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Conservation Campaign
May 2009

The Cave Hill CAMPAIGNER



ANNUAL REPORT

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It was a pleasant surprise when, a few weeks ago, I realised that the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign was twenty years old this year. Twentieth anniversaries are traditionally marked by gifts of china, or nowadays platinum, but neither of these is appropriate to Cave Hill. There are, as far as I know, no reserves of china clay or platinum ore on the hill. This is just as well, or perhaps the city fathers in these cash-strapped days might find the prospect of mining these irresistible. The Cave Hill Conservation Campaign believes that the best way of marking the anniversary is to pledge ourselves to continue the work of monitoring the hill, and trying to ensure that it is maintained for future citizens of Belfast in as unmolested a condition as possible. On an occasion such as this, it is a useful exercise to look back to our beginnings and remind ourselves of how threats to the integrity of the Hill can arise, and how essential it is to have an organisation which can coordinate opposition to any threat of unsympathetic development. The movement was initiated in 1989 under the melodramatic title of Save the Cave Hill Campaign, a community based response to the decision of the Belfast City Council to grant a prospecting licence to the Glenshesk Mineral Company to assess the reserves of zeolite on Cave Hill. The fear was that if commercially viable quantities of zeolite were found it would lead inevitably to mining. Now for a little science: zeolite is that mineral which is found as white flecks and patches in many of the samples of basalt you examine. At a microscopic level it has an open porous structure which is very good at trapping other molecules. It is therefore useful in industry as a filter, particularly in water filtration, and also as a matrix where different trapped molecules can be encouraged to combine, thus speeding up chemical reactions. This latter use is particularly important in the petrochemical industry where zeolites can act as a catalyst. Many different materials can be found as zeolites; there are at least 53 different minerals in the zeolite family but they are commonly found whenever volcanic rocks react with groundwater.

John Gray was chairman of the campaign from the start and under him, as part of our strategy, we founded the Belfast Hills Walk and organised public meetings. Whether as a result of the campaign or, more likely as a result of not finding commercial quantities, the quest for zeolite was abandoned. It was then decided to keep the campaign going as a way of allowing concerned citizens to express their affection for and opposition to threats to the Country Park. The title was changed to the present one to reflect the change in the group's focus.

Over the years the personnel has changed as people came and went on the committee. John and Albert Dolan are the only two still on the committee who were chosen at that inaugural gathering in Belfast castle in 1989. The present writer joined a few weeks later that year specifically to help organize the Belfast Hills Walk.

Inevitably the emphasis has changed slightly over the years. The level of our cooperation with City Hall has increased, and we have taken part in a number of joint activities with representatives of local government. These have included tree-planting and elimination of intrusive species. This year for the first time the committee has run its monthly meetings in Belfast Castle and we wholeheartedly welcome the publicly expressed commitment of the Council

to safeguard Cave Hill and its environs, as well as the evidence of increased expenditure on maintenance of the area. The invaluable work being carried out by the Parks Manager Fintan Grant and the Biodiversity Officer Orla Maguire is especially worthy of praise. But the problems of vandalism, path erosion, dog-fouling, mountain-biking and scramblers are still with us, and demand continuous vigilance from us and insistence on a continuing programme of retroactive and proactive activity from City Hall. We were promised an integrated management plan for the hill this year; we saw and commented on a draft plan last year, and we await the implementation of the proposals with impatience.

Before I finish, I would like to commend to you our newly revamped website and to thank our website editor Peter McCloskey in particular. Peter has been in charge of the website from the start and has been behind its renovation. Such a site nowadays is a very valuable source of information on all the aspects of the hill with which we have been associated these last twenty years and it also allows us to present ourselves very professionally to the public at large. When you visit it, I am confident you'll find it gratifying.
Cormac Hamill

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ENDLESS FORMS . . .

There can be very few readers of the *Campaigner* who are unaware of Charles Darwin's name. But 2009 marks the anniversary of Darwin's birth and it is appropriate surely for Belfast's premier conservation society to comment on the significance of the great shift in human understanding of nature with which Darwin is associated.

Fundamental to this is the proposition that all life forms have evolved from a common ancestor and the process that shapes this is *natural selection*. The philosopher Daniel Dennett refers to this as, "the greatest idea ever."

The idea Dennett celebrates is that competition for survival between reproductive organisms is the central mechanism in the evolution of life on earth. This operates in the most intimate environment, such as, for example, Cave Hill and its surroundings, as much as it does in more exotic parts of the world.

