catholics of Northern Ireland took notice and formed their own civil rights movement. At the outset, most marchers wanted equal opportunities in housing, jobs, and politics—they were not at all interested in reuniting

A turned wood bowl. The Northern Ireland peace process. How are they related? Let me tell you. It all began in 2005 when Fergal Martin approached me. Martin was in charge of the battle of the Boyne site-restoration project and wanted to know if I would come to Oldbridge House and have a look at a remarkable walnut tree. The tree would have been forty years old when the battle was fought in 1690. Its roots had become diseased and the wind blew it over during the winter of 2004. I was subsequently commissioned to make a number of pieces from the wood and I elected to turn hollow vessels. I kept one particularly beautiful piece aside for a special purpose.

Brief historical background

The Ulster question has bedeviled Irish-British relations since the final defeat of the last standing Irish army at the River Boyne in 1690.

The protestant British King William of Orange set a process in motion that led to Catholic Ireland being governed by a Protestant ascendancy.

In 1922, following a war of independence, twenty-six of the thirty-two counties were granted independence.

A separate state was set up in Ulster and retained as part of the United Kingdom to accommodate the largely Protestant majority who lived there. A significant Catholic minority found themselves cut off and second-class citizens in a state where they

Click [here](#) to read about the Peace Bowl

Favorite piece turned by another artist?

One of my favorite pieces of other people's work is the maple burl hollow vessel by David Ellsworth from 1985. Words are superfluous.



David Ellsworth. Bowl, 1985. Broadleaf maple burl. High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia. From the exhibition, "Committed to Craft: Martha and Pat Connell"

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