

## Cruinniú na Cásca, Easter Monday, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017

**Event: 'How Nature Inspires Creativity' with Ted Cook**

**Venue: Ballincollig Gunpowder Mills, Regional Park, Co. Cork**



Our Cruinniú (Gathering – from Crainn – Tree Grove) commenced around the solitary Specimen Oak standing in the entrance carpark to Ballincollig's former Gunpowder Mills Park Enclosure.

The Oak's unfurling mint-green sharply lobed leaves, borne on hairy stalks of 2.5cm. tell us it is a Turkey Oak (*Quercus cerris*) native to southwest Asia and central Europe. *Q. cerris* is the fastest growing of the world's 450 species of oaktree – at shoulder height we measured 150cm circumference. Normally we can gauge the age of a healthy broadleaf tree by assigning a circa 2cm gain to one growth year – in a good year, a tree's annual growth ring will translate into a width gain of c. 2cm. Turkey oak is exceptional – it has put on 12 cms in the last 4 years, as measured by Coláiste Choilm Science students during May 2013. We could say 12 cms in 3 years – the formation of this year's annual growth ring has barely begun. It likely dates from the 1970's when our forest service began importing Turkey Oak seed (acorns) from the Baltics – it became widely planted in Parks for shade + ornament. The measure of this specimen's potential height is c. 36-38 metres.

Participants scrutinised the lichen diversity that have found home on the dull dark grey bark. These fungal gems have recently contributed 600 new chemical compounds to our sciences – one of which now offers a breakthrough in HIV treatment (*Esculentia umbillicaria*). Many of our antibiotic treatments were discovered from wild fungi.



Biological diversity within nature continues to fund mankind's two most important enterprises – agriculture + medicine. It only necessitated creative thinking in our species to positively exploit the seemingly endless dynamic within wild nature to adapt and mutate – but more now than ever our capacity to run amok (amach) among earth's fragile network's of life cries out for bridling – as we might swaddle an infant.

What does current research tell us about our globally deteriorating mental wellness and its relation to our globally deteriorating biodiversity (constantly evolving + adapting variations of life)? Can man fight his own bleak emotion of depression in an exhausted nature? In 15 years (longest research of its kind) 'not once' had psychiatric patients during violent psychotic outbreaks, attacked 'a picture of a natural scene'; abstract art came in for a special and prolonged assault.

The Turkey Oak holds count at the centre of a circle of ash + silver birch (white) and flowering cherry trees. The ash's green sleeves of mosses require closer observation. And while we cannot yet place lichens in the botanical evolutionary scheme (lichens are c. 95% fungus and 5% green photosynthetic plant), mosses are very primitive – reminding us that they are a few steps into evolution beyond seaweeds. At our proposed Heritage Week (late August 2017) field walk/tree planting in the park, we will explore further what tales these ancients tell.

Our silver birch (she's a dainty lady – she wears a satin gown) bears 'witches' broom' fungi – resembling bird's nests. Putting the 'why's' aside, these 'Taphrina' broom fungi act with their host tree as a single organism. Like earth's reticence to reveal her true age, unless approached with 'awe and wonder' life in its trillions of forms defies explanation.

In *Laudato Si*, His Holiness Pope Francis declares that our tendency to 'Mastery and Dominion' arises from 'Ego – not from God consciousnesses. Nietzsche the philosopher suggests that animals and plants see man as the 'laughing and crying and unhappy animal'.

Over four million years, man's survival depended on paying close attention to life – to animals and nature. Our growing attention deficit (according to Prof. Katcher, Pennsylvania University) arises 'because our brains are programmed to pay attention to the Kingdom of Nature'.

We have 3 native cherries in Ireland – blackthorn, bird cherry and wild cherry, the latter being the ancestor of all known cultivated forms of cherry. The white flowering cherry-trees in 'Oak Court' are cultivars of the wild cherry (also known as the Gean Tree). They are wind-pollinated and therefore flower before coming into foliage. Generally, trees that flower after greening are insect – pollinated. Our sallies enjoy both.

'The trees that once had lost their sheen are dressing up in brilliant Green' (T.S. Murray). Along our walk, we encountered 2 disease-free Elm trees prompting the subject of 'pests and diseases'. We observed that they 'follow families' (Henry Doubleday, 1950). The Elm Family appears always to have been hounded by an Elm Beetle (*Scolytus scolytus*) - Elm's response being to release an aerosol of repellent. Droughty conditions force Elm to concentrate on water conservation – the Scolytus hones in on the host's stress. All families (of species + varieties) are kept on their toes by 'species specific pathogens'. It seems that somewhere within 'cosmos', an urgency for the 'Presence of Life' was such that a cooling fireball was chosen as cradle – questions asked later.

Consider that in time, Pathogens evolve into parasites (do not kill hosts) and into symbiots (mutual non-parasitic arrangements) and in time into 'mutualists', where the one-time pests become allies in their joint passion for existence. We translated an Aramaic Prayer – with a variation:



'Four Angels round you stand –  
You have one at your right hand –  
One to watch and one to pray –  
and one to keep Jack Frost away'  
as we observed the curtains of Ivy on the alder.



As Ireland's only evergreen climbing shrub, we ought pay more attention to this invaluable contribution to Irish nature. Manage – yes. Grub out – no. Like the woodworms in my kitchen table longing for the lost habitat of native woodland's combings, ivy longs for its natural habitat – woodlands. Ivy continues to play a central role in the 'ethno-botany' of the Congo Basin and across Mother Africa with its 200 ivy species. More in Heritage Week.

### **Aldertree Planting**

In the background, the Pardes were demonstrating Brown Bess musketry (Musket butts were carved from wild cherry) – we were choosing a home for our potted alder. Both buckthorn and alder charcoal provided our earliest gunpowder – we owe a debt to both – not for their charcoal but for the way 'tendency to mastery and dominion' fingered our 'warrior tree' (ancient Gaelic description for alder).

Alder will be at home in the former floodplain that is now the regional park – that its parentage is from the upriver swamp forest (Gearagh) will compliment this tree's genetic memory of nature. The scatter of alder, ash and sally along the canalised river banks are relict of what was before c. 1650 - an alluvial alder, ash, sally forest (Smith's History of County Cork, 1750). Additional reminders (indicator plants) included may flower and hemlock and angelica along the 'inch' (river meadow).

Like woodworm and ivy and may flower (lady's smock – milkmaid- cuckoo flower) we long instinctively and intuitively for wild space – without which we are 'strangers at home and exiles in Erin' (Fearflatha Ó Gnímh 1590).

We guard our mental health + our very nature by protecting the earth – we prey on the earth at our peril. The Park Authority welcomes us back to plant more at the same designated site near the weirs – and sensitively provide companions for our 'warrior tree' – keep an eye out for the Heritage Week 2017 Programme of Events.



The writer acknowledges our County Heritage Officer Conor Nelligan for his commitments to communities during this, our first 'Crinniú na Cásca, - an initiative aimed at building 'Diversity and inclusivity' in our newly emerging Ireland – and keeping Ireland beautiful (and Chico's coffee stall for concessions').

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