Most people's reaction to nature is essentially romantic. The interplay of colour and light, the behaviour of birds and animals, and the changes wrought by the movement of the seasons stimulate responses of pleasure and empathy. Almost everyone, one may suppose, remembers at least a few lines from Wordsworth's poem about daffodils. Darwin himself remarked very early on in *The Origin of Species*, "we behold the face of nature bright with gladness..." He goes on, of course, to point out that this sentiment masks the reality of a remorseless struggle for survival by all life forms in which those better adapted to their environment survive and others eventually become extinct. "We do not see, [he writes] or we forget that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings are destroyed by birds or beasts of prey." This destruction is merely an expression of a remorseless, inescapable struggle for existence in a world abounding in predators, disease and scarce supplies of food. All living creatures are engaged in this battle for survival.

There is a common misperception that this is a struggle between different species. It is not so; it is between members of the same species, success is measured by survival, and hence the capacity to pass on the genetic inheritance to the next generation. Another common error is to identify successful adaptation with strength, or size or even intelligence; in fact all that matters is suitability to a particular set of environmental circumstances.



Charles Darwin

How does this process actually work?

Variations in life forms occur naturally and the expression of these changes in form or behaviour is controlled by genes. Some changes may confer advantages, others do not, since in any given environment, certain traits enable particular organisms to survive. *Natural Selection*, acts to favour those characteristics that confer competitive advantage since, given limited resources and predation more creatures are born than can survive. Successful variations are passed on to succeeding generations because more of the successful survive. Over time, and especially over the vast reaches of geological time, cumulative adaptations lead to an ever increasing variety of life forms, and these, combined with environmental changes, ultimately result in the development of new species.

There are 250 species of native bee in Britain and Ireland and most people are familiar with swarming bees. On Cave Hill there is a species of solitary bee (about which Dr Jim Bradley has contributed an interesting piece elsewhere in the *Campaigner*.) Unlike social bees, which have a Queen who lays eggs and workers who care for them, the solitary bee, a female, after mating, constructs her own nest typically in soft earth or old wood, there-after gathering nectar and pollen for her off-spring. Biologists believe that social bees evolved from the solitary variety as a result of the operation of natural selection. Environmental pressures prompted a resort to social life forms as threats from parasites or predators provided the necessary selective pressure for colony formation with nest guarding. Greater success in nest formation with larger colonies suggests this as one of the factors responsible for the evolution of increased colony size.

On a vaster scale, all the complexity and variety we perceive in the natural world is the consequence of such accumulated changes over long periods of time. There is no fixed direction in this process, although it can be argued that given the existence of the scientific laws that govern nature, there is a limited number of ways in which life forms can successfully operate.

Some people react against this scientific explanation of life in which the process of natural selection has no fixed purpose or goal. Others agree with Darwin, who declared in a movingly expressed conclusion to his most famous book that, "there is a grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one...from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved."

With this thought in mind a walk on the Cave Hill may never be the same again.

Edward McCamley

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FORTWILLIAM GOLF COURSE

When we think of the Cave Hill, most of us probably have a mental picture of the area stretching above Belfast Castle to the summit at MacArt's fort. But this ignores the fact that the lower slopes of the hill are in fact below the line of the Antrim Road and in terms of topography the hill begins on what is now the Shore Road. A large portion of the land between these roads is occupied by Fortwilliam Golf Club, and its 18 fairways are easily seen when you look down from the top of Cave Hill. The golfers are certainly aware of the Cave Hill, since it dominates their view and its slopes are the main feature of the course, in terms of its physical challenge.

It is thought that the name Fortwilliam is derived from the name of a young nobleman who built two forts on the sites now occupied by Castle High School in Fortwilliam Park and Ekenhead Memorial Hall on North Circular Road. The approximate date of construction is 1330 and the forts were built to deter bandits who were preying on travellers between the main port of Carrickfergus and the Clondeboye estates in North Down.

The original golf club was founded in 1891. It was the first golf club in Belfast and occupied land between Fortwilliam Park and Parkmount Road. In 1897, the club was forced to re-locate due to the advancing suburbs of Belfast and in 1903 it was re-sited between Downview Avenue and Gray's Lane. The first president was the Earl of Shaftesbury who served from 1903 to 1961.

