

7 - Maumturk Mountains



TO WANDER UNFETTERED AMIDST the wild and desolate mountaintops is definitely to experience the ultimate in walking. In the last bastion of land-based wilderness, an untamed world unfolds that is far removed from the realm of humankind. It is a land of high relief, full of towering peaks, expansive mountain plains, cliff-edged corries and trails of meandering ridges that run in a confused maze around the ensnared valleys. The mountains are a magical place that can be both cruel or kind, but are always full of romance.

Up in the lofty peaks, one gazes over a three-dimensional map of land and sea that stretches out far below, where vistas lie exposed that

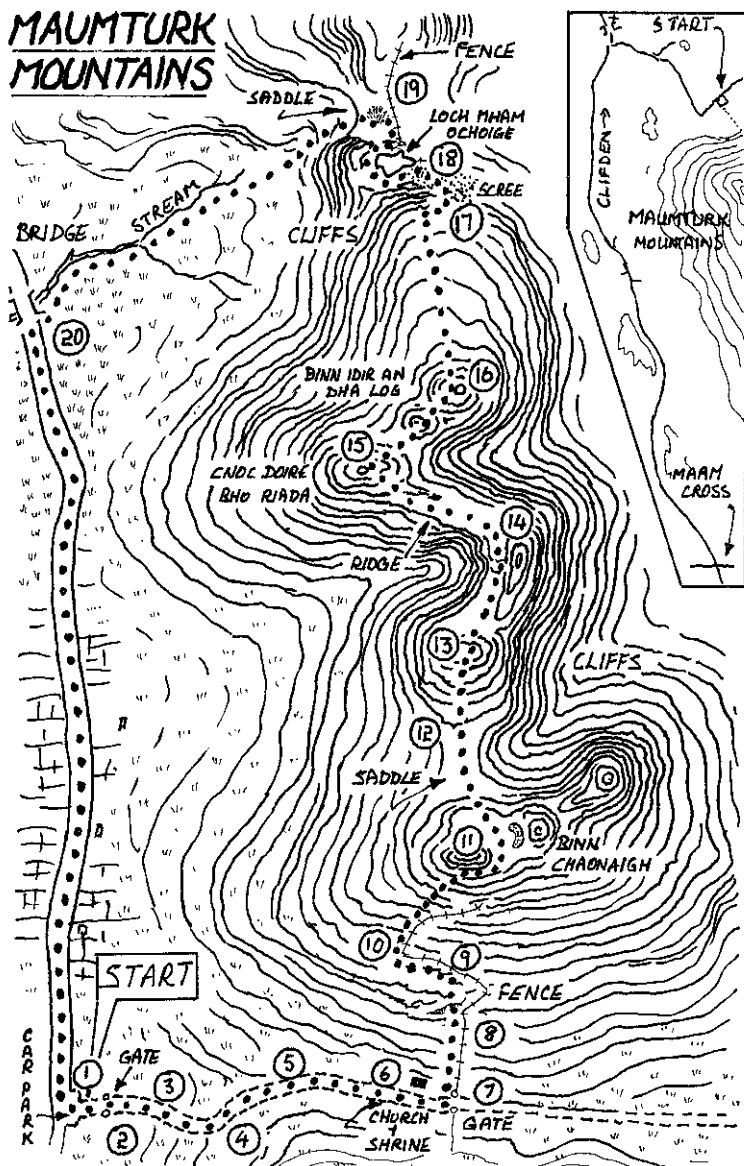
are more rolling cloud-filled sky than solid earth. On rainy days, one watches the thunderous volumes of darkened grey-white cloud rise in billowing towers from the metallic surface of an angry ocean, as if from some enormous volcano hidden over the edge of the earth. Out of the ruptured base of melting clouds, rainbowed showers and veiled mists fall, to rush across the prairie-like expanse of waterlogged bog and escape to the safety of the mountainous mass. On brighter days, the overpowering sun sends puncturing shafts of light through the cloud-roofed sky, scattering the shattered cloud remains to the heavens, while the shadows of their retreating forms race like galloping steeds across the mighty mountain slopes.

