

# Climbing Cuilcagh

Thomas D. Kersting  
Carmel, New York.



As anyone who lives in a valley knows, there's an inevitable challenge to climbing a mountain. Stark, solid, massive, it squats like some ageless beast upon its ancient haunches, lording itself over the valleys below, beckoning. One can resist the lure of the mountains, but one cannot escape it forever.

From my first trip to Ireland more than twenty years ago, Cuilcagh Mountain in the western stretches of County Cavan had been calling to me. During the intervening years I've made seven or eight trips to the valleys around my wife's native village of Dowra, marvelling at the grandeur of Cuilcagh and the nearby Slieve an Iarainn on the fringes of County Leitrim. While visions of the mountains would linger in my memory long after each return to New York, my many photographs could do little justice to their evocative power. The photos would freeze an instant in the time of mountains, capturing but momentary glimpses of their majesty. But to stand in the valleys below and gaze at the rugged shapes that loomed in the distance was to witness the presence of the mountains, to see their changing faces as storms swept in from the ocean.

The mountains would be alter-

nately ringed by halos of fog, then suddenly brooding in a scarf of storm clouds, only within moments, it seemed, to be laced with a fine soft mist through which the sun beamed its long slanted rays like paths to heaven just before giving way again to the familiar muted tones of a pewter Irish sky. In rare moments of sheer serendipity, the mountains would be graced with the sweeping tinted grandeur of a rainbow.

Is it any wonder, then that the mountains beckoned? There was no question of the need to experience the mountains firsthand. It was merely a matter of time. In the summer of 1989, returning yet again to Dowra, I had the good fortune to be introduced to John Fitzpatrick, who had grown up on the lower slopes of Cuilcagh Mountain. Having emigrated several decades ago, John makes a point of returning home to Cuilcagh from New York just about every summer. When he invited me to accompany him on a trip up the mountain, I knew the time had come to make the climb.

A hearty, rugged man of more than sixty years, John Fitzpatrick speaks of Cuilcagh with the love and awe of one who has known intimately the secrets of the mountain. These days his home place is the farthest inhabited cottage up the lower slopes of Cuilcagh, although John was quick to point out relics of for-

mer homesteads higher up the hills. The occasional track of ridges suggested where potatoes or some other crop had once been set. Cuilcagh was probably inhabited during the seventeenth century, John related, by people driven up the mountain when their land was seized during the time of Cromwell.

We were joined on our climb by Patrick Kennedy, a native of Stranamorth in the shadows of Cuilcagh, and by Harold Johnston, a draper and local historian of nearby Blacklion. As we slipped into our wellingtons, John stripped off his shoes and socks and rolled up the legs of his pants, insisting, despite our entreaties that he could more comfortably traverse the rugged terrain in his bare feet, much as he had always done as a boy and just about every summer since. And so he led us, as agile as a barefoot boy, as we began the ascent of Cuilcagh.

The lower slopes were an effortless hike. But about a third of the way up, the mountain revealed how wily it could be. Every time we approached what from the stretches below had appeared to be the summit, yet another peak would loom beyond it, enticing the climber to push on and on. In this way the mountain initiated



*He led us ,agile as a barefoot boy"*

the climber into the secret of its society, alternately giving a glimpse of what lay ahead only to yield yet another challenge, unfolding itself in layers.

All the while the terrain grew steadily but imperceptibly steeper. This was no longer the easy strides of the lower slopes, for the upper stretches of Cuilcagh required as much determination as they did physical stamina. Pushing on, we thrust and hurled ourselves at the mountain.

With the wind whipping in our faces, we continued our ascent, looking back to see the valley below receding farther and farther into the distance. When we spied two figures climbing the lower slopes, we slackened our pace and were soon joined by Oliver Dolan, a native of Derrylahan in Glangevlin, and his wife Eileen. They had heard talk of our journey and decided to join us. On the lonely slopes of Cuilcagh we were glad of their company.

From the higher stretches of the mountain we could see the clouds moving in from the distance. The barren, craggy landscape offered little shelter from the impending storm. "You'd better take cover",

John Fitzpatrick announced with the assurance of a native, "there's going to be a heavy shower. Pull in, pull in," he urged as we hugged an outcrop of rocks. The rain lashed all about, swept by an arrogant wind. Then on that August day the hail began to pelt us with its crisp, hard patter. "Well now, that's regular rain down at home now," John remarked, adding, "It's about twenty degrees colder up here." As the storm rolled past, we could see the

wave of it sweeping across the valleys below enshrouded in mist.