A PART OF CAVE HILL

Between 1914 and 1918 much of the course was given over to flax growing in support of the war effort. The land to the north of Gray's Lane was acquired in 1923 and the course was extended from 9 holes to 18 holes. Like all sports and leisure clubs, Fortwilliam reflected its wider society and it was not until 1926 that the members agreed to allow Sunday golf to take place. A further ten years would elapse before a liquor licence was acquired to improve the range of "refreshments" in the pavilion club-house. The growing popularity of golf is reflected in a steadily rising membership. By 1931 there were 294 men and 238 women. But the hard economic times of the 1930s took their toll, and by 1941 the numbers had dropped to 214 men and just 64 women. That year also saw a searchlight unit stationed on the course, as the threat of German air-raids became all too obvious to the people of Belfast. After the Second World War, economic conditions improved and membership resumed its upward trend. Today, total membership is over 900.

By the 1960s the membership had outgrown the wooden pavilion clubhouse and it was replaced in stages by the present building, starting in 1972. The old clubhouse was finally demolished in 1982, having served for almost 80 years.

Source: Fortwilliam Golf Club Centenary book 1991

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CAVE HILL DIAMOND FOUND

Readers of past issues of the *Campaigner* may recall the article that I wrote about the Cave Hill diamond in the 2000 issue. I described there the two ballads about the diamond which had been published by the last of the Belfast ballad sheet printers, John Nicholson, in the 1890's, and related two pieces of evidence that a large semi-precious stone of some kind did exist.

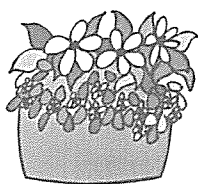
An entry under Whitewell in Henry Bassett's *Book of Antrim* (1887) stated:

Last year a very good example of the Irish diamond was found at Cave Hill by a little boy, son of Mr Hanna, belonging to Belfast. It is 11 inches in circumference, and weighs about a pound. Mr John Erskine, of North Street Belfast, purchased and advertised the crystal as the 'Cave Hill Diamond', finally disposing of it at a good price to the proprietors of Madame Tussaud's Gallery, London'. The Mr Hanna involved may well have been Professor Robert Hanna, author of one of the two ballads.

In rather more colourful terms, *Ireland Saturday Night* on 12 June 1925 described the stone – 'It was indeed a monstrous gem to be weighed in pounds avoirdupois and not by the orthodox carat. It formed the chief decoration of a draper's not a jeweller's window, where at night by its beams it made even the unbleached calico look like something which might grace the lines of royalty itself.'

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In 2000 I concluded 'clearly a large semi-precious stone of some kind was found, but what was it? Perhaps our geological friends can enlighten us.' However, without the actual stone, even geologists could only speculate.

Now the Cave Hill diamond has been re-discovered and presented to the Linen Hall Library where it will be on display from 10 June onwards. The stone and related papers have come via John Erskine's last surviving descendant. The 'diamond' weighs just under 1 pound 3 ounces and is of quartzite, not we think a naturally occurring mineral on the Cave Hill, but the Linen Hall is having it assessed by a geologist and will announce the findings at the launch of their exhibition.

Certainly John Erskine was the man to make much of the stone, whatever it is. *The Irish News* of 5 June 1897 described him as a man 'noted in Belfast for his sensational advertisements'. These were mainly connected with his 'Military and Cap Factory' at 84-86 North Street, where, as a contemporary poster put it, the wares were:

Hats, caps and tweeds, as Erskine supplied of the Royal Command of the King, the Queen, and their Royal Highnesses, the Prince and Princess of Wales, for their own wear [and] may also be had by the citizens of Belfast.

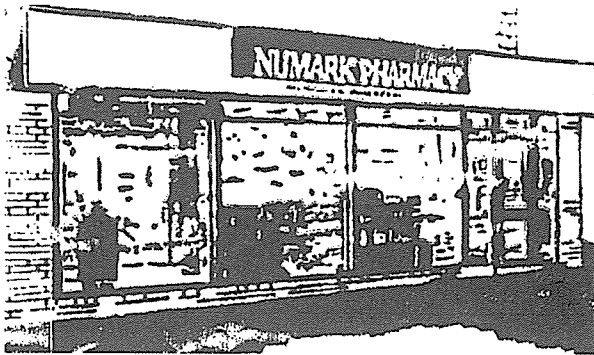
In fact Erskine inundated members of the royal family with unsolicited free gifts, and then publicised the most perfunctory replies. His cleverest 'Royal' stunt was in 1897 when he offered 7 acres of land in Carnmoney next to his house, Hatfield (note the pun!), for the construction of a royal residence in Ireland. As the *Irish News* sniffily commented, this was little better than 'three acres and a cow' and would hardly do for a royal palace. Meanwhile the royals were perfectly happy with the facilities at Dublin Castle thank you very much. This then was an offer that Erskine could make in the sure knowledge that it would not be taken up while he secured maximum publicity for free. At the time of the 1904 royal visit to Belfast his North Street premises were bedecked with the slogans 'Come back to Erin' and 'A Royal Residence'. Alas, Erskine's eccentric career as a self-publicist came to an end with his death in 1907.

