

# The MOUNTAINS of IRELAND

## PREFACE

The appeal of the mountains is, to some extent, a personal and subjective thing: each of us has some particular and individual response to the beauty of the hills. To that extent, this book, which attempts a brief survey of the Irish mountains, is a personal impression. These are the features of the different groups which I myself select as their special characteristics. And with this description of the hills, I have tried to include some account of the history and geology of the mountain country, and to venture to indicate some of the meanings of the Irish place-names.

Ireland is not a mountainous country in the ordinary sense of the word. Yet her small groups of mountains dominate the far more extensive plains, and are themselves true mountains and not mere hills. Each range, too, differs from all the rest, so that the Irish highlands include almost all the variations to be found in mountain scenery, from the smooth uplands of the Wicklow hills to the broken rocks of the Reeks at Killarney and the bare quartzite of the Twelve Bens. Mountaineering is still a young sport in Ireland and the hills are not as well known as they should be either to the Irish people themselves or to our visitors. And to the extent that the mountains are not known, this account of them is a signpost to the hills.

**D.D.O.P.M.**  
**August 1955**

## SLIEVE AUGHTY

Perhaps the most striking impression of these uplands, through which the Shannon has to carve its way from the levels of the Central Plain to the open sea below Limerick, is gained by sailing up from that town to Lough Derg, when the river, and its canalised section above the powerhouse at Ardnacrusha, seem to be leading one into the depths of the hills. Miles which are framed by the white concrete bridges spanning the canal section, symmetrical, like a Japanese painting. Entering Lough Derg is anticlimax, the hills fall away behind one, and the Shannon waterway meanders north over the inland plain, with the Slieve Blooms rising steeply from it, away to the east.

The Slieve Bernagh-Slieve Aughty country is rolling heather upland rather than mountain with small farms upon its slopes and little tracks of roads leading to them. There are pleasant lakes in the valleys, and some forestry plantations on their slopes leading up to the moors above. It is, in fact, an area somewhat isolated and off the main roads of Ireland and it seems that it was only comparatively lately settled. Prehistoric remains are largely absent, Derry place-names are frequent, and there seems to have been an immense oak wood covering the Slieve Aughty area down to Tudor times. This wood must have inhibited settlement. One cause of its eventual felling is to be found in the slag heaps of old iron furnaces that are to be found along the shore of Lough Derg and at Killaloe. There were tanneries here also, which would mean further destruction of the oak woods.

The MOUNTAINS of IRELAND  
By D. D. C. Pochin Mould

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## SOURCES

Very little has, as yet, been written about the Irish mountains as such. But as sources of information about Ireland as a whole, its geology, geography, history, etc., I list the following books, in which, naturally, there is a considerable amount of information about the hills themselves.

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(A brief account of the main routes up all the Irish hills.)

## CHAPTER I

### The Mountains of Ireland

IT is not of mountains that the stranger thinks when he imagines Ireland; not the bare rock, the driven snow, the dark lake cradled in the lonely cove; rather of something green and pastoral. Yet, for the Irishman himself, the mountains rising blue in the distance across the level brown of the peat bogs or the green of the undulating fields, form an essential part of his picture of his country. His mind turns upon little hills that rise from the plains and carry in their very names the sound of, history: Uisneach the ancient centre of Erin, Tara, Saul, of St. Patrick's first church, Cashel, of the Bongs; and then to those girdling chains of real mountains that rise like dragon's teeth around the rim of the island and whose slopes were both the homesteads of the first Irish farmers and the last unyielding bastion of Irish culture.

For Ireland is ringed with hills: the Mourne in the north-east (Slieve Donard, 2796 feet) (36), the Wicklows in the east (Lugnaquilla, 3039 feet) (31), the Galtees and Comeraghs in the south (Galtymore, 3018 feet) (40), the Kerry mountains in the south-west (Carrauntual, 3414 feet, Ireland's highest top) (47), the Burren (Slieve Elva, 1134 feet) (23) and Connemara (Mweelrea, 2688 feet) (13) in the west, and the Donegal hills in the north-west (Errigal, 2466 feet) (14). And each of these groups is not only real mountain country, but has its own particular and unique personality and character. To climb in Ireland is to range from limestone "karst" to granite torr, from bare and slippery quartzite to springy downland turf and mighty cliffs of red and violet sandstone.

