

## The Gearagh 1987 – 2017

### 'Paying Attention to Life' (May 14<sup>th</sup> 2017)

*(Dedicated to the Memory of Dick Warner)*



During our 'Cruinniú na Cásca' field outing on April 17<sup>th</sup> 2017 at Ballincollig's Regional Park, which is summarised on this website, participants were introduced to the residual pockets of mid riparian vegetation (Riverside Sally, Ash, Alder, Mayflower, Hemlock etc). The remnant flora, indicative of the Park's historic ecology, prompted a description of the last extensive alluvial wildwood upriver at the Gearagh (2kms south of Macroom). It was agreed that our Cruinniú (Gathering) would reconvene a month hence and observe what the Park resembled before this stretch of the Lee water-course was canalised and drained in the 16<sup>th</sup> + 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Auspiciously, 2017 marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the State's designation of the Gearagh as an 800 acre National Nature Reserve, signed off by Minister of Finance R. McSharry during September 1987. (see Post Notes).

Deriving from 'Gaoire' (Wooded River) which word occurs in scores of our 64,000 townlands and placenames, here we witness the last functioning extensive forest within Western Europe, west of the River Rhine. In German, the Gearagh's equivalent is 'Wald Alnes'. 'Wald' meaning 'natural forest' gives us the English 'wealth' – the common weal. The adjunct 'Alnes' (Alnus/Alder: Latin) we associate with wetland and River Meadow complexes.



Despite incomprehensible physical, hydrological, chemical and genetic pressures, participants during our 5 hour study, observed and were arrested by the Gearagh's capacity for 'self-repair' over the caravan of centuries. 'Self-Repair' capacity within a habitat is now the legal yardstick to assess whether developments, adjacent or distant, will cause 'significant adverse impacts'.

The writer recalls wholesale extraction of massive Oaks in the earlier 1980s from this site and associated Agricultural Drainage to the south and west of what is now an EU Special Area of Conservation (S.A.C.) under the 1992 Habitats Directive. Ancient Residual Alluvial Forest represents a Priority S.A.C. due to its endangerment of disappearance from Europe. Ancient Yew Wood; Bog Woodland and Limestone Woodland are the additional 3 Priority Forest S.A.C.s within Ireland.





The Government's option to sanction 2 downriver hydroelectric dams at Carrigadrohid and Inniscarra in 1954, attracted the attention of our Royal Irish Academy's botanist Helen O'Reilly. Helen's baseline survey of the vegetation which she compiled in 1957 (when the Lee Valley was flooded by the operational dams) would prove invaluable though her survey was lost in the hard-drive of memory. The 'sleeping beauty' wildwoods key ecological services and functions were assumed beyond recovery and time moved on.

Fast forward 30 years to 1987 and An Taoiseach CJ Haughey's personal intervention, having met with members of our Macroom District Environmental Group, on its achieving the Ford Environmental Award. Our group delegation was headed by De La Salle Science Teacher Kevin Corcoran who earlier had tutored his young student Tim Hickey to compete in the Aer Lingus Young Scientist's Competition. Tim's project 'Gearagh Feasibility Study' caused incredulity among senior academics – with the exceptions of wild salmon and yew, the entire of Helen O'Reilly's rediscovered lists had survived 3 decades of inundations based on the city's energy demands which determined water levels. Tim's achieving first place coupled with our group's site research attracted both the attentions of our National University and Trinity's Dr. D. Kelly in addition to several institutions as far away as Pallacky University, Czechoslovakia. Leicester University commenced site assessments.



Freshwater sponge, freshwater pearl mussel; buckthorn (its only site in Co. Cork); Bird Cherry (UN Red Data List); Dutch Pipes (*E. hymale*) in addition to 108 vascular plants (Tasea) and 90 fungi species were still at home, prompting a leading Irish botanist to declare the phenomenon as 'imperfectly understood' during late 1987.

A wiser generation would recognise 'a pearl of great price'.

From the third bridge from the northern entrance carpark, curiosity got the better of an Otter who rose from the swift clear water – a first for many of our 50 strong Cruinniú who observed its submerging powerful tail in a slow motion dive.

Because, as has been personally observed, a cohort of participants at the writer's field study/outings (since 1985) 'avoid people and places where they cannot be themselves', our 5 hour walk commenced with a sit – down picnic. Access to Butterfly Island was passable – a dream venue for us. Online and other promotions had broadcast a request to 'bring extra for sharing'. The warm 'sun in its jealous sky' beamed approvingly. Those who most need nature are prone 'not to love man less, but nature more'. Perhaps they were 'powered off' – not a single mobile device interrupted our 5 hours.

As a forest culture without its forest, time passed in this truly wild place – the last of an otherwise vanished countryside – taps into our genetic memory. The Ghost forest of exposed oak and yew stumps, covering some vast acreage does have an initial bewildering impact on the first time visitor. To observe the forest re-colonizing visibly from the west is emotionally redemptive and inspiring.