Truth was never a central feature in his narrative, and certainly one piece of information in that original 1887 account of the Cave Hill diamond was inaccurate. He never sold the stone to Madame Tussaud's because it remained in his possession. Why did he suggest that he had? Had publicity about the stone in Belfast flagged? Or had some of our very competent local geologists queried whether the stone could have come from the Cave Hill, in which case it was better to concoct a story which explained why the stone was no longer available for close examination.

Well it is available now, and the Linen Hall will report its findings in the near future.

One piece of information in the *Book of Antrim* account in 1887 is clearly untrue, namely that Erskine sold the stone to Madame Tussaud's. He cannot have done so because it remained in his possession.

John Gray



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BEYOND CAVE HILL

Remembering Sir Samuel Ferguson.

*Fields are glazed with frost.
Every branch and leaf in
Ballypalady, Knowthhead
Antrim, Down, Sligo
Gleam and glitter
In the morning sun
A blue bag striped red
Gurgles in an icy stream
And the red phone booth
Wears a crown of white.*

*I have run away too long
From fields near my feet
Where this beyond-words day
A bell rings for religion.
On the bend to my right
Horses neigh loudly,
Misty breath hiding blackthorn*

*At a graveyard where a poet lies.
This is nocturne and symphony
As I pass a crossroads,
Feel the pull of winter sunlight
Where circling birds,
I know not their name,
Land on ancient trees.*

*I stop, watch and listen;
They call in strange unison
Wrapping notes around me.
In the distance, car's fumes,
The roar of engines
Are deadened on the motorway.*

*I listen again; watch their flight
From tree to tree as I cycle on.
In this Sunday's frosty hour
I ride beyond church and priest;
Stop at a river to take my fill;
The water intoxicating.
In the background the air
Is misty over the city.*

*I feel like kissing ground,
Running bare feet through frosty grass;
But I ride on wondering
What this world will be like in the future.
A brightness beyond redemption?
An end to the Hare's stillness?
The upside-down of making progress?
The chilling death of wrapping birdsong?
Tom Morgan*

Tom Morgan is a distinguished poet whose fourth collection, *Ballinrillick in the Light of Ben Whiskin* was published in 2006. The poems in that volume have been described as, 'speaking eloquently about the predicament of being a modern in ... ancient and meaning-laden landscapes.' The beautiful lyric published here testifies profoundly to the truth of this judgement.

NORTHERN

For seven years now we've lived in the lee of this famous hill. And it still excites me to look out the window and see figures moving about on the summit. The heart goes out to them somehow and we speculate as to who they are and where they've come from. Did they get wet in that shower on the way up? Is that a group of two or three? They must be glad they timed it just right to get such perfect weather. Like fans of some soap opera, we discuss the fates of the protagonists with concern. We project ourselves body and soul into these distant stick figures, vicariously enjoying their exhilaration. And we resolve to get up there ourselves again soon.

What is it about hills and mountains? They seem to bring out the poet in us. As a child I lived on the lower Falls and when we eventually moved "up the road" to Andersonstown there was a frisson about looking up and seeing fields, farmhouses, woods – and that tantalizing horizon beyond which lay ... what? As an eight year old I could only imagine. "The airport", they said, "Lough Neagh". Some day, I promised myself, I would climb up there and look down at what lay on the other side. It was one of those landmark moments of disillusionment, I think, when, as a twelve or thirteen year old, I did climb up only to discover that there was no "other side" – only more hills and fields going on for miles it seemed. Inevitably, however, Divis Mountain crept into my heart and became part of me. I associate it most vividly with nights returning from the pub as a teenager. As 18 year-olds we were full of ourselves, able now to drink in the open instead of behind the Ex-Servicemen's club. We were intoxicated not just with alcohol, but with our new standing,

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subscribing equally to the world of adults and the freedom of student life. On the way home, we used to stand on a street corner, unwilling to let go of the night, bantering and teasing, before going our separate ways. And then, on the last stretch of the walk home, I used to search the sky for the Plough, somewhere over the TV mast. That mast, the constellation, the hill, the quiet street – all are tied into feelings of being young and alive and inebriated by what felt like limitless potential.

