

Ulster: the Need for Control

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How can you rediscover the lost joys of the prewar English countryside, that lost fairyland in which, before prairie farming and conifer profiteering, scruffy little fields, straggly woods, mossy banks and rambling hedgerows together slept what Orwell called 'the deep, deep sleep of England'? One answer, surprisingly, is to head north-west across the Irish Sea to Northern Ireland. The media blanket this troubled Province in a permanent miasma of doom, but in its countryside there are few reminders of the Troubles and many reminders of a time when the Arcadian dream was flesh through most of the British Isles.

The phenomenon that first awakes memories of the past in the traveller flying into Aldergrove Airport is the abundance of thick and healthy hedgerows. The hedgerow has become the symbol of the devastation of lowland England by agricultural intensification over the last 40 years. More than 150,000 miles of hedgerow and 20 million hedgerow trees have disappeared in England and Wales since the Second World War II. Where a hedgerow survives at all it is often cut down to a sad looking line of stumps. In Northern Ireland, studies have shown that there is a higher density of proper hedgerows today than there was in Devon in 1955, and many of these Irish hedges have that unkempt air which led Rupert Brooke to call Edwardian England's hedgerows 'little lines of sportive wood run wild'.

In the lee of the hedges, many landscape features now scarce in England survive in abundance in Northern Ireland. Upstanding human monuments, some thousands of years old, still litter the Province's countryside. Stone-Age burial cairns, dolmens, court graves, circles of standing stones or individual megaliths occur in relative profusion along with the Province's most common prehistoric relic, 'raths' or fortified farmsteads. These usually show up as small circular thickets enclosed by a bank or ditch on the tops of drumlins and embody the remains of fortified farmsteads from around the 4th century AD. Being so common, ancient relics are often preserved in the most casual way - a standing stone, erected at the dawn of history, may well serve as a washing-line prop.

Amongst this wealth of living and inanimate landscape features survive wild creatures which modern agricultural methods have banished from much of England.

Visit the Lough Erne in Fermanagh, a low-lying, watery wilderness of lake, island and convoluted shoreline, and you can still hear the weird croak of the corncrake, a bird once relatively common in England but now extinct there. Today it survives on the British mainland only in the Hebrides and Orkney. The Ernes are what the Norfolk Broads must have been a century ago before they were swamped by people and craft. Inviting memories of Arthur Ransome and Coot Club as the Broads no longer can, the Ernes play host to only about 200 hire cruisers and sailing craft over their 40,000 acres of navigable waterway - compared to the 2,900 hire cruisers and sailing boats that jostle for space on the 10,000 acres of the Broads.

Ulster's uplands have escaped the grim blankets of sitka spruce that have buried the charms of so much of Wales, Scotland and northern England. The Mourne Mountains, the Sperrins in Tyrone, the Antrim Plateau and Glens and isolated hills like Slemish Mountain in County Antrim rise up bare and imposing from the patchwork of small green fields. There are forestry plantations, but they are smaller and more compact than many of those in Britain, and they mainly adorn rather than dominate the hills.

The explanation for the survival of so much of the wildlife, archaeology and landscape of yesteryear is two-fold. Firstly, there is a shortage of arable agriculture - the type of farming that in England most often leads to the prairie landscapes of agribusiness. Arable agriculture occupies only 7% of Northern Ireland's farmland; the remainder is devoted largely to sheep and cattle. Then there is the relatively smallscale of land holding in the Province compared to the position on the British mainland; while the average size of farm holding in Great Britain is 280 acres, in Northern Ireland it is only 60 acres.

Furthermore, while 40% of farmland on the British mainland is owned by landlords and farmed by tenants, virtually all the Province's rural land is held by owner-occupier farmers. For in Northern Ireland, unlike Britain, feudalism was effectively overthrown in the latter part of the 19th century during the tenant-led land revolution which drove the large landowner from the Province. The small scale of land holding encourages a high density of boundary hedgerows while the tradition of small holdings makes Northern Ireland's farmers less territorially ambitious than many farmers on the British mainland.

The small scale of ownership also militates against private afforestation. Most of the Province's commercial forests are owned by the Forest Service of the Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland. Commercial private forestry requires areas of at least 500 acres to make a good profit and it is very difficult to purchase 500 or 1,000 acres as a block in Northern Ireland. While in Britain afforestation by private landowners now adds 80 square miles of bare land a year to its already large estate, in Northern Ireland private conifer afforestation has hardly expanded at all.

Yet the survival of so much in the Northern Ireland landscape cannot be taken for granted. Ominous clouds line the horizon, and the Ulster treasure-house of wildlife, archaeology and landscape is now looking more like a house of cards than a fortress.