I was struck by how fast the view changes from the mountain. It was as though the mood of the place were constantly shifting: one moment bright, cheerful, optimistic; the next dark, gloomy, foreboding; the mizzled and misty, mixture of both. Meanwhile, all about us, few signs of life were to be seen. No doubt nocturnal creatures roamed the slopes after dark, but in the light of day we'd see little more than errant sheep foraging in the hollows, an occasional crow, or a hawk gliding above the mountain passes. John Fitzpatrick spoke of a herd of about thirty wild horses that used to roam the slopes of Cuilcagh, but there were no longer any signs of them to be seen. Among the most striking features of the mountain habitat, however, was the virtual absence of trees. The limestone terrain was blanketed with grasses, lichens, and mosses; the mountain meadows embroidered with blooms of purple heather and the occasional dwarf shrub, the landscape everywhere bathed in tints of grey, brown, and green. As the sky cleared overhead, patches of sunlight broke through amid shadows of clouds that dusted the hills.

Nearing the summit of Cuilcagh we faced the most formidable stretch of the climb. From the path we had taken there was but one way to the top - a narrow ledge of rock known locally as "the sheep's pass" that required a bold leap of faith to traverse. In single file we hugged the cliff step by step, finally lifting



*"as the rain lashed, we hugged an outcrop of rocks"*

ourselves over the top.

We reached the summit of Cuilcagh two hours after we had begun our ascent from the valley below. At 2,188 feet, Cuilcagh is the highest elevation in the region. For a full 360 degrees there is no higher view to be seen from the summit, and it is a vantage point of sheer exhilaration. Indeed, it was from atop Cuilcagh that the ordinance survey team of 1836 had mapped out much of Ireland, for the summit affords a view of seven counties. When the cloud cover had cleared, we could see all the way into the mountains of Donegal to the northwest.

"We used to have sheep, now, across all the way over there," John Fitzpatrick said, sweeping a finger across the hollows below. "People often got lost coming home from the mountains," he continued, "and we used to always say if you'd get to the top you'd be okay...They'd think they were at home when they'd get (to the top)...They could see the lights of Glan, you know, when they came over the mountain. They could see the other side of the mountain. But down there it'd get night on you and unless you know the mountain good, you wouldn't know..."

His words trailed off as if in awe of the plight one would face if forced to pass the night on the bleak, forbidding slopes of Cuilcagh.

Aside from the view it affords, the most extraordinary sight at the summit of Cuilcagh is a pair of cairns, two adjacent stone pil-

lars about four feet high known as "the monument." As might be expected in Ireland, these stone mounds have a story attached to them.

"The old people used to tell us you never take a stone away from it," John Fitzpatrick related. "In fact, you're supposed to throw one at it, to bring one and throw it instead of taking one away. It wouldn't be right to knock it down." We added a stone, each of us, in silent tribute to and ancient custom.

We began our descent, tumbling effortlessly downward like the mountain streams beside us. Along the way John Fitzpatrick had one more story of Cuilcagh to relate.

"Do you see Mick Peter Dolan's there with the roof on it there, the furthest house up towards us here?" he asked.

"The police chased me with a basket of eggs down there once" he added.

"Did you get away?" someone in our party inquired.

"I did," John replied, "and I didn't drop my basket either."

As we approached the lowlands John scampered down the slopes ahead of us like the barefoot boy that he was at heart. We ended our journey where we had begun and capped it with tea at John's cottage.

What was it, I couldn't help but wonder, that had driven us up those windswept slopes? We climb mountains, of course, because "they're there." And we climb them for the exhilaration of the hike. Some even climb them merely to say that they have done so. For me that August day, climbing Cuilcagh was all of

these and more. The climb had been a humbling experience, a kind of prayer in a sense. I am reminded of the words of the psalmist which, like the mountain itself, put everything in perspective:

*When I consider thy heavens,  
The works of the fingers,  
The moon and the stars,  
Which thou hast ordained;  
What is man that thou art  
mndful of him?*

There is upon the top of a mountain a kind of serenity not to be found anywhere else. Even in the midst of five companions one experiences a rare and satisfying solitude, the sheer stillness of the summit reminding me of what the American writer Jack Kerouac has called "the reassuring rapturous rush of silence." It is a deep and mystifying mood of the place, a sense of continuity as if the ancient rock exuded the immutable presence of time long past. Far more than in the world below, things on the mountain top are as they have always been, untamed by the civilizing hand of man and society. And there is something sublime, a certain breathlessness in knowing such a presence, if only for a short while. In the years afterward, we can retreat from the hectic pace of life to a fleeting flash of the memory of such moments. To recall the serenity and the permanence of the mountain is to be sustained by it, and that is the greatest gift that the mountain has to give us.



*The Climbing Party*