Since then I have moved many times and strangely have rarely been so close to hills. Dublin seemed flat and the Wicklow Hills too far away to be more than a blue smudge to the south. In Ottawa we were near the river and we skated in the winter along Rideau Canal, but the nearest hills were to the north and in a different province. Strasbourg sat proudly in the Rhine valley with the Vosges on one side and the Black Forest on the other, but neither of these mountain ranges were a real presence; the city was dominated by rivers

J. D. O'BOYLE

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N HEIGHTS

and canals, an administrative capital with efficient links to the great artery that was the Rhine. In London, looking up revealed only tall buildings and perhaps the sky. A girlfriend lived near Primrose Hill for a brief while and we'd go and watch people flying kites; there was a view over Regents Park and London Zoo, but it wasn't quite the same as having that summit to look up at and daydream. Cambridge, then, was in the flattest of flat countries, on the edge of the Wash – all that reclaimed land whose only relief was Ely, “ship of the Fens” and home to Cromwell. As we drove to work along the A604, passing Dry Drayton, Fen Drayton, Fenstanton and Hemingford Abbots, there was little to draw the eye beyond the fields of rape and wheat that stretched relentlessly to the skyline.

Upon returning to Belfast I initially lived in South Belfast, which seemed the natural aspiration for anyone who'd been a student at Queen's – to want to live in those leafy streets around Stranmillis and Malone, Belfast's Boulevard St. Germain. Except, of course, you ended up not quite there, but on the edge – the Ormeau Road to be precise, a close second if you couldn't afford to buy in the most expensive square mile of real estate in the North. I'm afraid I made very little effort to get to know the hills that rise out of South and East Belfast; apart from the odd Sunday cycle up around Lambeg, Drumbeg and Carryduff. Much as I enjoyed pretending to be still a student I was finally to be whisked away on the wings of love to the far side of the city and find myself ensconced in a charming house on the lower slopes of the Cavehill.

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Seven years on, I find that, North Belfast has begun to insinuate itself into my psyche, so that McArt's Fort has become a fond friend, welcoming me back as I drive up the Cavehill Road. I now know something about the history of this place, but it's a complex subject and I still feel like a blow-in in many ways. What stands out for me is the evidence of a once-grand past; the gateway at Fortwilliam Park, the remains of the grandeur that was Chichester Park, the gate lodge at the waterworks. All these speak of an era when the Antrim Road vied with the Malone Road for the title of Poshest Thoroughfare, when the Jewish community was thriving, when the rail tracks on the Cavehill Road carried trucks filled with limestone down to the docks, when St. Malachy's was a seminary and B.R.A. was surrounded by playing fields.

All this grandeur, however, was inevitably complemented by a fair amount of deprivation and unrest. It's a brave historian who would set him or herself the task of charting the roots and growth of sectarianism in North Belfast. Just today I learned that the Cavehill Bowling and Lawn Tennis Club was subjected to a terrorist attack in 1914 – not from Republicans or Loyalists, but the Suffragettes! Belfast has always been something of a hotbed of radical politics, but I hadn't realised that feminism was so vigorously alive so early on. Were these sisters inspired by the figure of Mary-Ann McCracken? Did they, like her brother and his friends, go walking up toward the caves and look down on possible targets for revolutionary attack? Which takes me back to the hill.

Robert Frost has a poem called “The Mountain” where the eminence in question seems to symbolize all that is untamed and uncivilized, both in “Nature” and in human nature. People skirt around it and are rather afraid of it and they often talk about going up there but very few do. Paul Muldoon points out a link between “The Mountain” and one of Frost's most famous poems, “Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening.” According to Muldoon, “these two poems are in dialogue with one another, one ‘barking backwards’ at the other”, and if this is the case we must assume that “The Mountain” is a poem about the lure of the abyss, of danger, of “the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns.” I want to suggest that a mountain brings out all of this deep stuff in us; an anxiety about going out of our comfort zone, but a fascination with it too – a desire to get away from it all. Frost himself seems to put off the job of climbing the mountain – although, suspiciously, he seems to know quite a lot about it.

There is an unresolved tension in the poem, as there is in all Frost's work; a tension between the mundane and the extraordinary, the safe and the terrifying. This seems to me to be a healthy state of affairs. We all need to be about our business and we all have “promises to keep”, but it is good to be at least intermittently mindful of the possibility of going beyond ourselves. Cavehill helps us to keep that balance, reminding us constantly of the beyond, the Other, which can be both “out there” and within us.