On the Lough Erne, duck populations are dwindling at an alarming rate. Sample surveys by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds of wildfowl on the Lower Lough have revealed a 69% decline in number of red-breasted mergansers over the last 72 years (now down to 22 breeding pairs), while the tufted duck population has plummeted from 194 breeding pairs in 1967 to 10 pairs last year. Nobody knows the cause of the ducks' decline, but unless action is taken soon, these delightful creatures will disappear completely from the Fermanagh Lakeland within the near future.

Nor are the archaeological treasures entirely safe. True, there are still a lot of them, but according to calculations by the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland, 48% of the known archaeological features of County Armagh and 50% of those in South Antrim have been destroyed since the publication of the first Ordnance Survey maps in 1835. Yet only a tiny proportion of the Province's archaeological relics have ever been excavated: less than 1% of the raths, for instance.

Meanwhile, building development is transforming Northern Ireland's countryside in a way that has been unthinkable in England and Wales since the 1930s. By and large, Northern Ireland lacks the village structure of England's countryside, and instead is dotted with isolated farmsteads, to which are being added more and more bungalows and houses for people not employed in agriculture. The Northern Irishman does not want a cottage in a village; he wants his own home out in the fields. In the Omagh planning division, for example, which includes land around the Lough Erne, in 1977 (the most recent year for which figures are available) planning permission was given for the building of only 202 new dwellings in towns but 564 new dwellings in the countryside.

Northern Ireland's greatest treasure is its bogs and the wildlife they support, but they are now the Province's most threatened habitat.

Thousands of acres of bogs with their communities of mosses, grasses and insectivorous plants all thriving on wet peat have been destroyed in recent years. More than half the surviving bogs in County Down, for example, were destroyed between 1950 and 1965.

The reason for all these disturbing developments is that the forces for change which have afflicted Britain are now reaching Northern Ireland; meanwhile the Province's machinery for environmental protection is as archaic as its landscape. Take the safeguarding of historical monuments, including archaeological features. In England and Wales, a landowner needs permission from the Secretary of State for the Environment before he can do anything which would damage or destroy a scheduled ancient monument. If he goes ahead and ploughs up the site before receiving consent, he is committing an offence and can be fined. However, in Northern Ireland the landowner needs only to give the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland six months notice of his intention to damage or destroy a scheduled ancient monument. During that period, attempts may be made to safeguard the feature, but the landowner is free to go ahead with his plans after the six months are up. By no means all the Province's historical and prehistoric artifacts enjoy even the slim protection afforded by scheduling.

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Only 800 of them have been officially scheduled by the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland, out of a total of 12,000 known sites.

Woods, which are scarce and therefore precious in Northern Ireland, can be eliminated as easily, as archaeological relics. A landowner needs no permission whatsoever to clear away a wood, whereas on the British mainland no landowner may fell more than 176 cubic feet of timber in any one quarter-year unless he has a felling licence from the Forestry Commission.

Protection for specific areas along the lines of the national parks system of England and Wales is also lacking. Dr Arthur Mitchell is a general practitioner at Kilkeel in

County Down. In his spare time he chairs the Mourne Advisory Council, a group of local people which together with organisations like the RSPB and the National Trust, are seeking protection for the landscape of the Mountains of Mourne, now threatened by anything from the erection of hacienda-style bungalows to water abstraction and storage schemes and the clearance of hedgerows. Pleading for the designation of the Mourne as a national park, Dr Mitchell told a Royal Town Planning Institute conference last autumn: "I don't want anything above what you have in the UK mainland. I just want what you do have, and regard as having had rightfully. Because we do not have it here."

Areas like the Mourne, the hill range of Slieve Gullion in County Armagh, Upper and Lower Lough Erne and the countryside around them, the Plateau, Glens and Coast of Antrim, and the Sperrin Hills in Tyrone would benefit in a whole host of ways from national park designation along the lines on which it operates in England and Wales. Tighter planning controls would not only protect these landscapes against current threats but would also safeguard them against new threats implicit in the declining profitability of agriculture. A national park authority in each of these areas, with its own staff and budget controlled by a mixture of central government nominees and local council representatives, might provide the positive planning in conservation and recreation urgently needed in the Mourne and these other areas.

But no national parks have ever been successfully designated in Northern Ireland, and there are no current plans for any. Instead of national park designation, the Mourne enjoy the status of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The main benefit of AONB designation is that, unlike the situation in the rest of the Province, anybody who wishes to build an isolated house in the countryside has to demonstrate a need to live there. (In Britain, the need requirement exists everywhere.) But AONB designation does not bring with it the planning controls over farming and forestry enjoyed by the national parks of England and Wales. In November 1987, the Mourne was the only AONB in the whole of the Province; although over the next few years the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland intends to designate other areas.

In an attempt to persuade the farmers of the Mourne to retain the traditional look of the landscape, particularly on the lower lying land of small fields, the Mourne are shortly to be designated the Province's first 'environmentally sensitive area'.