Disaster Prevention functions of flood plains include dissipation of floodwaters and the repositioning of silts away from the main channel, thus benefitting homebound spawning salmon and their evolutionary allies the freshwater mussels. The sites 2km width of floodplain, comprising glacial gravels overlying carboniferous limestone bedrock and summed up by Gibbings as bejewelled 'by a thousand wooded islands – impenetrable jungle' continues to attract and mesmerise geomorphological, hydro-engineering and biological academics from across the continent. And while qualified arboraculturalists describe 'bio-mechanics' within veteran trees, our geologists study the 'geo-mechanics' of this 10,000 year old uncanalised vast wet wonderland buttressed by mile after mile of braided channels that absorb the furies of storm waters (anastomisation).

Along the route we observe the flattened mountaintops of Shehy and Deamhas and Doughill to our west. At nearly 2000 feet this Shehy Range lay entombed in frozen crystal – what we term the 'Cork – Kerry icesheet'. It rained snow 24/7/365 century following century. Water trickled as temperatures rose – climatologists describe the 'fast melt'. The earth's 3<sup>rd</sup> (some say 4<sup>th</sup>, others 5<sup>th</sup>) Global warming, which continues in our day, had begun. This quiescent phase is still in progress. How long it will last, none can tell. It may well be that by the time our earth awakens to her next bout of geological jerks, the activities of mankind, a slight episode in cosmic history, will have ceased. Because the preservation in the cosmos of the Presence of Life would seem to be the evolutionary scheme by 'Trial and Error', organisms that fail to progress from the parasitic stage to some symbiotic semblance (or stasis) tend to be upstaged, asteroid impacts excepted.

Our study site is also a Special Protection Area (S.P.A.) (EU Wildbirds Directive 1979). Wildbirds are 'birds in the Natural state'. The Gearagh's wildbird populations include wigeon, teal, golden plover (2000 in 1994), mallard, grey lagged geese), tufted duck, crested grebe and the refugee Whooper swans escaping the 'frost giant of the north.' July will see coots. Mute swans appear to be a permanent presence. The lowered water levels on the day allowed us to discern the pattern of tiny field enclosures to our east. The early medieval 'old port road' to Maclinagh was visible.

The stillness of the deep Quarry Pond, peopled with pike, invited an impromptu group silence. We were together alone – alone together, unlike the solitary Whooper Swan that 'climbs the air' in our approach. A Whooper Swan in May? One plausible interpretation is that having lost her mate 4 years ago, she stayed behind. She feeds and roosts adjacent but apart from her tribe that make it home for Christmas from the Polar North. Whooper numbers have fluctuated wildly this 30 years – from 110 to 39.



Passing through the deserted village of Annahalla, we emerge from the (post 1957) colonising Sally Woodland into wide open space dominated by acres of water-body fed by swift streams from the north-facing uplands ahead. The 'snow whites' with pristine yellow feet – the little egrets are peening (and preening) and sun-bathing, displaying no apprehension of our colourful Cruinniú.

Birdwatchers among us tell us that it first bred here in 1997 and like the Kerry slug that can indicate expansion or contraction of our western Atlantic Hyper – oceanic micro climate, the 'snow-whites' indicate our warming climate'.

Our path crosses 'Bandon Bog'. An east – west boundary, no longer visible, marks the bounds of the Ardilaun and Bandon Estates. Following the break-up of Irish estates during the Cromwellian Period of Land Confiscation, the Clancarty Lordship was divided out. The Lords Bandon acquired the valuable Turbary Rights here and carted it all the way to their Castle Barnard Demesne. Initially, Cromwell himself granted Macroom Castle Demesne to his friend Admiral Penn whose son embraced Quakerism – dynastic prospects were unreal and the Admiral left for and founded Pennsylvania. Barnard acquired the Macroom estate, leasing it back to Lord Clancarty during the Restoration Period at £1000 annual rent, but reserving the Quarry Rights to the lucrative limestone bedrock of the Gearagh.



Noteworthy are the huge butts of Bog Oak that protrude through the cutaway Bog on the nearby Kilmichael Pitch and Putt. The glacial weight that had flattened the mountains, with the grinding action of terrestrial icebergs that moved at 5km annually, pulverised the Gearagh's Old Red Sandstone, thus exposing the limestone. The resulting sand and gravel was deposited downriver at Kilumney. To the west, the melting mass burst through the Shehy Range forming the 'glacially cut' Pass of Keiminagh.