Two things only have these diverse groups of mountains in common, an immediate and intimate relationship between the rocks of which they are built and the nature and form of the hills themselves, and the nearness of the sea. Except for the Galtees, the principal Irish mountain chains are set close upon the sea and the winds that strike them are salted with the ocean; the climber looks down not only on the checkerboard pattern of fields below but on the ridges of the waves and on alternating cliff and strand, and out to islands whose stories are interwoven with the stream of Irish history. It is not only the mountains of Mourne that sweep down to the sea; all of them combine the splendour of the heights with the splendour of the depths, and their summit cairns have something of the wistful magic of the Brendan legend, of the saint climbing a high mountain and looking out upon the boundless ocean and glimpsing the earthly paradise far out on the western horizon.

Statistics bring home the fact that their actual area does not necessarily indicate the importance of the Irish mountains in either landscape or history. Three-quarters of Ireland lies below the 500-foot contour and actual mountain land only makes up 11 per cent of the

surface area. Only 5 per cent of Ireland is over 1000 feet and only 1 /400th above 2000 feet. The highest point, the 3414 feet of Carrauntual, is in the Kerry hills, low by mountain standards outside of Ireland, yet since there is nothing higher by which they may be dwarfed, the Irish mountains rear themselves up into the clouds in what some- times appears an almost alpine majesty, steep sloped and rocky, and sometimes in winter, with snow cornices flashing against the deep and vivid blue of the Irish sky.

In general, one may say that the Irish hills are built of harder and more resistant rocks than the Carboniferous limestone that underlies most of the great central plain of Ireland. In the west, however, in Burren and near Sligo, the limestones themselves form upland, bleak "*karst*" in Burren and precipice-bounded mountains at Sligo. Then, too, the "*grain*" of the hills has been determined by ancient earth movements which crumpled the rocks along particular lines of folding and compression; and the final moulding of the hills was brought about by the ice of the glacial period.

Apart from the Lewisian gneiss of the little island of Inishtrahull, it is in the west that the most ancient rocks of Ireland are to be found. The Connemara mountains are built partly of ancient rocks quartzite, granite, the beautiful green striped Connemara marble, the hard quartzites forming the hill ridges and date back to the pre-Cambrian, the earliest geological period recognised. In Donegal, the high tops are again of resistant quartzite, but of somewhat later Dalradian Age, the continuation across into Ireland of the schists and quartzites of the Central Highlands of Scotland. The quartzite tops of Errigal, the Poisoned Glen and the like are echoed over in Scotland in the symmetrical Paps of Jura and the heights of May. The great Scottish fault lines, of the Great Glen, the Highland Boundary and the Southern Upland Boundary can be traced across into Ireland, together with the rocks which they affect.

The Wicklow mountains are composed of granite; so too the Mourne, but of much later (Tertiary) date than the Leinster hills. In the south, the Galtees, Knockmealdowns and Comeraghs and the hills of Kerry are composed of the sandstones of the Old Red Sandstone period, with massive crags of violet and purple rock. The north then continues the pattern of the Scottish hills and the grain of the country follows the same NE.-SW. direction imposed by the Caledonian orogen (mountain building move- ment) which preceded the Carboniferous period. But as you go south in Ireland the direction imposed by the folding changes and the southern hills are controlled by the east-west trend of the post-Carboniferous Hercynian orogen (named from the Hartz mountains, also called Armorican from the old name for Brittany). In Ireland, these two great structural lines of Europe meet: they finally intersect across the Atlantic in the Appalachians.

