

Fascinating insight into the life of someone who cares



Spirorbis

Peter Vine
Artisan House, €22.50

Review:

Tina Neylon

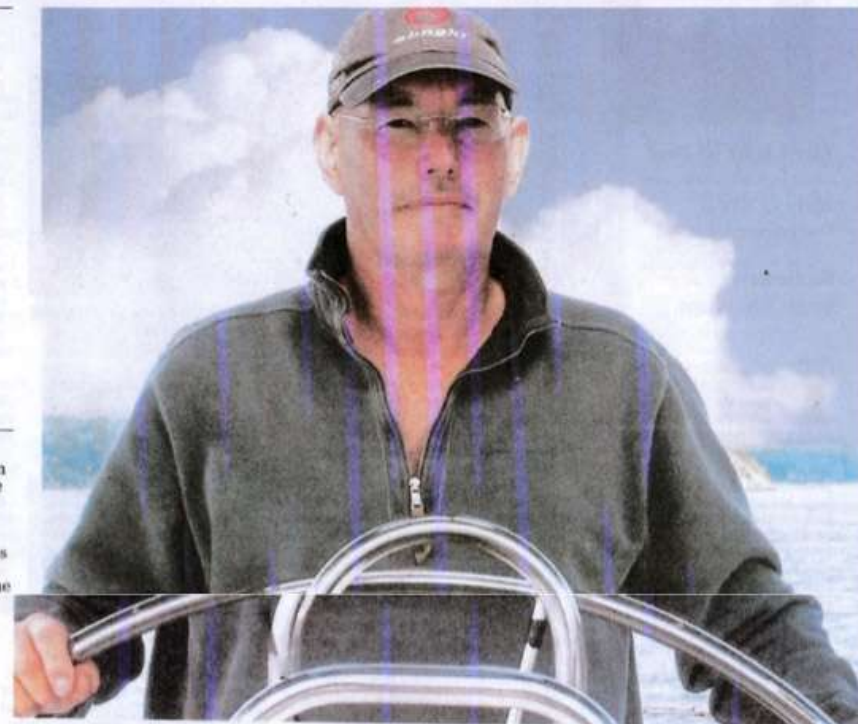
SPIRORBIS is a memoir in episodic form, its subtitle is 'Stories from My Life', and what an interesting life Peter Vine has had. He has worked in more than 30 countries in a variety of careers; carrying out scientific research as a marine punting, filmmaking, writing, diving.

And the title? Spirorbis are tiny spiral tube worms living in almost every coastal marine habitat; studying their biology and zoogeography gave Peter Vine the opportunity to travel and experience the adventures he describes. A new genus of spirorbis was even named after him, *Vinearia*.

He was born in Swansea but grew up on Merseyside, where his parents ran a small hotel. From childhood he was a risk-taker, recounting how on his eighth birthday he jumped off the top diving board in his local baths to prove he could swim. His father had promised him and his two siblings that he'd get them a dinghy once they could all swim, and actually built them their first one. He writes: "My love of sailing was an introduction to an ever-expanding world of adventure" which included being the youngest member of the Observer Lough Ness Monster Expedition while still a schoolboy.

In 1967 during his first year at university he was invited by his mentor Professor Knight-Jones to join an expedition to Greece where, on the island of Chios, Peter "almost disappeared without trace, within a stone's throw of a traditional stone farmhouse and a field full of tents". He had fallen down a deep well, hidden in long grass. His arm caught on a wooden stake and he managed to climb out. Perhaps there's some truth in the belief that being born in a caul, as he was, is an omen of good luck?

There are so many different episodes in Peter Vine's life that it's



difficult deciding which to highlight. This reviewer found the section about his time on Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) one of the most interesting and satisfying. Before starting at university, he spent a year with VSO – sent to what was then known as the British Colony of Gilbert and Ellice Islands, which later became Kiribati and Tuvalu. The island nations lie between Hawaii and New Zealand in Melanesia and are among the countries most threatened today by global warming.

