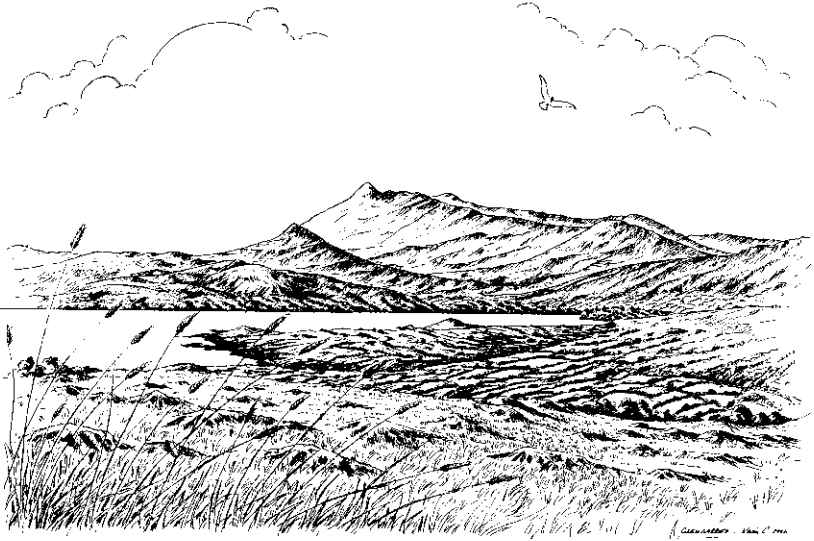


9 – Glengarriff



WHEN LOOKING AT THE IRISH LANDSCAPE, most people imagine it as a country of open green fields and barren mountain tracks that have always been there and that typify its true nature. There was never a greater misconception. Very few people appreciate the magnitude of the transformation that occurred in the last two centuries. Ireland was originally a land of dense oak forest that up to the 1700s still cloaked the river valleys and mountain slopes. Here the wild wolf ran free and the eagles soared over their extensive domains of jungle-like wilderness.

In the subsequent two hundred years practically every single bit of native aboriginal forest vanished, recklessly plundered to the point of no return by the insatiable demands of a greedy and reckless humanity. Only a few ragged remnants of the original forests now remain, some of which are located in the more remote and inaccessible regions of the West Cork mountains. In Glengarriff, trapped within a rugged valley that stretches to the waters of Bantry Bay, there is an oak wood that has existed continually since its first appearance ten thousand years ago.

Completely sheltered by the Cahah Mountains to the north, it is free from the effects of icy winds, while its coastal fringes are washed by the northern limit of the warming and moist Gulf Stream. These two factors together are responsible for producing woods of considerable luxuriance, full of moisture-loving mosses and ferns as well as plants of warmer climes. Thus we get rare filmy ferns covering the shady, woodland rocks, Irish spurge carpeting woodland floors, and the Mediterranean strawberry tree clambering through to the upper tree canopy – all indicative species that point to the wood's great age. However, the reason for the forest's survival today is not due to any scientific wonder but rather to the fact that it became part of an old eighteenth-century demesne belonging to the Earls of Bantry, and was kept for the hunting and recreational pursuits of the then ruling classes, after they had butchered all the rest. Unfortunately, since their departure, the woods have been extensively abused by the less well endowed who in their narrow-minded ignorance identify the area with the 'house of the planter', not realising that it was here long before even we ourselves arrived.

Happily, since the area is once again being appreciated for its romantic beauty and tourism value, more care is now being extended to its protection and maintenance. Hopefully we will not be as shortsighted as we have been in the past, and in developing it will not repeat those mistakes that interfere with its natural development in such a way as to precipitate its final extinction. Long may it outlive us.

