

A Journey Through the Real Wild West

By Joe Barry, Irish Independent, 2 September 2015



Majestic: Ballycroy National Park in North West Mayo extends to 11,000ha and is home to an extraordinary diversity of habitats. Photo: Andrew Gilmore

"There is no break in the empty silence save the whimper of the winds. Not a bird voice is upon the air. Nothing but pasture and sheep and stone walls and the western wind and loneliness." So wrote Michael Bulfin as he passed through Connacht on his famous cycling trip round Ireland in the early days of the 1900s.

Moving forward over 100 years, as I drove through Ballycroy national park in Co Mayo, there was still splendid isolation to be found and the scenery was magnificent yet everywhere there was evidence of a glorious revival in the fortunes of those who now live in the West.

"You can't eat a view" goes the old saying but the tragic days of the potato famine, evictions and forced emigration are now ancient history. EU funding, tourism and local initiatives have brought real prosperity to these places where once even the snipe went hungry.

The promotion of the Wild Atlantic Way has been a huge success as has the Great Western Greenway, a traffic free cycle and walking route following the line of the old Westport to Achill railway. Driving towards Mulranny on a sunny August day there were cyclists and walkers of all ages out enjoying this new facility.

On reaching the village of Ballycroy, I was close to my destination of Shean Lodge, built in 1865 and where some noted people such as Count John McCormack and the artist, Paul Henry stayed and enjoyed the renowned fishing on the Owenduff River. While I was there, local farmer and guide at Shean, Michael McManamon caught a specimen 6.5 pound sea trout, a catch of a lifetime which most of us can only dream about.

Despite the abundance of both salmon and sea trout, I of course caught nothing, but that was partially due to laziness and a desire to spend time revisiting Achill and the surrounding countryside.

Ballycroy National Park extends to over 11,000 hectares of blanket bog and mountainous terrain covering a vast and largely uninhabited wilderness. There is a new interpretive centre located on the edge of the village and while I would normally avoid such places as I feel they can diminish the sense of unspoilt landscape that attracts us in the first place, this one is an exception.

Scale

Perhaps it was the sheer scale of the park itself that made me appreciate guidance regarding the flora and fauna and the extraordinary diversity of habitat.

The information on display is excellent and aimed primarily at exciting the interest of children and helping them learn more about our natural heritage. There is also the added bonus of an exceptionally good café upstairs with splendid views of the surrounding area.

I had been told that I would be greatly disappointed if I visited Achill as it was said to have changed hugely since my childhood with unsuitable development ruining the scenery.

This was the landscape so perfectly captured by Paul Henry when he lived and painted on the island for a decade from 1910. While I only visited the southern side of Achill, I found it still retained its lovely coastline with numerous beaches. There was little to complain about but then I suppose it all depends on your state of mind. Do we really want to see people living in mud cabins in abject poverty? Surely not.

The little thatched houses with their tiny windows were undoubtedly attractive to tourists passing by but they cannot have been much fun to live in.

I well remember from my youth seeing women wearing dark shawls along with ragged barefoot children, hard at work in the bogs.

There were few men to be seen then as they were all away working overseas. The money they sent home was the only thing that kept the west of Ireland solvent.

The donkeys and wicker panniers were indeed picturesque but again, like the mud-walled cabins, they are part of an impoverished past that we are fortunate to have escaped.

One further major change evident is the arrival of aquaculture or the farming of salmon and other fish species in cages in the sheltered bays surrounding our coasts.

It remains unclear as to whether they are responsible for a fall off in the numbers of fish returning to our rivers.

Sea trout and salmon are happily still abundant in the Owenduff and according to the records, their numbers are now increasing.

I cannot wait to return and try my luck once more.