

Ireland – A Natural History

David Cabot. 1999. Harper Collins Publishers. ISBN 000-220080-5. 512 pages. Paperback. Stg£17.99.

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After exploring David Cabot's comprehensive volume on Ireland's natural history, it is clear that the style lends itself as much to the casual reader with a passing interest in the environment as it does to the specialist in any of the fields covered. The author's considerable experience in the biological field, which spans almost 40 years, is translated impressively with the help of an array of specialists from a variety of backgrounds. This book, like Mitchell and Ryan's *Reading the Irish Landscape*, bridges the gap between the scientific arena and the general public, but in addition, Cabot describes each of Ireland's habitats in considerable detail.

The opening chapter on the history of naturalists and their work in Ireland chronologically describes the contributions of clerics, scholars and travellers since early Christian

times. This is colourfully described through a mixture of poetry, prose and superstition. Some humorous anecdotes are imparted, including a number attributed to Giraldus Cambrensis, grandson of Henry I. In 1188, he noted in his infamous *Topographia Hiberniae*, "barnacle geese hatching from goose barnacles found clinging to floating logs in the sea." According to Cabot, "such miracles were in vogue, a convenient way of explaining mysterious phenomena and the substance of bestiaries." The many interesting historical observations described include one by William Hamilton Maxwell in his vivid *Wild Sports of the West, with Legendary Tales and Local Sketches* (1832), where it is recorded that some of the last indigenous red deer of Mayo were persecuted almost to extinction during his time with the aid of muskets abandoned by the French in 1798.

This chapter is followed by a biological history of Ireland, beginning approximately two million years ago. Geology, paleobotany, climate, flora and fauna are intricately woven into a distinctive style interspersed with some controversial conundrums which have puzzled specialists in the botanical and zoological fields alike. How Ireland acquired its flora and fauna is given special attention, with the author finally postulating that both arrived here through a combination of migration from Britain and southern Europe, by aerial dispersion, chance methods and introductions by early man, and lastly, through the survival of preglacial colonists in ice-free areas. This chapter sets the tone for the following nine chapters, which deal exclusively with Ireland's main habitat types: mountains and uplands; peatlands; lakes and rivers; the Burren and turloughs; broadleaf woodlands; farmland; the coastline; islands; and the sea.

At times, the sheer volume of detail and the use of Latin nomenclature interrupt the author's appealing narrative flow, but this does not discount from what can only be described as a most wide-ranging and current description of Ireland's many and sometimes unique habitats. Some will not like the author's tone in the opening paragraphs in the chapter on broadleaf woodland, where an account is given of "a man-induced devastation of a once vast and thriving ecosystem, reduced today to a mere vestige of what it used to be" and succeeded by "recent coniferous plantations dominated by two species originating from the Pacific coasts of British Columbia and southern Alaska – sitka spruce and lodgepole pine – sprawling like advancing armies across the landscape" and "despised by most naturalists as 'ecological deserts'."

Such statements are a preamble to the final chapter, which concerns the conservation of nature. Set against the extinction of many species of flora and fauna, either through habitat destruction or direct persecution, the author suggests that "a nature conservation strategy for Ireland should aim to protect a representative range of the best habitats from mountain summits to the sea bed, as well as particular species requiring safeguarding." Not everyone will agree with the author's views on man's interaction with nature, which appears to be derived solely from the conservationist perspective.

This book is a descriptive, factual tapestry of Ireland's natural history, interspersed with history, anecdotes, data and a number of exquisite photographs. It is, at the very least, a reference for anyone who wishes to explore Ireland's array of terrestrial and aquatic habitats, with particular emphasis on its unique habitats, especially its wildfowl refuges and the Burren in Co. Clare. It outlines the principal threats to Ireland's natural heritage and the challenges which face us all as we enter a new millennium. The book does contain a number of small grammatical, spelling and technical errors. These do not, however, take away from the flowing narrative style, and could be easily remedied in the next edition. In the final analysis, *Ireland – A Natural History* should stand the test of time.