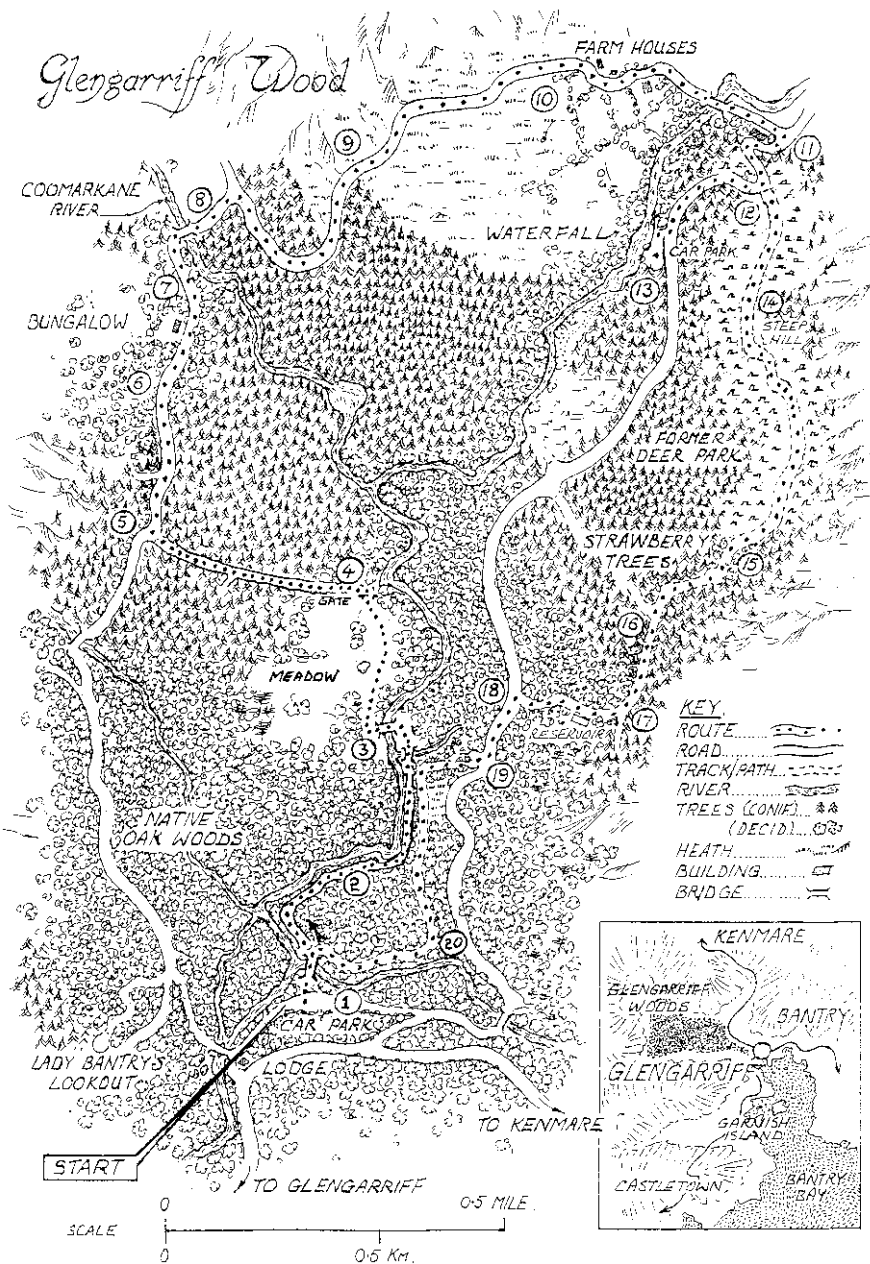
WALK DESCRIPTION

LOCATION: The walk is located in the woods above the town of Glengarriff. Travel along the Glengarriff-Kenmare road for 0.5ml/0.8km and enter the wood through the stone and timber walled gates, on your LEFT. The open gate is flanked by a picturesque lodge house built of cut stone. On entering, follow the track for about 200m to the carpark.

TERRAIN: A delightful walk along the empty by-roads and woodland nature trails that weave their way through the forested hills. It is a walk that is accessible to everyone and can be performed in any type of weather, with no difficulties being experienced along the good-quality green roads.

FEATURES: Oak and coniferous woods; woodland paths; Fine views over the forested valley, mountains and Glengarriff harbour, riverside walks with cascades; fabulous mountain heath; country by-roads;

Glengarriff Wood



strawberry trees; geological features.

LENGTH: 5 ml/8km.

TIME: 3 hours.

EQUIPMENT: Casual walking shoes.

WALK OUTLINE

(1) On arriving at the carpark, walk across the grass lawn, cross the timber footbridge and go to the LEFT. The surrounding parklands were maintained by the Earls of Bantry in the eighteenth century. The enchanted wooded avenues once led to a romantic fairytale cottage, hidden on an island in the river in the depths of the forest. This had a thatched roof, sweeping, curved eaves, rustic verandas and Gothic tracery windows, fit for any Grimm's fairytale. Like the Earls themselves, the original cottage is now gone, having caught fire and burnt to the ground early in the last century.

(2) Follow the riverside path up through the trees. The richness of the woods is apparent in the moss-covered trees and rocks as well as the dense ground flora. *Polypody ferns* drip from the oak branches, while *frothens*, *heather* and *buckler ferns* clutter the ground around the tree trunks. A closer look at some of the shaded rocks will expose the rare *filmy fern*, a small moss-like plant that grows well in the warm and moist conditions of the south-west. In early May and June, the best months to observe the real glory of the indigenous West Cork plants, *Irish spurge* will be sporting its green-domed tufts on the woodland floor, while thin, red-stemmed spikes of tiny white flowers, rising from a circular rosette of leaves, identify the characteristic *kidney saxifrage*. These are plants that are rarely found outside the mountainous areas of the south-west, growing here with a vigour that is not matched anywhere on the island.

