

LOVELY LEITRIM!

LOOK WHERE
YOU'RE GOING!

"Keep an eye out and watch where you're going." This piece of advice is usually given by a mother to a child who has just started to walk or, by an older mother to a lad in his forties, bent on taking the plunge. Sound advice in both cases, I'd say! You couldn't have a child bumping her pudgie nose against the table, nor the lad getting pure silly and marrying a decoration, a faireen, a walking chemist-shop! In both cases, I can tell you, from my own observations, the advice has been ignored at times and with such dire consequences as to give steady employment to nurses and doctors, to priests, social workers, gardai, prison officers and, in "happier" times, part-time work to the hangman.

It's not that, I'm talking about, at all. When I ask you to look where you're going, I'm pleading with you to open your eyes and appreciate all the beauty that lies around you in your native county.

Get Out and About

For a start why don't you travel a bit? There's no excuse, in this day and age, for a Mohill man to say that he never saw Glencar nor for a Drumkeerin lady to say that she heard there was a nice lake near Ballinamore — "was it Garadice they called it?" No excuse for women nor for men — nor even for the few men who get the disease. In early adult life they

contract this disease, which advances, with outlandish speed. "Gallop badgerosis" I call it — tho' I never saw the words written down before. This disease consists, principally, in the notion that any man who is impressed by scenery or takes an interest in the appearance of the world around him should go to a psychologist or be brought to a psychiatrist.

Typical symptom of the disease: "I saw Joc looking up into a bush to-day, fair play to him! I'm thinking

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he won't find it until he lands in a bigger house nor the one he's in," or, "Didn't I see a poor lad on the mountain yesterday, looking around him and looking down into the valley, and he has neither sheep nor bog up there. I wonder what'll the boys in Columba's make out of him!"

If I had my way, men with this disease would be sent to a type of free-range, non-subsidised, treatment centre in Meath, Kildare or, better still, the Sahara — and fair play to them! Cheviots are seldom tolerated in Art Galleries and if you spot a cow in a museum, be sure she's from an earlier age and not likely to qualify very easy, I doubt, for a headage grant. It may be going a bit far with it but I wouldn't trust a man



who didn't appreciate his surroundings. To deal with him, if you ask me, you'd need to be up early, aye and have your fill slept. I'm not saying he would go for your jugular but he's no addition. Ask him "what time is it? or is the last train gone? or did you see ever a stray ewe up around Croc? but, after that, hold your tongue and pray against nightmares.

Leitrim Lamenters?

The song "Lovely Leitrim" did a good job for Leitrim. Above all, it was positive. The composer had never read the lamentations of Jeremiah, so there was no word of drumlin hills, no mention of two cows and two wee calves. (Leitrim folk are not lamenters but there are a few left who show little enthusiasm except for moans. I sometimes think, without any irreverence I assure you, that, at their funeral Mass, the response to the psalm should be "Two cows and two wee calves"!)

Yes, Lovely Leitrim gave us all a lift but the composer was more interested in monks and mythology than in the exquisite beauty of the county.

Some other time, if God is good to me and people leave me alone, I must tell you about Garadice lake, about Lough Rynn, Lough Scur, Erril of the hundred swans, tidy Dromod, Carrick of the cruisers, and the highlands of Mullaghgarve which keep watch over the whole of South Leitrim.

Look down from Knockatean

I'm jumping the Iron Mountain on my way to Manorhamilton and, on my journey, I want to make two stops. Don't ever tell anyone you have seen Lough Allen unless you have seen it from the high road above Knockatean and Moneenreave. This is my first stop. If you haven't seen Lough Allen from here, raise your voice when you're singing "I thought I saw." Best to turn at Tarmon Church and climb until you come to the rock at the T junction. Here you can sit on the rock, surrounded by heather and bilberry blossoms, look down at the huge expanse of Lough Allen and, in the distance, Sliabh-an-Iarann, and the valleys of Ballinaglera. (Will the person who dumped his broken beds and plastic ware beside my favourite rock please taken note that he has savaged and desecrated one of the loveliest spots in Leitrim — if I had caught you in the act you would have ended up "reluctant for to sit.")

Excuse me Drumkeerin but I must fly over and perch myself down in Altavra. Altavra is worth a visit if there was never a lake, but it is particularly interesting because of the view it affords you of Lough Allen. And there's a special bonus when you turn away from Allen. There, below you, is a shining silver sixpense, tucked in among the hills of Creevelea — Belhavel lake. (I'm sure, as a motorist, I am not alone in regretting that the same silver sixpense isn't tucked in enough by the hills of Creevelea).

Manorhamilton of the Four Valleys

There is a condition, better described as a 'trake', very common today and known by its initials M.O.T.H. — standing for Micky on the hob. Micky surveys the vast area between his ash-covered toes and the dresser, becomes an expert on that local scene, and then pronounces himself an expert on everything. That's the boy that will make economic forecasts and pontificate on national issues! In giving my opinion on the scenery of the Manorhamilton area I deny any connection with Micky. I have travelled thro' nearly



Top: Ballinamore. (Picture — Joe McInerney).

Middle: Mass Rock at Carntulla, Ballinaglera. (Picture — Seamus McMorrow).

Bottom: Killansen. (Picture — Joe McInerney).

every valley in Ireland, in Wales, in the Lake District of England and in the Highlands of Scotland, and yet, I say, the Manorhamilton area surpasses anything I have seen. The town stands at a crossroads between four valleys — Glenfarne, Glenade, Glencar — the Manor and Killargue-Dromahair. So, we'll use Manorhamilton as our gateway to each valley.