In the Ice Age the whole of Ireland, except for some small areas in the south-west, seems to have been overwhelmed by the great ice sheets. The hilltops were rounded and smoothed, except for the highest Kerry tops which still rose above the sea of ice. Later, as the cold lessened and the great sheets of ice retreated, the Irish hills still nourished their own snowfields and glaciers and deep corries were plucked out in their crag faces as the ice gathered there and moved outward to the valleys below.

The small ice-free districts are important not only in providing the rock-climber with splintered crags for his amusement, but in leaving a small foothold where some plants and animals could survive the cold. Not all life became extinct, and part of the Irish flora and fauna seems almost certainly a pre-glacial relict one, though the bulk of it is a recolonisation across then existing land-bridges in the wake of the retreating ice.

Up the west coast then, in Kerry, Connemara and Donegal, are to be found, often in quantity, two special and very interesting groups of plants, one linked with Western Europe and one with North America. The North American group is the less interesting of the two; its presence suggests an earlier, closer linkage between Ireland and America by land-bridges and is paralleled by some European species along the east coast of America. It includes *Spiranthes gemmipara* and *S. stricta* (lady's tresses), the blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium angustifolium*) and the rushes *Juncus macer* and *J. dudley*.

In the Lusitanian Mediterranean group are not only delightful flowers, but a small corresponding group of molluscs, beetles, woodlice and earthworms. Both may well have survived the Ice Age in the ice-free areas. The plants include the famous arbutus, the lovely deep violet butterwort of the Kerry bogs (*Pinquicula grandiflora*), four heaths (*Erica mediterranea*, *mackii*, *dliaris* and *vagans*) and St. Dabeoc's heath (*Dabeocia polifolia*), the orchid *Neotinea intacta*, and the saxifrages *Saxifraga spathularis* (St. Patrick's cabbage, a close relative of the London pride) and 8. geum. The arbutus is to be found in the hillside woods of the Killarney mountains and among the hills of Sligo: place-names indicate that it once occurred in intermediate stations up the west coast. The Irish name of the arbutus is *cuinche*, which is found in place-names as Quin and Quinsheen an island in Clew Bay. The Mediterranean heath tinges the Nephin mountains pale purple with its blossom in early spring; whilst St. Dabeoc's heath, with large pink bells and glossy green foliage silvered on the underside, is one of the glories of Connemara, in flower there from June until nearly Christmas-time.

Then, too, the climber on the Irish hills will delight in the special limestone-loving plants of Burren and the Ben Bulbin hills of Sligo, and in the small collection of alpinists to be found on Irish crags and cliffs. The mild wet Irish climate, lacking lingering snowfields, is not ideal for alpine plants, and accordingly they are to be found not so much on the actual summits but on the cliffs facing north and at levels ranging from 1000 to 1500 feet above sea-level. In fact, "alpinists" can be found growing right down to sea-level. The link between sea and hill extends even to the small plants of the mountainside.

As the ice retreated and the climate improved, forests spread up the Irish hillsides. On the very summits you will see the stumps of pines marking forest layers in the peat. The pine itself died out naturally about the time the first men arrived, around 2000 B.C. or earlier, and the picture of that time is of dense wood and bogland on the low ground, with woodland alternating with grassy sward on the higher levels. Oak was, and is, the dominant native tree, with birches on the hills and alders in the swamps, and with yew and holly and hazel. The first settlers beach-combed along the shores, later came the Megalithic people, farmers, traders, sailors, with a custom of burying their dead in great chambered tombs. They settled on the dry uplands where the light soil could be easily worked and their cattle find pasture. From that time on the woods of Ireland began to diminish, by the browsing of young seedlings by cattle and sheep, by felling for agricultural reclamation, or for building or iron smelting, and, apparently on a large scale, to destroy cover in which one's enemy might lurk. The Irish hills today are treeless places for the most part, except for the Killarney woods and the new plantations of State Forestry schemes. The old extent of wood can be traced in place-names, the Derry that means an oak wood (*daire*) and *coille*, wood (as in Kylemore great wood).