(3) The path leads up to a footbridge, after which there is a second bridge with a sign for the 'Big Meadow Trail'. Here go to the LEFT over the bridge and then cross over a third footbridge where you go to the RIGHT. Following the riverside path upstream, it eventually leads out onto a more open meadow. Now retained as a wild-flower meadow, little disturbance is exacted on these fields, other than light grazing. This is a very sheltered area and clearly illustrates why so many eighteenth-century ruling families developed extensive tropical gardens here.

Nearby Garnish Island is the crowning jewel of such efforts. At the



The Irish spurge is a member of the Lusitanian flora so characteristic of West Cork.

turn of the century, the island was planted with a fabulous collection of tropical plants, including representative samples from New Zealand, China, South America and Asia, all of which thrive in the frost-free climate of Glengarriff.

(4) On arriving at the other side of the meadow, the path turns sharply to the LEFT and eventually, after 50 metres, a small pond will be passed on your left hand side. Follow the track into the woods where, in spring, the white *lesser celandines* and yellow *anemones* spill from the woods onto the track side. Many tall oak trees line the route and these are decorated with lush growths of *ivy* and *moss* that provide rich feeding grounds and nesting sites for a multitude of woodland birds. Keep your eyes open for the mottled *tree-creeper* and the dozens of song birds that are constantly foraging through the fertile tree canopy. You should also stand a good chance of seeing the pink and blue-coloured *jay*, as Glengarriff is one of the strongholds of this woodland bird. In fact, as many as four hundred different types of organism depend on the oak tree for their survival, while conifers support less than a handful.

(5) As you proceed, a track will join in on the left, but ignore it. Instead keep on STRAIGHT until you arrive at a tarred road, through a timber gate with a stile. Here go to the RIGHT.

Along the way the remains of a clear-felled coniferous forest lines

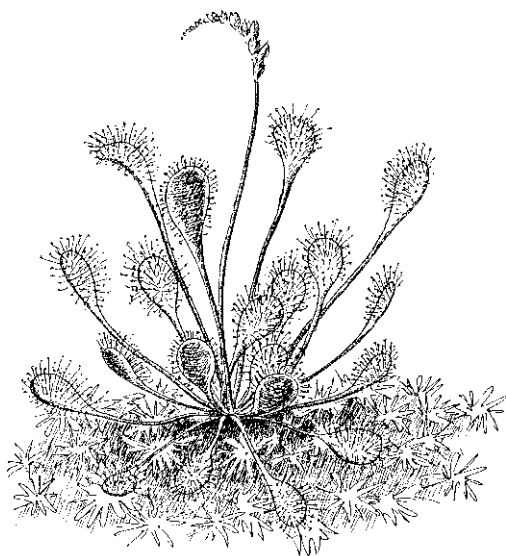
the route, very sterile when compared to the deciduous woods left behind. Some native trees have managed to find a foot-hold along the verges of the plantation; in this case they are mostly *silver birch* and *alder* which can tolerate the wetter soil. These native trees are also the food source of the *redpoll* and you may be lucky to spot some of these birds with their red crowns as they flit among the seed-heads, especially in autumn. Dark conifers flank the route on both sides – which may be a bit of a nuisance during the summer heat as they give shelter to irritating midges. The tiny, though harmless bites of these minute flies can cause the most annoying itch, driving one almost to despair. However, I have found that a twig of pine-scented *bog myrtle* if constantly fanned about the face is handy for keeping them at bay, while the sweet scent of lemon balm oil if rubbed to the skin stops them from biting for up to fifteen minutes – thus it needs repeated application!

(6) Eventually, the oak woods return and you pass a bungalow on your left. In mid-summer the rich aroma of *honeysuckle* wafts from the hedgerows, identifiable by its trailing stems and clusters of yellow, trumpet-shaped flowers. The complexity of associations that occur between different forms of woodland wildlife is well illustrated in the leaves of this plant. With a little searching, you should be able to find some of the honeysuckle leaves that have a delicate tracery of white winding lines through the leaf blade. This coil of lines is formed by the burrowing of the tiny *leaf-miner*. Hatched from an egg impregnated within the leaf tissues, the grub eats its way through the thin leaf, getting fatter as it burrows, and so too does the tunnel. Hold such a leaf up to the light and you should be able to see the small insect inside. A tiny animal, but very much a part of the woodland ecosystem. The leaf-miner depends totally on the honeysuckle for its way of life, so that without the host plant the insect could not exist.