John Gribbin

Cave Hill's Solitary Bees

We've all probably heard of the recent dire predictions and concerns about the future of our honey bee populations. As their numbers seem to be irreversibly declining and experts can only guess whether it's due to disease, pesticides, climate change or a grand combination, it's easy to forget that the honey bee is only one of exactly 101 bee species in Ireland.

We have another 19 species of bumble bee and a total of 81 solitary bee species. These solitary bees occupy virtually every habitat and corner of the land and range from very common to rare. Most have a simple lifecycle of building a nest into which they collect a store of pollen and nectar. Once they have enough, they lay an egg on this and seal the chamber where the young feed and develop until the next year.

Although this sounds simple life is never so straightforward. The time they emerge has to be just right, especially if they specialise in a particular plant like the bilberry bee. A couple of bad weeks of weather can therefore send their population into a tailspin for a year or two. Having a store full of food also attracts a queue of parasites, cuckoo bees and other hangers on.

We have only begun to investigate what solitary bees Cave Hill has but already we have found a range of species showing the good quality habitats there. When inspecting a nesting bank near Ballyahagan I also spotted what looked like ordinary flies closely following incoming bees. Both the bee and the fly would land on the bank and the bee would fly away again but the fly would stay. It turns out this was one of those hangers on, a "satellite" fly who, once they found the nesting bank, would then wait for another bee to arrive, reveal where its nest was and leave again. (The first bee would know never to go to its nest if it was followed home!) The fly would then nip in and hid an egg in the chamber ready to hatch and devour the food and probably the bee egg or larva as well.

It's suggested that all these attacks on their precious food parcels and young were a big driver for evolving into social bees. Some solitary bees have a single entrance but their own brood chambers, making it much harder for these pests to nip in undetected. It's only a small development to get to having a guard on the door and then shared broods and more specialised roles. So ponder on the magic web of life on the Cave Hill the next time you hear a buzzing along the path.

Dr Jim Bradley

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Food for Free!

With the coming of spring new shoots and plants creep all over the Cave Hill – a wonderful opportunity for the thrifty and the energetic to go in search for what amounts to free food. I would like to at some of the more common plants that will contribute to this enterprise. If you are tempted, always remember to take only what you will use, leaving enough for another year. Conserve for the future.

Nettles are at their best in the spring as they tend to get tougher as the year progresses, and by early autumn they are withering. They can be found around any disturbed ground and under hedges. And why not try nettle tea as an answer to joint problems? To prepare this particular potion pour boiling water over a handful of fresh nettle leaves in a warmed teapot and allow to stand for five minutes before straining and drinking. The drink may be sweetened with honey. And if you are bothered with flies in the kitchen, a bunch of nettles left over from the tea-making and placed in a vase of water is an old remedy for keeping the pests away,

Bilberries are small and dark and usually found growing on low bushes on moor land but may be found at the top of the Cave Hill. They are at their best in summer. Related to the modern blueberry, they can also be eaten raw, made into jam or baked in a pie. Children can be encouraged to eat them by competitive pressure for the most purple tinted tongue!

Elderflowers and Elderberries are also common and are often found in hedgerows. They produce small, white delicate flower heads in early summer, and the small blue-black berries follow in the autumn. Elderflowers have a number of uses, and for a calorific sweet they can be dipped in a light sweet batter and deep fried. The berries can be made into cordial by placing them into a saucepan with a little water and cooking them until the juice runs out. The mixture should then be strained and measured. For every pint of juice add 1lb or 500gms of sugar and boil until it thickens into a syrup. When cool enough to handle, the liquid can be bottled and dispensed as a pleasant cordial for the cold.

More familiar are Blackberries or Brambles which are at their tastiest in August and September. Our native examples are smaller and more delicious than those to be found on supermarket shelves as well as being renowned for their high Vitamin C content. Best eaten straight off the bush, they also go well in pies, crumble and jam – more particularly when

combined with apples. One should always look for the berry at the tip of the stalk as it will be the first to ripen, as well as being the fattest and the sweetest. Make sure however that it is growing above dog's leg height!

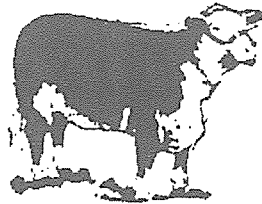
Sloes are the fruit of the blackthorn, and again, are to be found in hedges in the autumn. They may be picked even after the first frosts which are reputed to make them just that little bit sweeter as they are characteristically tart to most tastebuds. Traditionally they have been used in the preparation of sloe gin or sloe syrup two familiar treatments for flu symptoms.