However, while such designation attracts payments of £40 per acre for farmers in the Yorkshire Dales who agree to farm in an environmentally sensitive way, the figure for farmers in the Mourne will be only £12 per acre. At such a low rate, it is hard to see many farmers considering it worth their while to draw up the five-year plan for their holdings necessary for successful application for payments under the designation.

Ulster also lags behind in the designation of the Province's equivalent to Britain's Areas of Special Scientific Interest - or ASSIs. These are the only areas in the Province in which there is some form of planning control designed to ensure that conservation needs can override landowners' desires for agricultural change. Yet while 4,826 SSSIs had been designated in Great Britain covering 6% of the land, in Northern Ireland there were only 15 ASSIs covering the tiniest fraction of land by November 1987.

The reason why environmental protection machinery has been slow in coming is the immense power of the farming lobby in the Province in which 5.6% of the working population is employed on the land compared with 1.6% in Great Britain. The strength of the farming lobby is matched only by the weakness or absence of institutions designed to protect the interests in land of the rest of the community.

Northern Ireland has no government quangos like the Countryside Commissions or the Nature Conservancy Council ready to make recommendations on conservation. Progress could be made on a whole host of fronts if such organisations were created. Furthermore, the existence of such bodies or body (perhaps a 'Countryside Conservancy' combining the functions of the Countryside Commissions and Nature Conservancy Council) would serve as a voice for conservation that is lacking at present. At the moment, the designation of national parks and AONBs, ASSIs, the provision of country parks and the protection of historic monuments are all carried out by the Conservation Service of the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland Commanding a budget of only £5 million a year, this service forms only a tiny part of a big department that also covers roads, planning, water and housing.

Governments have been wary of setting up such bodies because appointments even to such apparently harmless bodies would be provocative in the hot political climate of the divided Province. Still, in the early '80s Chris Patten MP, as Parliamentary Under Secretary at the Department of the Environment, invited Jean Balfour, the recently retired chairman of the Countryside Commission for Scotland, to consider whether a new quango for conservation and recreation should be set up in the Province.

Patten had an open mind on the question, but Mrs Balfour in her report in 1984 came down against a Countryside Commission-type organisation for Northern Ireland because she thought it would upset the Province's farmers too much. She recommended instead that two bodies called the Ulster Countryside Committee and the Nature Reserves Committee should be merged.

These two committees have advised the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland over a number of years on conservation issues in the Province.

However, they have no separate staff or budget and are quite unlike the Countryside Commission, which frequently issues statements criticising the government of the day. It is hard to see the new committee being any more effective than the old ones. A hint of what might be achieved if countryside policy-making in Northern Ireland was more effective is available in the remarkable story of the Ulster Way.

This 600-mile-long footpath - the only one in the Province - is the almost single-handed achievement of one enthusiastic and energetic man. Wilfred Capper, now aged 82, realised 42 years ago that a path through Northern Ireland could embrace a far more varied range of landscape types than any English path. After years of lobbying he won the support of the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, a body primarily concerned with organised sport. Together they set up the Way over a period of 12 years. Although about half of the resulting Way goes along little country roads rather than along footpaths, and where it does involve footpaths over private land these often rest on a handshake rather than written legal agreements, the fact remains that the Ulster Way is a significant achievement of great tourist potential, and the unique assets of the Province justify many more such imitations. The obstacle is the fraught political climate of the Province, as it is to so many other kinds of progress in Northern Ireland.

But conservation has always been thought less politically sensitive than housing, education or employment. On the Ulster Countryside Committee and the Nature Reserves Committee people from both sides of the political divide have worked together happily enough. Bringing both political and professional appointees together on a Countryside Conservancy would certainly be worth a try.

Steps which increase the dominance of Direct Rule are bound to be resented by many, but the creation of national parks in the Province could have a positive effect as well. Since the introduction of Direct Rule in 1972, all planning decisions have been taken not by elected local councils but by the Department of the Environment in Belfast; district councils have a consultative role only in planning. Were national parks in Northern Ireland to be administered by park authorities, one third of whose members were drawn from local councils with the remaining two thirds, appointed by government (as the Province's 1965 Amenity Lands Act, which was repealed in 1983, provided) district councils would actually get back some planning power. These park authorities would also act as a sort of interface in the areas concerned between the civil servants in Belfast and the people actually on the ground, which in turn could bring people face to face with the reality of the dangers confronting the Ulster environment.

Common efforts to keep these at bay could pave the way for a similar effort on other fronts. It would be wrong to suggest that saving Ulster's countryside could incidentally resolve the Irish problem, but it might be a small step in that direction. Whether it is or not, it is a step that should be taken, not just for the sake of Northern Ireland, but for the sake of the British Isles as a geographical, ecological and archaeological whole.

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