So as you climb up you make almost a cross-section of history, leaving behind modern Ireland in the valley, and on the high slopes coming upon Megalithic chambered tombs and standing stones, and, numerous on the very summits, the massive circular burial cairns of the

slightly later Bronze Age people. Here and there old mine-workings appear to go back to the first utilisation of metals in Ireland, and the glitter of Irish gold in the museum collections is a reminder of men long ago panning the gravels of the mountain streams.

As the ground was progressively cleared for cultivation and habitation, the settlements moved downhill, and the mihhs, the fortified homesteads of Celtic Ireland, appear on the lower ground. Yet because the Irish climate is mild, it was always possible to make use of the heights and some raths are set high, like Caherconree in Kerry on the Slieve Mish mountains. Then too there are many small sites of the Celtic Church on the hillsides as well as the actual summit oratories on Slieve League, Croagh Patrick, Mount Brandon and Slieve Donard (36). Ireland has a cult of high places and has long cherished the old Celtic custom of lighting hilltop fires at the great seasonal changes of the year, May Day, Midsummer (St. John's Eve), Hallowe'en. Giving the old custom another twist, she has, too, of recent years erected many crosses upon the hilltops to commemorate the Church's Holy Years and the Marian Year. These crosses not only show forth the people's faith and stand as a symbol saining the fields below, but have the quite incidental value to the climber of giving him a pinpoint of the summit in mist.

The separated groups of mountains round the coast have never provided barriers, as did the Scottish and Welsh hills; their influence on Irish history has been more subtle. The great communication lines and the great barriers of Ireland are the rivers and their fords, the bogs and dry esker ridges of glacial gravels that make dry roads across them. The hillsides were the cradle of Irish farming, and the first movement of the Irish settlement pattern was downhill, to lay hold upon the riches of the plains. The plains were rich, and the immediate objective of the Anglo-Norman invaders and their successors. Cromwell's plantations gave the old inhabitants of the rich lands the choice of "*hell or Connacht*" the wild moorlands and bare rocks of the west.

Forced out by the successive plantations and seizures of the good land, the Irish retreated back into the mountains. Among the hills, on the poor land that the invader despised, the language, the culture, the religion, the traditions, were kept alive. Here the modern folklore student has gained his richest harvest, old methods still suited to the small stony fields, old traditions, old customs. With the big increase in population just before the famine of the mid-nineteenth century, the people "utilised every available inch of land, and the fields climbed almost to the mountain-tops, their walls still stand. The climber will remember the evictions of the Scottish Highlands as he comes on abandoned fields and ruined cottages on the heights of the Irish hills. But these tell a different story. In Scotland the hillsides were the people's rightful home, here they had always lived, and here they were turned out to give place to sheep walk and deer forest. But in Ireland, these high fields are rather the symbols of a last-ditch stand, of the ultimate retreat, the toe-hold of the Irish against the invader; from which in the end they advanced again to take possession of the soft fertility of the lowland plains. The present pattern is of the dividing up of the big lowland estates and the moving down on to them of the people from the small congested holdings of the mountainsides.

And the mountains too have been places of temporary retreat and hiding. Not only of outlaws like the famous highwayman, Crotty, with his cave in the Comeraghs, but of Irish patriots of all periods of her history. So the 1798 rising was closely linked with the Wicklow hills, in whose depths its forces were able to conceal themselves. The Irish historian, Father Geoffrey Keating, lived concealed for years in the Glen of Aherlow below the Galtees. And the constant occurrence of the word *aifrionn*, the Mass (from the Latin, *offerendum*) in place-names like Knockanaffrin (Mountain of the Mass) in the Comeraghs, reminds how the

Catholic faith was kept alive during the long period of penal legislation by the courage of the priests who brought the Mass to the lonely Mass rocks on the hills and in the glens, where the people gathered, with sentries posted on the heights around them. In Donegal the cairns are still to be seen which the Catholic priests built as guides over the lonely mountain routes, each little heap set on the skyline of a ridge and in sight of the next.