Moving up the food chain, Hugh Fearnley Whittingstall has recently demonstrated how to trap, dress and cook the grey squirrel which is now such a familiar sight on and near Cave Hill. According to the guru of River Cottage these animals can be substituted for rabbit in pies or stews, and are a good source of free range and unfarmed protein.

Like the grey squirrels, magpies have been increasing here in recent years, and with the latter's appetite for smaller birds, it might be worth considering the preparation of a dish well known from the ancient nursery rhyme! As with all such suggestions, a warning is necessary. It is essential that anyone on the free food trail should take great care to correctly identify the plant, leave, berry or nut that may look so tempting.

As always, beware the dangers of plants that are poisonous or which may be an irritant. Equally, self-medication with natural produce should be considered only after the greatest care; this is particularly the case for expectant women, those with diagnosed medical conditions or allergies, or for those on courses of prescribed drugs or using homeopathic remedies.

Shelia Johnston



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Landfill site on the Hightown Road

For many of us who use the hill for recreation purposes, the sight of the landfill site at the back of the hill is familiar. It has been in existence for about thirty years and is operated by Macwill Services. This, in turn is owned by Mr and Mrs Victor McLaughlin who live on the Hightown Road; Mrs McLaughlin's family has owned the land since the 1860s.

A year ago there was a period when a lot of plastic rubbish was being blown into the Cave Hill Country Park from the site. Representations were made by City Hall and by the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign and in the months of February to April 2008, six men were employed at the expense of the site to bag and lift the rubbish, both within the site and also within Cave Hill Country Park. The problem of rubbish incursion has all but disappeared since.

Since December 2008 there is now a closure plan agreed between the owners and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and I spoke to Mrs Laura McLaughlin to get some clarification as to what exactly was involved.

The site has stopped taking plastic and other forms of inert material. They are now in the reclamation and restoration phase and they will only be taking clay and hard-fill. That material will be used for drainage and to landscape the site so that it can be restored to its original profile and planted with trees and shrubs. The recent extensive grading and creation of new roads within the site are all part of that work. This phase is expected to last about five years because as the site settles, some of the drainage work will need re-done.

Mrs McLaughlin pointed out that in the last few years, their participation in the landfill tax credit scheme has resulted in money being given to the Ulster Wildlife Trust, to church organ restoration and also to path restoration in the Cave Hill Country Park. That source of revenue will now cease as clay and hard-core dumping is outside that scheme.

Mrs McLaughlin is also keen to point out that landfill dumping has its positive environmental aspect. In their case, the income generated has allowed them to resist development pressure on the Hightown Road above Glengormley; they are proud of their fields and the fact that these fields are a green oasis in an area increasingly filling up with high-density housing.

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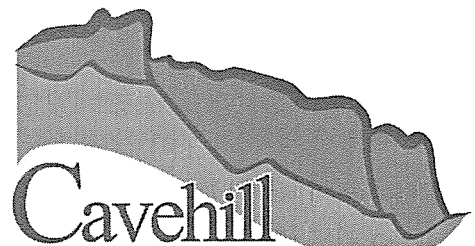
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Biodiversity and Cave Hill

The natural state of any healthy uncultivated environment is one of biodiversity. In other words, for whatever environment, there will be a range of plants and animals which are adapted to it. And those plants and animals will have adapted to make best use of each other – a state of symbiosis. Although individuals within each class of flora and fauna look identical, each will have its own strengths and weaknesses. Because they share the same environment, these individuals will fertilise each other by whichever means and so share their genetic predispositions. This in turn means that there will always be a rich genetic variation and consequent range of characteristics within a species. This allows that species to withstand any change in the environment. Should there be a change in predation or climate, there will always be individuals which are well suited to resist it and this resistance will be passed on to the next generation as those individuals survive while others don't.

Where biodiversity has been eliminated, as in some modern agricultural methods where every plant is identical, predation and disease can only be resisted by the use of chemicals which in turn can have unforeseen consequences on the environment.

It is a given that few places nowadays can left entirely unmanaged. But where an environment is managed, the aim should be to preserve this biodiversity and also to keep to the mix of flora and fauna which are truly native. Cave Hill is an example of a managed environment (it really consists of a number of environments – in broad terms parkland, forest and moorland) but it contains within it species which are recent arrivals and which therefore contribute little to the maintenance of the rich insect and plant life native to it. I refer to the rhododendron, the laurel and sycamore and more recently plants such as Japanese knotweed and New Zealand piri-piri. The aim of a proper management strategy should be to eliminate these imports which will allow more native shrubs such as birch, hazel, hawthorn and blackthorn to flourish. There is also an argument that the beech tree is too recent an import to contribute much to the environment and

while no-one would recommend its entire elimination, it should perhaps not be allowed to propagate too freely.

