

Doneraile Park

Recollections and reflections

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Introduction

Following almost three and a half centuries, the St. Leger connection with Doneraile had drawn to a close. However, a lingering spirit in the form of a distant St. Leger connection had taken up residence in Doneraile Court in the late 1960s with expectations of reigniting the St Leger dynasty. This coincided with the dawn of a national awakening to the value of our natural heritage. The meeting of these two elements began with an unscheduled curiosity visit and ended in the transition of Doneraile demesne into a national treasure.

The curiosity visit

On a Saturday morning in the spring of 1969 I visited Doneraile Court (Figure 1) near Mallow Co. Cork with Fred Courtier, Chief Wildlife Forester in the Forestry Commission. At that time I was a Wildlife Officer (there was only one!) in the then Forestry Division of the Department of Lands.

Fred and I were on an official three-week tour of Ireland, north and south, giving talks to forest staff in both jurisdictions, about the importance of wildlife within forests, their role in society and their importance to biodiversity. We were also emphasising the importance of controlling grey squirrel and the more recently introduced mink. We visited as many deer parks as possible and recorded their populations. Much of this information was published in 1970 by the British Deer Society in its journal *Deer*. We travelled in a Forestry Commission Land Rover driven by Fred Courtier, and carried a 16 mm film projector, films and a collection of mink and squirrel traps as well as other paraphernalia.

I was aware of the Doneraile herd of red deer, which was reportedly introduced in 1895. I also knew from an official in the Land Commission (Mr. Jim McAllister) of the ownership claim by a Mr. St. Leger (i.e. right of inheritance). A Vietnam veteran from the United States, Mr. St. Leger's claim was, at that time, before the House of Lords. We were also aware from Jim McAllister that there were moves afoot by the Land Commission to purchase the estate, but this was being held up by the St Leger claim.

Mr. St. Leger answered our knock on the door of Doneraile Court. We explained our mission and were invited inside. He elaborated about his claim to ownership and the plans he had for the demesne. We were given permission to view the demesne and come back with our opinion.

We walked the 166 ha. demesne and formed the opinion that this was indeed a very special place, which in the event of a breakdown of St. Leger's claim, would make an excellent public park. Few Irish estates, if any, possessed the character of this beguiling and intact, walled demesne. The combination of its landscape configuration, natural beauty, red deer herd and architectural heritage made both the demesne and Court unique within the Republic of Ireland. It pressed all the right buttons that would fulfill the requirements of a publically owned park where Irish wildlife would be an important component. Portumna Forest, which eventually became a Forest Park, had similar attributes but lacked the rich undulating sylvan landscape of Doneraile.

We returned to Doneraile Court and again met Mr. St. Leger. We expressed our views on the magnificence of the demesne and the need of such a place to have greater public access. Although he didn't agree with us, we parted on good terms. Unfortunately, I never met Mr. St. Leger again.

Meeting Departmental officials

When we returned to Dublin we reported on our tour to a HQ group chaired by Henry Gray, Assistant Secretary (Forestry Division) (Figure 2). Others in the group included Martin Feehan, Inspector General (a fancy title for Chief Inspector, but without the Assistant Secretary status) and Tim McEvoy, who subsequently became Chief Inspector. During the meeting Fred made a passionate case for seeking public ownership of the demesne. He outlined in strong and convincing language the enormous benefit to society of its being made a forest wildlife park. Fred's advocacy was strong and very persuasive citing the need to build on the special qualities and high educational value of the demesne. His soft Devonshire accent and his undoubted charm made a huge



Figure 1: *Doneraile Court c. 2001 (photograph: Seamus Crowley).*

impression. At that time Henry Gray was Vice Chairman of the Council of Europe's *European Conservation Year 1970* Committee. This committee sat in Strasbourg and was chaired, I understand, by Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands.

Henry Gray's aspirations

As the Land Commission and the Forestry Division were within the same Department (Department of Lands) it is assumed that Henry Gray would already have been aware of the possibility of the Land Commission purchase. However, following Fred Courtier's presentation, his focus was drawn to it and he set about paying a visit to Doneraile himself. He told me later that he liked what he saw and was fully behind the concept of making it into a Forest Park with wildlife being an important element. He was clearly determined to use his powers of persuasion to secure its transfer to the Forestry Division should it be purchased. He had a strong and forceful personality with a "difficult to work for" reputation. He led the Forestry Division more by dictate than consensus and his will usually prevailed. His position on the Strasbourg Committee gave added impetus to his Doneraile mission. At that time there were only a handful of parks in state ownership (Phoenix Park, St. Stephen's Green, Botanic Gardens, the Bourne Vincent Park and perhaps one or two others). A dedicated Forest Wildlife Park would have had a particularly sweet ring about it in the run up to *European Conservation Year 1970*. I believe he saw it as a means of pursuing a wider agenda of building a more important nature conservation role for the Forestry Division.