Climbing to the high uplands away from all but the minimum of human interference is a challenge that comes close to an expedition to some uncharted isle. But such regions do not offer their rewards lightly and one must travel prepared for the harshness of mountain terrain. Abandoned as this place is, several days may pass before another person comes your way. The high cliffs and mountain peaks dictate where you may wander. Unexpected bad weather can develop quickly, drowning the upper mountain levels in low cloud and engulfing you in a mist of blinding fog, leaving you to stray frantically through the monotonous heath for hours on end, or worse, over the edge of some steep ravine. The mountains, like the sea, are bewitching, but can be horribly cruel and violent.

WALK DESCRIPTION

LOCATION: The Maumturk mountains run for 20ml/32km from Maam Cross in the south to Leenane in the north. The walk crosses through their central mass and begins at the car park of the holy shrine of Máméan – St Patrick’s bed and well.

From Maam Cross travel the Maam Cross-Clifden road for 6.5ml/10.4km towards Recess. Less than 1ml/1.6km before Recess watch for a RIGHT turn, where a small sign reads: ‘Máméan. Tobar +



leaba Phádraig⁷. If you cross a bridge and pass a church you have just missed the turn off.

Follow the side road STRAIGHT for the next 2ml/3.2km, ignoring any left turn-off. The road climbs gradually to the mountain base and after a sharp left-hand bend brings you to the rough car park on your RIGHT.

TERRAIN: Mountain-tops rising to 2307ft/703m. This is an extremely tough circular walk over a very strenuous route. The walk travels along the central ridge of the Maumturks and returns by way of a minor road. There are several peaks to be climbed, which are surrounded by dangerously steep sides and cliffed ravines. To negotiate such terrain requires a sound understanding and experience of such features and an ability to trust to your instincts on changing weather conditions. On no account enter the high mountains on your own.

FEATURES: The Maumturk mountains; geological and glacial features; Alpine flora; upland wildlife; St Patrick's bed and well; incredible views over vast stretches of Connemara, including its expansive boglands, indented coastline and the Atlantic ocean; fine vistas of the Twelve Bens mountains, the picturesque Inagh valley, Joyce Country and the mountains of south Mayo.

LENGTH: 9.5ml/15km. This does not take into account the undulating terrain which will make the walk seem longer.

TIME: A minimum of 7 hours at a comfortable pace. Normally, allow roughly one hour to the mile for tough walking, which constitutes 6mls/10km of this walk; the remainder is on the access roads.

EQUIPMENT: As this is not a walk for the amateur, it requires specialist mountain gear. Strong mountain boots and appropriate clothing for cold or wet conditions are essential. Remember that for every hundred-metre rise above sea level there is a one-degree drop in temperature, thus when it is seven degrees at sea level it is at freezing point on the mountain-top. Also carry a knapsack for spare clothes, food, first aid kit, compass, whistle and reliable Ordnance Survey maps. Always let someone know where you have gone and what time you expect to be back.

WHEN TO WALK: Any time of the year, depending on the weather conditions. The long days of summer allow more time, but may bring wet and overcast weather which makes the peaks inaccessible. In autumn and early spring, despite having shorter days and less time to dawdle, you are guaranteed colder and drier weather with frosty skies and crystal clear views. Avoid snow when it does occur if you are not accustomed to this condition. Similarly, strong winds are trying.

WALK OUTLINE

(1) From the car park a stony path leads up to the mountains behind. Follow this UP to an iron-barred gate.

The old track leads up over the low pass of Máméan (pass of the birds), which crosses the backbone of the Maumturk mountains (Máim Tuirc – pass of the boars). It is an extremely old route, dating back to pre-Christian times when it was an access point to Connemara and possibly the site of pagan rituals.

(2) On reaching the gate pass through and reclose it after you.

The gate has the word ‘Máméan’ inscribed on it and bears a small cross on top. The track leads to the ancient pilgrimage site of the holy well and bed of St Patrick, which forms the focal point of an important religious pattern (the Stations of the Cross). An annual pilgrimage, which dates back to the fifth century, takes place here in August.

(3) A crude outline of stones flanks the old path as it climbs upwards.

Since the hills are exposed to the elements, the Maumturks are subject to high winds and low temperatures. This, in conjunction with the acidic nature of the bedrock, ensures that little of the usual lowland vegetation can thrive. Any that does occur is sparse, and confined to peaty clumps between sheets of white rock. Instead, a number of hardier Alpine plants tend to flourish in the harsh conditions, with some even occurring on the higher peaks. It is predominantly the

grass-like SEDGES (*Carex*) and stunted HEATHERS (*Erica*) that are found on these lower slopes.