Some of the mountain chains, like the Comeraghs and the Galtees, rise suddenly and abruptly from the fertile lowlands. They have virtually no foothill country at all. But others, in Kerry and Connemara and Donegal, rise from rough "*mountainy*" country, and it is there that one may best experience the old ways of life and hear the language spoken by the people. Here is to be seen a network of small fields, often still worked in lazy bed-ridges with the spade, for they are too small and stony for the plough. Some of these fields are, in their basic pattern, very old, for excavations at Gush on Slieve Reagh near the Galtees discovered a site dating back to the late Bronze Age whose fields still roughly corresponded to the modern ones superimposed on them. The checkerboard pattern of squarish fields, then, is very old and is connected with hand-digging and cross-ploughing with light ploughs. The English mouldboard plough, turning the soil once efficiently, imposes a characteristic long furrow to minimise turning and a rectangular field. Yet a great deal of the Irish field system is only as old as the enclosures of the late eighteenth or nineteenth century. From the air or from the mountain it is a characteristic of the country; scattered farms amongst a variegated chessboard of fields, green pasture, brown ploughland or later yellow corn, the vivid green tops of potatoes or sugar beet.

The oldest sort of settlement seems to be the Cachan, which, like similar groupings in the Scottish Highlands, formed a small community amongst which the land was divided in rundale (or runrig) plots each family having a turn of the different plots in sequence, so that all had a share of the use of both the best and worst land. Normally there was much mutual help and the system seems to have worked well enough, though it meant that, since one never held any particular plot permanently, there was no incentive to undertake specialised improvements, and as the cattle had the run of all the arable in winter, there was no possibility of growing special crops in winter.

Cattle from the earliest times have been the basis of the wealth of Irish farming. Sheep became important in the early nineteenth century and often replaced cattle on the hills. Sheep were kept in Celtic Ireland but only in small numbers as compared to the big herds of cattle which were maintained by the owners of the raths. Great use was made of the mountain pastures, and when the cultivated land round the homesteads was sown and the crops were growing, the cattle were taken away to the high pastures. This not only meant that they were prevented from destroying the crops but also enabled a larger head of cattle to be carried. In Ireland the word for this custom of going to the mountains with cattle for the summer is "*booleying*". It is from the Irish word *buaile*, a cattle fold, and with a basic meaning of an enclosure. In Scotland the same custom was observed but *buaile* is rare in place-names, and the Scots called their mountain pastures and their huts "*shielings*". In Ireland the custom still just survives in

Achill Island, and, to a rather larger extent, it is also found in Scotland, on the Hebridean island of Lewis.

So the Irish, hills are marked with green plots with rickles of stone on them; the old booley sites where the people lived up in the hills herding the cattle (and wolves long remained in numbers in Ireland) and making butter from the milk. Many are the stories and traditions of the *buaile* and of the pleasant summer life amongst the mountains. Often peat (turf) for the

winter firing would be cut at the same time from the mountain peat bogs. The butter was packed in wooden containers and buried in the bogs to preserve it; lost kegs are occasionally dug up today the so-called "*bog butter*". Booleying went on until the sheep took over the high pastures.