Henry Gray frequently spoke of how, in many European countries, nature conservation was the remit of the Forest Service. At that time the Land Commission had recently been given responsibility for developing "Game" tourism. This was



Figure 2: Henry Gray, while he was Principal Officer in the Forestry Division in April 1961. Photograph taken at Shelton Abbey by the author while he was the Assistant Superintendent in the Forestry College.

to fulfill an expectation in the Government's *Second Programme for Economic Expansion* published in 1963 to earn revenue from the provision of game shooting for tourists. Two officers within the land Commission (Michael Skehan and Eamon Grennan) were trained in Game Management and a Scientific Advisor (Fergus O'Gorman) recruited from University College Cork. State support was being provided to Regional Game Councils to build up the resources. It was becoming increasingly obvious that Henry Gray would seek to have this responsibility transferred from the Land Commission to the Forestry Division after European Conservation Year. Indeed this eventually happened in the spring of 1971 when responsibilities for wildlife and game development were transferred to the newly named Forest and Wildlife Service.

A vision of an all-embracing Department of the Environment

When European Conservation year was at its height, Henry Gray had instructed his Departmental officials to draw up plans for a broad ranging parliamentary bill to encompass all the environment issues. The mandarins within the Department of Local Government (subsequently to become the Department of the Environment) must have been aware of this take-over bid and effectively torpedoed its passage at an early stage. The Taoiseach, Jack Lynch T.D., opened the National Conference of European Conservation Year, which took place in November 1970. He used the occasion to define the role of the Department of Lands by drawing up a parliamentary bill which would be confined to Wildlife Conservation and would replace the Wild Birds Protection Act 1930 and the Game Birds Preservation Act 1930. The momentum and ambition that drove Henry Gray to generate a super Department of the Environment were thus clearly thwarted. The Wildlife Bill was eventually published in 1973 and passed into law in 1976. It was not enacted, however, until 1977, seven years after European Conservation Year.

Purchase of Doneraile estate by the Land Commission

The summer of 1969 saw a campaign to influence the trustees of Doneraile to proceed with the sale to the Land Commission. The claim for ownership by Mr. St Leger was beginning to flounder. A meeting was arranged by Henry Gray for me to meet the Chairman of the trustees (a solicitor from Clontarf as far as I recall), who quizzed me on the rationale and the benefits of making Doneraile Demesne into a Forest and Wildlife Park. Public appreciation of nature conservation was extremely low in the late 1960s. At that time for instance, no legal protection existed for wild fauna and flora or their habitats. Whatever protection existed related only to birds (i.e. the two 1930 acts). Equally, there were no nature reserves, no nature trails and ecology was a topic mentioned only in textbooks.

In the meantime Henry Gray used his undoubted influence as Assistant Secretary to persuade the Departmental Secretary (Tim O'Brien) and Minister (Sean Flanagan T.D.)

to smooth the legal and political obstacles to its takeover. It also helped that the trustees were anxious to offload the estate in the event of a likely collapse of the House of Lords judgment against St. Leger. There was also good rural support in the hinterland for a Land Commission takeover. Many thought that the Land Commission would divide the area among deserving farmers and there was a strong lobby to influence the Minister to that effect. Equally however, there appears to have been strong support within Doneraile itself to have access to the demesne, particularly since such access had evolved over the years with the demise of the St. Leger family influence.

The Land Commission purchase took place in November 1969. The purchase included the area within the demesne walls, Doneraile Court (Figures 1 and 3) and lands outside the walls of the demesne including some woodlands and part of the current Kilcolman Bog nature reserve. The purchase price is reported to have been £56,000. However, all such purchases were paid in “Land Bonds” that invariably had a lower cash value.

Traditional Land Commission Policy – Doneraile an exception to the rule

The policy of the Land Commission was always focused on acquiring suitable estates for division among local farmers or farmers from congested districts, thereby increasing their holdings to a viable status. Non-agricultural land resulting from such sub-divisions were usually handed over to the Forestry Division, which was prohibited from acquiring agricultural land. At that time, and indeed up to the mid-1980s, a designated Land Commission inspector was based in every Forestry Divisional office to ensure that no agricultural land was purchased for forestry purposes.