(4) Higher up, the path swings gradually to the LEFT and the bleached bones of the first summit to be climbed rises up before you on the left. This is known as Cnoc Doire Bhéal an Mháma (the mountain of the wood at the mouth of the pass).

Turn around and look back to see the expansive views already opening up. On your right the tall pyramidal stacks of the Twelve Bens mountains run down on to a great flat boggy plain. This sweeps across to your left and stretches away south to the sea near the peninsula of Kilkeran.

(5) The path begins to level out towards the top of the pass but becomes indistinct further on where one has to clamber over some of the protruding rocks. Maintain a STRAIGHT course and presently you should see a small church beneath the distant cliff on your left.

On windless days, there is a pleasant silence about this spot. The only sound is the echo of your footsteps from the cliff-edged amphitheatre and the hushed gurgling of distant streams spilling through the peat-smothered gullies.

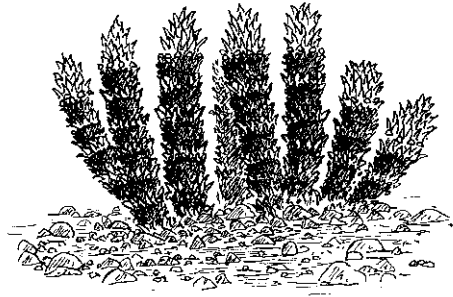
(6) On arriving at the holy shrine you must climb up the rocky slope on your left to visit St Patrick's bed and holy well. However, the most comfortable way up to the mountain summit is to continue STRAIGHT on



St Patrick's cabbage growing from a bed of wood sorrel leaves. Both can be found in the sheltered rock crevices on the mountainside.

along the track for a few hundred metres until you reach a wire fence with an iron-barred gate.

The shrine consists of a small church, a rocky cleft which was used as an altar or Mass rock, St Patrick's bed, the holy well and a circular enclosure of stones which represent the Stations of the Cross. The Mass rock would have



Fir clubmoss will be found growing in small green-tufted clumps on the rocky stone-spattered peaks.

been used during Penal times in the eighteenth century when the practice of Catholicism was banned.

Within the stone enclosure a series of rites is carried out in the form of a pattern (*pátrín* – patron saint); prayers are said and crosses inscribed on stones with a small rock as the pilgrim moves about the enclosure. For centuries the pilgrimage to Mámean has been held annually to commemorate the time St Patrick is said to have climbed Mámean to see and bless Connemara. When he reached the top and saw the forbidding Twelve Bens and the vast wild plain of the lowlands stretching away to the coastal archipelago, he is reputed to have said: 'Well, I'll bless you anyway but sorra foot I'll set upon you.' But it is more probable that his visit coincided with the intention of replacing an old pagan ritual with a new Christian one.

The pattern fell into disrepute during the early nineteenth century when it developed into a festive occasion of drinking, singing, laughing, fiddling, piping and the harmless sport of faction fighting. In this sport, disputing families fell upon each other in mock battle, with shillelaghs clashing amidst much shouting and screaming. It is said that few if any injuries were ever sustained!

(7) On reaching the iron-barred gate do not cross over it but go to the LEFT and follow the line of the fence as it climbs up through the rocky incline. The climb is over a jumbled collection of rocks and small cliffs but in general it is quite easy. Keep your hands free and stay near the fence.

Amongst the rocks, sheltered clefts allow the growth of a few unusual residents. Watch for the appropriately named ST PATRICK'S CABBAGE (*Saxifraga spathularis*), a rare plant that is mostly confined to the west of Ireland. You may also spot a few COMMON DOG VIOLET (*Viola riviniana*), and WOOD SORREL (*Oxalis acetosella*). It is unusual to find these latter plants up here as their preferred habitat is woodland. Their presence suggests that they may be left-overs from the woods which once occurred here and from which this mountain takes its name (see point 4).

(8) As you climb upwards, the rocky escarpments increase and you should notice when the fence begins to swing away to the right. At this point, leave the wire fence and keep going STRAIGHT, climbing up over a low cliff. Once on top of the shattered white rocks maintain a STRAIGHT course until you meet the wire fence again.

Looking to the right, you find increasingly better views down into the glaciated valley of Gleann Fhada (the long glen), then out to the Maum valley and across to the distant shores of Lough Corrib, that great body of water separating the fertile plains of east Galway from the rugged wilderness of its western seaboard.