Lilting townlands of Glenfarne and Glenade

The gentle sloping mountains of the Glenfarne valley lead you down to Lough MacNean, — even the names of the townlands make you eager to see where you are going — Moneenlum, Stravannies, Stradian, Lagoon, Meenkeeragh, Ardmoneen and Cornamawn. You'll be in no hurry to move from MacNean or from the civilised tribes of that valley but, if you must, you can lead north east, with Thurmor looking across the

Fermanagh hills, on through Kiltyclogher, and beyond, where the Rossinver braes keep watch over Lough Melvin's east side.

By contrast the stark and abrupt magnificence of the Glenade mountains leads you safely past the dobharcú in Glenade lake, past Proughlish and Crompaun to Kinlough at the lower end of the valley. In this village at the head of Lough Melvin you should stand and look back towards Glenade. Glance left to Rossinver and 'the gates' over the mountain into Glenaniff. Look straight ahead at half a dozen cones, pinnacles, or turrets, cocked up in the air between you and the face of the mountain. You think, perhaps, of the pinnacle of the temple, or maybe you imagine a thousand fairies dancing on the hills of Dartry or Aughadunvane. Cast your eye to the right and there you see the Ballintrillick valley, Gleniff, and, higher up, Truskmore. Visit our little bit of coast-line or drive towards the mountains thro' Tawley, land of the rowan tree.

I must return to Manorhamilton and turn West this time. There, in front of you, against the Western sky, lies Benbo, a quiet giant bathing its toes in the Bonet.

Have you been to Glencar?

You may not have seen Benbo but if you haven't, it's not Benbo's fault. I'm told it has been there half a million years longer than the mountains beside it in Glenfarne! Move west a mile or two to Shanvass and we have a choice of the Manor valley or Glencar. We go on to Glencar but we'll come back to Shanvass. The Glencar valley has been there, in all its beauty, for maybe millions of years. A few years back, the notion of separate counties was introduced and so a line was drawn to separate Sligo from Leitrim. As far as I'm concerned the line does not exist and the whole valley is a Leitrim valley — mountains, river, lake, Ben Bulbin, Truskmore, the Waterfall and all (by the same token I will allow all to be claimed by Sligo — but no dividing lines). If you expect me to describe the beauty of the Glencar valley it just shows that you have never been there. Pay it a visit and you'll know what I mean.

We should retrace our steps to Shanvass, and cross Moragh into the Manor valley but, instead, we will fly over Glenague and Conrea and over Lecan itself into the upper reaches of that beautiful place. This whole area, Moragh, Corraughan, Shramore, Carrickfad and Newtown, leading down to the lake, is a place of a hundred hills. And all hundred of them like children in the school-yard playing 'hide and go seek' popping up here, and there, and yonder, peeping around corners, disappearing around corners with boisterous abandon. But, always, as though you had been forbidden to look at it, your eyes will be lead down to Lough Gill. Comparing lake with lake is a dubious exercise but, if it has any validity at all, I will give you Killarney, Windermere and Lough Lomond but I will hold fast to Lough Gill.

Dromahair — The Bonet — Lough Gill

In our fourth and last valley coming south and west from Manorhamilton the road takes you between O'Donnell's Rock and Benbo (you will not get me to mention the fact that, just here, the road itself has valleys) and you follow the Bonet into Dromahair. As in the other valleys, you have every opportunity to get out of your car, take out your bicycle, and cycle for an hour, or just climb for an hour or two and look around you. Dromahair, the Bonet, and Lough Gill

are inseparable but I want to separate them and say something of the town itself. We may not know much today about those who founded or lived in the abbeys and monasteries hundreds of years ago, but we are certain that they showed unnerving judgment in choosing places of great beauty for their foundations — Glendalough, Clonmacnois, Creevelea Abbey — so much part of the town of Dromahair. Groves of copper beach and lime, majestic oak, horse-chestnut and sycamore, the Bonet, ruins of O'Rourke's Castle, Creevelea Abbey — that's what Dromahair means to me. I will not describe it further except to say no native of Leitrim should be let die before seeing Dromahair — I hasten to add that no native should be let die after seeing it.

Seasonal Beauty

The variety in this North Leitrim region can, immediately, be multiplied by four, to take account of the seasonal variations: Glenade when the mountains are white, is a different Glenade; and Glenfarne, not to be missed at any season, should surely be seen at rhododendrum time. Dromahair in Autumn, and Tawley at the same time for its rowan trees. The instinct for survival bids me not to mention a few places best seen in early Spring when the blackthorn is in full bloom! I can hear the voice "Do you hear him — and all belonging to him reared, I doubt, on sloes"!

And multiply the variety again if you can row a boat or climb a mountain. I've been on Lough MacNea, on Lough Melvin, and of course, on Lough Gill. Lough Allen gave me a bit of a fright on my one boat trip there. It put manners on me! — I think, maybe the main reason for my liking that rock up in the Knockatean hills is that it's a safe distance from the lake!

I've climbed every mountain in this region. Not only do the valleys look different, when you get up there, but life itself looks different — square miles of heather in bloom, busy bees taking up their collections, and Department rams nonchalantly passing by — no probing questions from them — "How are they all in Carrick?" "Any word from the ones in America?" or, "How did Pat do in the Group Cert?" It is my considered opinion that I have learned more, up yonder on the mountains, than I ever did in more renowned and more expensive institutions.

My ramblings are over. I have done less than justice to a land carved out by God for decent people. But, as I love the place, and its people, I hope that others may decide to ramble down there, and, if you do, please look where you're going.

Des Flynn.