Figure 3: *Doneraile Court and demesne c. 1993 (Photograph: Seamus Crowley).*

It is against this background that the concept of allocating Doneraile Demesne to the Forestry Division would have been alien to normal policy and is testament to the dominating position Henry Gray had acquired within the Department. Political representations were indeed made shortly after its acquisition for the land to be divided. There was also a strong political representation for housing to take place on part of the demesne.

The Minister for Lands at that time was Sean Flanagan TD. He was a charismatic and well-known national personality with a strong sporting reputation, having captained All-Ireland winning Mayo teams in 1950 and 1951. He too was a frequent visitor to Strasbourg and was a keen advocate of European Conservation Year 1970. He was the official chairman of its Irish Committee, with Henry Gray as his vice Chairman. Sean Flanagan told me during a trip abroad in 1972, that he had supported Henry Gray's vision for Doneraile, although it would have had adverse political repercussions had adverse declined a request for division. He was made an honorary member of Doneraile Golf Club in or about 1970, perhaps in recognition of the good work ...or possibly for more ulterior/Machiavellian motives. In spite of strong representations to sub-divide the demesne for housing and golf, the political and administrative will prevailed and no division or allocation took place.

Transfer to the Forestry Division

The transfer of Doneraile Park to the Forestry Division allowed onsite work to commence. In the early years, resources unfortunately did not in any way match the urgent need to perform basic repairs, let alone any development work. For instance, it took many years of subterfuge to repair the perimeter wall, with funds being spirited out of the "Fence Repairs" subhead. Moreover, the "Doneraile Park" was viewed by some senior managers as a dilettante's exercise and, worse still, that money spent in the Park was at the expense of normal forest operations elsewhere.

However, as the years passed and particularly as the official opening of the park approached in 1984, resources gradually became available and approximately IR£50,000 was spent annually on development. Meanwhile, the Georgian Society, motivated principally by Desmond Guinness, obtained a lease of the house and environs and set about a modest restoration of Doneraile Court.

Coillte commenced operation on 1st January 1989. In preparation for this event all wildlife functions, including the enforcement of the Wildlife Act 1976, were transferred to the Office of Public Works. The administration of Doneraile Park was part of this transfer. Seamus Cowley, who had provided skilled and sensitive guidance of park management for almost a decade before the transfer, continued to oversee its ongoing improvement up to his retirement.

Conclusion

The task of generating awareness of nature conservation in Ireland effectively began with *European Conservation Year 1970*. The transfer of Doneraile Park to the Forestry Division under the administration of Henry Gray played an important part of that process. That Henry was an ambitious man is certainly true, but it was that ambition which also kindled a curiosity about nature that, even today is serving the nation well. The chance visit to Doneraile on that spring day and Fred Courtier's strong advocacy apparently sparked an idea in Henry Gray's mind that he seized upon to complement his involvement in European Conservation Year.

It is clear that Doneraile was therefore, part of a wider agenda as perceived by Henry Gray. The absorption of the wildlife remit into the Forestry Division was reasonably straightforward for Henry Gray, but the game element became a particularly contentious issue. Being used to having a compliant workforce, the Game movement was particularly suspicious of his motives and mutual distrust ensued. This distrust was so strong that one particular Game Council made complaints to the Taoiseach in early November 1971. This resulted in a boycott threat by that Regional Game Council of the upcoming National Conference of Regional Game Councils unless Henry Gray stepped down. As sometimes happens in life, Fate intervened with the sudden and unexpected death of Henry Gray. His successor, Billy Duggan, was a consummate diplomat who moved quickly to diffuse the situation.

The joint legacy of Henry Gray and Sean Flanagan was the saving of Doneraile from threatened division. To this must also be added the growing public appreciation of Nature Conservation and the lead into the Wildlife Act of 1976. Habitat Protection, Nature Reserves and Special Conservation Areas were alien concepts in the Ireland of the late 1960s. Doneraile played an important part in this journey and deserves a special place in the process that awakened the national consciousness to the benefits of nature protection to society. For their contribution we must all be grateful.

Postscript

The Land Commission was abolished under the Land Commission (Dissolution) Act 1992, 111 years after it was established. Sean Flanagan T.D. initiated the case for its abolition while still its Minister, a unique political act as ministers do not normally advocate the abolition of their own departments! It was certainly a reflection of his strongly independent personality.

Henry Gray's ambition for a new all-embracing Department of the Environment under his control collapsed in November 1970. Ironically a new Department of the Environment emerged in time and is currently responsible for all wildlife matters, albeit divorced from forestry, while the Office of Public Works is now responsible for Doneraile Park. Henry Gray's vision came to pass in the way he may not have

wished, nonetheless a resource of great value emerged. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

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