The Alpine conditions are now becoming more marked, thus you may notice the gradual appearance of a short tufted plant growing amongst the rock-splattered terrain. This is FIR CLUBMOSS (*Lycopodium selago*), one of the few Alpine-type plants that occupy the high mountain-tops and not generally found in the lowlands. Alpine plants are quite rare and very poorly represented in Ireland, and they grow best on high north-facing aspects. Again, they are possible left-overs from post-glacial times when the climate was more Arctic-Alpine, allowing these plants to be much more widespread.

Other rare Alpine plants found on the Maumturks are ALPINE CLUBMOSS (*Lycopodium alpinum*), ALPINE MEADOW-RUE (*Thalictrum alpinum*) and JUNIPER (*Juniperus communis*), all of which grow in sheltered pockets in the scree-strewn landscape of the upper mountain-tops.

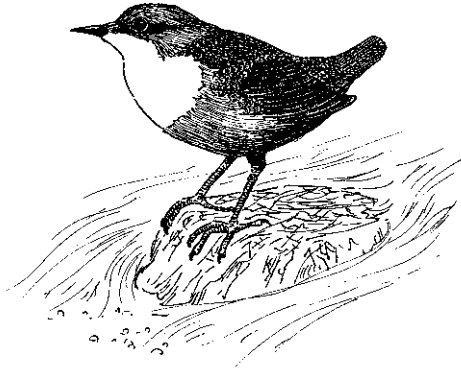
(9) Very soon you meet the wire fence again as it crosses your path from the right. Go to the LEFT with the fence until the Twelve Bens come back into view, then swing RIGHT and uphill with the fence, stopping when it again runs away to the right at point (10).

When you look back over the southern end of the Maumturk mountain chain, the Aran islands should be visible. Nearer home, many sea inlets that surround the archipelago of Rossaveal and Gorumna Island sparkle.

(10) As you climb upwards the fence comes to an end, swinging sharply off to the right. Keep going STRAIGHT to reach the summit. This is visible ahead, distinguished by a large white round-domed rocky knoll of bare quartzite. On reaching the knoll, you can gain the summit by going up to the left or the right of it.

(11) At the top, walk at an angle to the LEFT (north-west) across the stone-shattered plateau of Binn Chaonaigh which means ‘mossy peak’ – this may relate to the large amount of ALPINE CLUBMOSS (*Lycopodium alpinum*) that grows about the scree. Keep the small lake, at the back of which is the true summit, well over to your right. Descend slowly on to a lower saddle covered in loose scree, and then up the other side to the next summit. Be CAREFUL not to descend into the steep corrie that lies straight ahead. As you cross the saddle proper this drop will be very obvious on your right.

The top is an incredible wonderland of white quartzite, with the shattered rocks scattered about the summit in a confused jumble, giving the appearance of some alien planet. The Maumturks and neighbouring Twelve Bens are solid masses of quartzite. This whitened metamorphic rock glistens in the sunshine and often gives the impression of a thin layer of icing on the pointed peaks of the Bens,



The dipper will be found hopping about the stream-side rocks as it plunges in and out of the fast-flowing currents in search of insects.

especially after rain. They are both ancient mountains laid down some six hundred million years ago in pre-Cambrian times. Originally sedimentary sands, they were later subjected to volcanic activity that transformed the rock to crystalline quartzite.

From the top, the views northward along the spine of the Maumturks are outstanding. Beyond them the faraway round-domed Sheeffry Hills hold one in awe. Further to your right is the heath-clad Joyce Country, running off to the similarly coated Partry mountains. While away across the Inagh valley on your left, the craggy peaks of the mighty Twelve Bens shoot up dramatically from the tree-smothered shores of Lough Inagh.

(12) Climb up the slope on the other side of the saddle and make for the un-named peak.

Along the way there is plenty of BELL HEATHER (*Erica cinerea*) amongst the rocks, while on more exposed ground it is hard to avoid standing on the many clumps of FIR CLUBMOSS (*Lycopodium selago*). However, no matter how common it may appear here, you must still remember its reduced distribution, so it should not be picked.

(13) On reaching the top you should find a small mound of stones. From this, go slightly to the RIGHT into a dip and make for the next rise



Numerous delightful cascades pour from the rocky summits in these regions.

visible ahead, going up its LEFT side. There is the outline of a rough footpath up along this left side, but be careful of the steep drop down on your left.