He recalls December 1964 at the Boys School where he was teaching, when the British resident commissioner gives a speech he describes as "textbook colonialism, reminding the indigenous people that they owed a huge debt of gratitude to Great Britain and that the current situation was becoming more and more precarious as a result of the rapidly depleting reserves of guano..." adding wryly: "It did not seem to be acknowledged that this depletion of valuable resources was being carried out at huge profit to the British Phosphate Company and its shareholders."

Between 1863 and 1904 more than 60,000 islanders from across Melanesia were lured or kidnapped onto boats, a practice known as 'blackbirding.' They were transported to Australia to

work on cotton and sugar plantations as indentured labourers. That's some history most of us wouldn't be familiar with, and there are plenty of other such relations in this fascinating book.

He and his wife Paula moved to Ireland in the 1970s, building their home on the shore of Clifden Bay, where they re-invigorated and expanded the Clifden Boat and Sea Angling Club. They also established one of the first marine fish farms in Ireland, Ardhear Sea Farms. An accidental meeting led to involvement with an American oil company conglomerate called Charter Company, which set up offices in Athens and started to focus on commercial tilapia farms for the Arabian market; sea bass and sea bream farming in Greece and

Italy; salmonid farming in Ireland; shrimp farming in south-east Asia. Tilapia, by the way, is an inexpensive, mild-flavoured fish, and very popular in the United States. His contract with Charter ended abruptly when four of its executives were sadly killed when their helicopter crashed on its way from Ballynahinch Castle, Co Galway, and Shannon in 1982.

During the years with them he had many interesting experiences. Among them is a hilarious one when he's sent by Charter to China to give a lecture about fish-farming as part of an Italian Communist Party Delegation, though he's neither Italian nor a communist. The audience is about 5,000 strong, and he discovers he's been allocated a whole day though his slide show was "originally designed to take about an hour". To make it even more amusing, the following day he's informed that the audience was the wrong one — they were agriculturists, not aquaculturists — and has to repeat his presentation — and not just once to the working staff but yet again to management.

Spirorbis is full of experiences, with vivid descriptions of scenery on land and underwater.

At one point he makes this comment about himself: "When people describe me, they sometimes use the phrase 'a bit ahead of his time',

Peter Vine, in this file picture from 2008, cares deeply about humanity as well as the natural world, and that comes across throughout his accounts of his many experiences. This beautifully produced book was designed by Connemara-based Vincent Murphy, originally from Cork city.

Picture: Aoife Herriott

and I have to admit they are sometimes right."

He was certainly aware of the urgency about conservation decades before most people were — not only commenting, but also acting, on his knowledge. For instance, he spent five years in Port Sudan where he established the Coral Conservation Committee.

In 2007 he co-founded the charity Oceans Watch "to harness the facilities and interests of the international yachting community to support social, environmental, and economic development among remote island communities in the Pacific." One of the issues the charity has focused on is the deforestation of sustainable woodlands to make way for mining in the Eastern Solomon Islands.

Peter Vine cares deeply about humanity as well as the natural world, and that comes across throughout his accounts of his many experiences. As a young man he was aware of what was then called 'colour prejudice' — even among those like his own parents, who saw themselves as liberal and open-minded, and today he finds hope in the support for Black Lives Matter.

It comes as quite a jolt when he describes developing Parkinson's Disease and its cruelty. Yet Peter still dives and even includes a list of recommendations for anyone suffering from the disease who wants to continue to do the same. Half the proceeds from the book go towards the Mater Hospital Neurological Institute to acknowledge the support Peter has received in the treatment of his Parkinson's Disease.

Spirorbis is a beautifully produced book from Connemara-based publisher Artisan House, with scores of stunning photographs and reproductions of letters and other documents, which all greatly contribute to the text.

Peter Vine admits that Spirorbis couldn't have been written without the intervention of a local friend and building contractor. Instructed to dump old suitcases and papers into a skip, he discovered letters from the 1960s and queried whether he should. One can't help wondering if the current generation will ever be able to write such a book — will they have letters, cards, diaries? Today with our texts and other social media will we have archives to draw on to stir our memories?

“He and wife Paula moved here in the '70s, building a home on the shore of Clifden Bay and re-invigorating the boat club