It is good to report that the Belfast City Council have such a strategy to maintain biodiversity and that there is an active programme of invasive species elimination in implementation. If you walk the paths in Hazelwood in particular, you will see the great numbers of sycamore trees which have been cut down and you will see that the ground is covered with new plants in consequence. We, in the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign have also done our bit. We have virtually eradicated a stand of Japanese knotweed at the Hightown Road entrance and we have also over the last year or two cut down a lot of laurel and sycamore close to the Castle. We have also planted stands of shrubs which would have been found on Cave Hill over thousands of years, plants such as blackthorn, hawthorn, birch and hazel.

Biodiversity extends also to animals. It is true that red squirrels were once part of the fauna of Cave Hill and that they have been replaced by grey squirrels. The presence of grey squirrels is contentious. They are not native and it is a pity that they have been introduced. The native red squirrel would be much more preferable but practically, it is very unlikely that we will be able to restore it. The two species cannot co-exist; the grey will always supplant the red, largely because of the disease it carries which kills the red but to which the grey are immune. A restoration programme would require the complete elimination of the grey squirrel before the re-introduction of the red and that would be likely to cause an outcry. While we rejoice that the red squirrel is hanging on in places such as Belvoir Forest, we must resign ourselves to the impossibility of seeing it again on the slopes of Cave Hill. There is still a lot of such work we can do and both we and City Hall are aware of the necessity for it. As funds and volunteer time allows, we will continue to pursue the maintenance of the biodiversity which makes Cave Hill such a rich and varied environment.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Our **Annual General Meeting** will take place in the Fortwilliam Golf Club on Wednesday 13 May at 7.30pm. The guest speaker this year is Mike Dobson, manager of the National Trust site at Divis/Black Mountain, who will be providing a talk on the problems of managing a wild area with public access.

We will be holding our annual **Clean-up of the Cave Hill** on Saturday 23 May and hope to recruit as much help from our readers and members as possible to help us make a difference. We will be gathering at the Belfast Castle at 2pm – if you can make it don't forget to wear suitable clothing but you'll need nothing else – bags, gloves and litter pickers will all be provided. Hope to see you there!

In May and June we will be holding two guided walks – one will be a **dawn chorus** and the other will be a **late evening owl watch**. If you are interested in participating in either of these please contact us by email at info@cavehillconservation.org or contact Cormac Hamill by phone 90291357 for further details.

Saturday 25 July should be a day marked on everyone's calendar. In conjunction with the Belfast Hills Partnership, the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign is delighted to invite you to celebrate the launch of the Friends of the Belfast Hills Group by marking the day with a **visit to our famous cave**. Between 10.30am and 4.00pm safe access will be provided to the cave (by way of scaffolding) and don't be surprised if you see a few people walking around in full Victorian attire...

Our annual **Quiz Night fundraiser** will be held in Fortwilliam Golf Club on Friday 27 November at 7.30pm. As well as the quiz there will be the traditional ballot and a selection of Cave Hill goodies will be available to buy on the night.

An extra feature this year will be a special ballot for a wonderful painting of Cave Hill generously donated by the artist, Catherine McWilliams.

Don't forget to check out our website (www.cavehillconservation.org) for all the information on these and our other activities throughout the year and if you would like to join up (or make a donation) please complete the form on the back cover.

Martin McDowell

WEBSITE

Those who use the internet will be pleased to know that the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign has recently launched its new website which can be found at www.cavehillconservation.org. The site has lots of interesting information about the Cave Hill, a news section, and the minutes of our regular committee meetings. It is also possible to access an archive of articles from the last eight years of this magazine – so be sure to check it out.

We hope to add a photo gallery to the website in the near future, and if readers have any interesting photographs that they would like to see included, please feel free to email them to us at our new email address info@cavehillconservation.org. Also, if those interested in our work have a comment to make about the *Campaigner*, a concern about the Cave Hill, or indeed about the website itself, please contact us at the same address. We'd love to hear from you!



CALLING ALL MEMBERS AND NON-MEMBERS!

If you are a member wishing to renew your membership for 2009 or a new member wishing to join, it's never been simpler! You can either join at our Annual General Meeting at Fortwilliam Golf Club on Wednesday, 13rd May or attach a cheque to the form below and sent it to: Cave Hill Conservation Campaign, 32 Waterloo Park, Belfast, BT15 5HU.

All email addresses supplied will be kept secure and only used to communicate with our members.

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