(14) Eventually you reach the top of the ridge just as it swings around to your left. Climbing up on to the ridge, follow it to your LEFT and climb gradually up to the peak of Cnoc Doire Bhó Riada (hill of the tame cow wood). You should be able to find the crude outline of a path up on the LEFT-hand side of this rising ridge.

As you cross the ridge, there is an impressively deep gorge down on your right. This was carved out by a giant glacier during the long Ice Age that covered much of these mountains for over two million years. Wearing down the mountain sides, it gouged out these steep-sided corries and carried the debris of rock for many miles. Many quartzite boulders ended up as far away as the Aran islands, having been deposited on the limestone terraces by the melting ice.

(15) From the top of Cnoc Doire Bhó Riada, start swinging around to the RIGHT, first descending into a small hollow and then gradually working your way up to a second rise. From the second rise, continue slightly to the RIGHT and up on to the summit of Binn Idir an Dhá Log (peak between two hollows).

(16) On reaching the top of Binn Idir an Dhá Log, continue north-west, descending the steep slope until you reach a sheer drop. STOP. Below you is a mountain tarn or lake (see the illustration at the beginning of this walk).

Binn Idir an Dhá Log (2307ft/703m) is the highest point of the Maumturks and there are excellent views up towards the top of the Inagh valley. From left to right are the waters of Kylemore Lough, Lough Fee and Killary Harbour. Above the latter is the tall dome of Mweelrea mountain, which marks the southern boundary of county Mayo.

(17) When you are able to look down on the tarn, go to the extreme RIGHT and slowly descend the scree-covered slope of loose rock and pebbles. DO NOT GO STRAIGHT DOWN THE CLIFF FACE.

The slope is steep and the scree of boulders and stones is loose so take your time and watch your footing. The inexperienced may find this descent rather trying but with good boots and your hands free, you will reach the bottom safely, to arrive beside the tarn's exiting stream.

(18) At the bottom of the incline a sheep-wire fence blocks the way. Do not climb over it, but go to the LEFT by going clockwise around the tarn until you meet another fence on the other side. Follow the fence up over the rocky ridge and then down on to the lowest part of the saddle where there are some ruptured black banks of peat. Stay close to the fence on your right.

This is the pass of Mám Ochoíge, from which the tarn gets its name. The characteristic heath is beginning to return, so watch for the few birds that do occur in these parts such as the WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) and SKYLARK (*Alauda arvensis*). You will also surely encounter the RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) as it soars over the cliffs emitting its lonesome croak. The raven is an early breeding bird and generally engages in its mating display as early as January.

(19) At the lowest part of the saddle, go sharply to your LEFT, descending the steep grassy slope. Further down, you reach a small stream which you follow down to the tarred road.

Along the way, there are several wet and soggy patches which support insect-eating SUNDEW (*Drosera rotundifolia*) and MARSH VIOLET (*Viola palustris*). Throughout the earlier part of summer there are also plenty of HEATH SPOTTED-ORCHID (*Dactylorhiza maculata*) pushing its spike of spotted pale-pink flowers up through the damp meadows. On either side, the drier ground continues up the hillsides coated in thick swards of bracken that turn a delightful russet brown in autumn and contrast sharply with the barren white peaks up above.

The stream eventually opens out into a clear stony brook, interspersed with several small pools and little falls, quite a delightful place to bathe your feet on the warmer summer days. Such immature mountain streams are usually low in nutrients and so have little in the way of insect life. However, you may still spot the DIPPER (*Cimulus*

cinclus), that delightful black bird of rivers and streams which has a characteristic white apron patch beneath its chin. Additionally, the bobbing yellow-bellied GREY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*) flits about the rocks in mid-stream.

(20) When the stream reaches a bridge, climb up on to the tarred road and go to the LEFT. After 2ml/3.4km you arrive back at the car park (1).

Along the way, you pass several houses surrounded by small meadows. Very exposed and devoid of trees, save for a few fuchsia bushes, this area was once covered in woodland, as a glance down to the lake on your right will show you. This large body of water is Loch Leitheanach and there are several trees on its islands. These are remnants from a time when the drier meadows supported woods full of OAK, BIRCH, HOLLY and HAZEL. Now, a great sea of bog stretches across the valley and turf is cut. During drier summers, the harvested reeks of cut turf line the roadside as you make your way back to the start of the walk.