Our 'thousand islands' of alluvial silt offered early toehold to the pioneering plants migrating from all directions – most notably the 'Micronesian' plants that are associated with the warm wet Gulf Stream. Some such indicator plants include Irish Spurge (*Euphorbia Hibernia*) and the Killarney Fern (*Trichomanes speciosum*) formerly the Killarney Bristle-Fern that occurs within the Gearagh S.A.C. which comprises Toonbridge Wood to our site's Northwest. Whilst absent from the Gearagh, the Kerry slug is present upriver.

'Paying Attention to Life' comes easy here – the things in our life have little place and distractions have been left at the carpark. What resonated with one troubled young offender were 'the sounds'. The swifts and swallows overhead became the background music – the woodpigeons retrieve a wandering mind – how the wren can project such amplified melody defies our logic. The first bird encountered was a willow warbler – one recent addition to this 'sacred chord' is the plaintive and distant Sea Eagle overhead. We notice a pattern of dead and dying alder trees to each side of the track – 'lepers' was one response from within our band.



The writer recalls the late Dick Warner describing the symptoms 25 years ago of an alder tree disease that had reached some waterways in south Leinster. This pest has infected many Alders within the remnant 150 acres of Gearagh wildwood to our west and seems to continue upriver for c. 4 kms. Large stretches of the Blackwater's riparian Alder population have succumbed. Dick expressed doubts whether the pathogen was waterborne. We now know that the spores of the fungus 'P. alni alni' are having their day. It is airborne – but may also be waterborne. One local biologist suggests it came with infected plant stocks from Europe – a pattern of infection being associated with hardwood afforestations.

Nature's 'toolbox' may have resistant strains – maybe our global forest is re-shuffling – western Europe's scatter of wild sown ash trees represent surviving remnants of our once vast pure ash woods. Ash die-back may not be so new after all.



We acknowledge the private landowner in Dromkeen that invited us to view the last of its name – a wild Gearagh yewtree transplanted as a sapling during the 1860s. To meet with this yewtree – 'Cainem sen' in early Irish (Fairest of the ancients) under its farflung bottlegreen canopy is to meet an Archetype spirit – a rescue tree – 'Airig fedo' (Lord of the Forest) and last of its tribe. This male continues each spring ('since I first made my count') to post off its fertilising powdered pollen to the winds, in the hope that way down the river a hundred miles or more other lady yew trees might take his genes ashore.

To mark Heritage Week 2017, the writer hopes to host 4 events in County Cork - including a talk at Macroom Library, Tuesday August 22<sup>nd</sup> entitled 'Gearagh – 1987 – 2017' followed by tree- planting in the nearby Macroom Castle grounds. Other venues include Ballincollig Regional Park on Sunday August 19<sup>th</sup> and Ballyvourney and Rathbarry. Check out [www.heritageweek.ie](http://www.heritageweek.ie)

Bless All,

Ted Cook

## Post Notes

Our earliest farmers and earlier 'Herders' would have been aware of the dangers to livestock and humans that wandered into the once c. 5000 acres of the Gearagh – with its mouth at Ballingearry (Béal Áth an Ghaoire). Readers are urged not to access the residual wild wood without appropriate guidance. Geo-subsidences that have silted up are said to have 'swallowed horses' not dissimilar from the 'swallow holes' of the east Galway/Clare griked limestone.

One of the 'Malachi prophecies' recounted to the writer 30 years ago by Jamsie Kearney (seanachai and poitín maker) - 'the Lee will flow backwards!' When wading between the linear east-west wooded islands, one observes both upriver + downriver currents as a consequence of the dammed channel downstream. Maintaining foothold on the polished gravels, many the wader have been swirled in cross- currents and swept sometimes upriver or downriver. We have no record of fatalities.

### Gearagh Biodiversity Designations

- (i) The Nature Reserve (The Gearagh) Recognition Order became law in September 1987 under S.16 of Wildlife Act 1976. This Order provides that the site 'be managed for conservation of the alluvial forest ecosystem'. (Statutory document 231/87)
- (ii) Special Protection Area (S.P.A.) Site Code 109 (323 hectares) arising under EU Wildbird Directive 1979. Species include Scaup, Greenshank, Lapwing, Dunlin (rare inland presence), Curlew, Green Sandpiper, Snipe, etc.
- (iii) Special Area of Conservation (S.A.C.) Site Code 000108 arising under EU Habitats Directive 1992. Gearagh S.A.C. extends upriver 7kms to Dromcarra Bridge. Because of the rarity of the Gearagh's Biogenetic function – the Habitats Directive further confers 'Priority Status' on this site 'because of the danger of its disappearance from the European Continent'. Three additional Irish woodland types, namely yew wood, bog woodland and limestone forest, have been designated 'priority'.
- (iv) Natural Heritage Area (N.H.A.) arising under Wildlife Act 2000.
- (v) Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (UN 1971) lists the Gearagh.
- (vi) The site is listed as a UN Biogenetic reserve making it a global centre for evolutionary Biology Studies.