Lower down, amongst the little fields, the discerning will look at the old cottages of the smallholdings. The Irish house is essentially of one basic design, rectangular, long, one room broad, and one storey high. There are two great types of this basic house: one which has a central hearth (perhaps from the old circular hut or beehive cell) and the other with the fire at the gable end. The central hearth, originally on the floor, has developed a proper chimney and therefore a dividing wall; so, too, the second type may have another room extended beyond the chimney gable, so the two designs come to approximate near to one another. Each area has its own types of thatch material and thatching method. Gabled houses are the type chiefly found in most of Ulster and Connacht and the coastal districts of Clare, Kerry and West Cork; whilst to the south of this NE.-SW. division of the country, in most of Munster and in Leinster, there are many hip-roofed houses, in which the gable is replaced by the thatch sweeping round the end of the house in a graceful half-beehive shape. The windswept west likes to secure the thatching itself with ropes and nets, and the materials used vary about the country. The climber coming down from the hills will note the long whitewashed cottages of Donegal, the beautiful hip roofs under the Knockmealdowns, the Connemara thatch roped down against the wind; and going inside the house will then discover further regional variations in the furnishings. The wet Irish climate, with a natural emphasis on the growing of oats, has helped to preserve the open fireplace and the cooking of thin cakes or oatbread on the girdle or a flagstone set before the fire. An iron crane supports the large black pot for boiling potatoes over the blaze, its ancestry going back to the archaeologist's finds of similar pots of riveted metal plates, and to the gigantic pots of Irish legend.

And it is round the fire, with pot and kettle hanging from the crane, that the family and their guests sit. The table is along-side the wall, and one turns to it only if the tea is set out neatly on it; the focus of the Irish cottage home is the fire, not the kitchen table as in an English house of the same sort.

But the sea is not very far from the hills and, especially in the west, the small farmer is fisherman as well as farmer like his Scottish crofter counterpart. And the sea too has provided wrack to fertilise the small hill fields, and is today a valuable source of income in the way of "sea rods", the seaweed stalks collected for manufacture into the new alginate products.

So often the mountainside holding runs down from the rough hill pasture to the seashore, where the boats are hauled up on the shingle. The "*mountainy*" man should, says the saying, be a good hunter both, on land and sea, for he comes into contact with wild nature at the two ends of his farm. The lowlander lives surrounded by cultivated land, but the mountain farmer has the wild hills and the wild sea about him, and from them both he gathers crops that he never sowed: peat (turf) for fuel, hill grazing, seaweed, fish, shell sand to lime the ground.

The speech of the western hills is Irish, and the names of all the mountains were originally Irish, though they are now some-times replaced by English ones, and the small crop of "*tourist*" names like Sugarloaf. For the old people, the shepherd on the heights, every rock and hollow and streamlet had its own name, each a sensitive record of some individual feature of the place or object named. Many of these have been lost, particularly in districts in which Irish has ceased to be spoken, and, of the names preserved on the maps, many are now

hard to understand owing to the English surveyors' unhappy attempts to write down a language they did not understand. In some cases the map error has passed into ordinary use and led to the loss of the correct pronunciation. Some of the map spellings are laughable, as Money scalp for Muine sceilp, the shrubbery of the chasm, and Vinegar Hill for fidh na gcaer (roughly the same sound as vinegar to English ears) which means the wood of the berries!

The common name for a hill is slidbh, slieve in English spelling, rough ground and translated in ordinary speech as "*mountain*". For an Irishman to say he is going to the "*mountain*" means not hill-climbing, but going out to the rough grazing. He may there-fore speak of going down to the mountain. High craggy tops are called "*hill*" in common speech, in Irish cnoc (Englished as knock) and beann (Ben, Scots -gaelic beinn). Scotland has a slightly different use, cnoc being mainly applied to the low hillocks, beinn to the great heights and sliabh hardly occurring at all; whilst the Scottish highlander talks of going "*to the hill*" and not to the "*mountain*" to look at his sheep.

So these Irish hills are intimate with history and with men. To climb them never means wandering very far from the hill-side cottages or the rough lanes (boreens), hung with fuchsias, that serve them. Even the main roads often climb over the mountains in a way that one never experiences, say in Scotland, and make possible a kind of armchair mountaineering. Yet there is real rock climbing to be had on many Irish cliffs and crags, though the summits may all be gained by the ordinary hill walker. And storm and snow and cold can strike as fiercely on their heights as in countries regarded as more strictly mountainous. And then, too, it is perhaps in the hills that the beginning of the understanding of the whole country can be made, to look down upon the plains and upon the sea from the silence of the high places, and to begin to know the Irish people in the intimacy of the semicircle round the open fire.

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