(7) The rumblings of the Coomarkane river should shortly be heard ahead. It flanks the road on the right-hand side, as it pours down over rocky cascades and through crystalline pools that are overhung with giant *emperor*



Honeysuckle with leaf miner in its leaf. The plant is recognised by its rich sweet smell and yellow-red flowers.



ferns. An interesting spot to take a break. Watch the rocky stones beside the river for the black, white chested *dipper*. This bird can fly underwater! It chases the larvae of mayflies, caddisflies and stoneflies that hide beneath the stones. Pushing itself through the strong currents by beating its wings, it swims through the water with amazing agility. Periodically it pops out onto a rock with another mouthful and shakes the water from its water-repellent feathers before nose-diving back in. The Irish dipper is slightly different from the European and British race, thus it represents a separate and endemic sub-species unique to Ireland.

(8) The road follows the river upstream and crosses by a bridge, back into the coniferous woods. Within the wood, an open clearing is soon met, where there is a Y-junction. Go RIGHT. The road left leads into a dead-end valley out of which the Coomarkane river flows. This is a high-cliffed coomb where wild *goats* can be seen clambering about the precipitous walls in search of elusive tussocks of sweet grass. This is one of those enchanting valleys that calls you in, definitely a place worth exploring another day.

(9) Passing through the *conifers*, wild and beautiful tracts of heathland

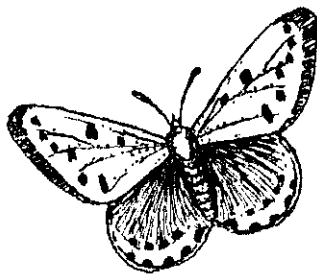
open up on your left. This is frequently punctured by the rounded bones of old red sandstone rocks that protrude like a sea of islands across the wild expanses of *purple moor-grass*. Looking up to the higher hills you may recognise the characteristic terraced pleats of the layers of sandstone. These illustrate clearly the warping effect that occurred as these mountains were forced upwards over 250 million years ago by the Armorican or Hercynian movements. The heathland is festooned with the beautiful deep violet flowers of the endemic *butterwort* during the months of May and June. Water-logged pockets are full of the sticky, hairy-leaved *sundew*, also an insect-eater. In July and August numerous butterflies will be seen moving about in the bright sunshine. The orange-brown *large heath* butterfly may be spotted here, a generally rarer inhabitant of the bogs and heaths. It feeds on the white *cotton grass* that carpets the bogs in blankets of white during May and June.

(10) Gradually the bogs give way to some picturesque farm meadows of hilly knolls and hedgerows lined with trees. These surround the farm buildings of stone near the roadside track. In early summer this is a good area to hear the call of the male *cuckoo*, even if you don't spot it, as it tries to attract females. Plenty of *hedge sparrows* will guarantee ample hosts for the cuckoo hen as she moves from nest to nest depositing an egg in each. Along the hedgerows keep an eye out too for the *small copper butterfly* as it lays its eggs on the leaves of *docks* and *sorrel*.

(11) Continue on through the oak-wooded road, crossing the bridge over the Glengarriff river to arrive at a T-junction. Go RIGHT. The road soon passes a stone house on your right and then goes through a felled coniferous plantation.

(12) Within the felled *coniferous wood* and on a bend you should notice a forest track with a timber gate on your LEFT. This will be the direction of our route, but before entering the woods you may first like to visit the cascades on the river that are just around the corner by the carpark.

(13) At the cascades there are some



The orange-coloured small copper is frequently seen along flowery banks and small meadows.

picnic tables available, thus it is a good spot to rest, with many paths leading into the woods and around the river bank. This can be rather busy during the summer season, but if you are here in either autumn, winter or spring you will have the entire place to yourself. It is also a good location to see *kingfishers*, *otters* and *stoats* if you have the patience to sit around quietly for a while.

(12) Retrace your steps back to the forest track at point (12). The track is now on your RIGHT. Pass through the timber stile to enter the *coniferous wood* and follow the track up through what was originally the deer park.

(14) Much of this part of the original oak forest was cut earlier this century when the estate passed to the state and became subsequently planted with conifers. However many of the indigenous plants managed to survive, especially in the higher parts of the glen where disturbance was diminished.

(15) Within the woods a steep incline leads one up to the higher hills. Felled recently, there are good vistas available. One can see some fine examples of the rarer *strawberry tree* (or *arbutus*) that make the trek worthwhile. Where the road levels out on top, watch for a small bend on the track. Below the track on your right is a timber seat, while on your left there is a rocky outcrop. Just about here, both on the left and right hand sides, are a number of strawberry trees. These are more akin to a large shrub than a mighty tree, and have a reddish bark and small evergreen leaves similar to the *rhododendron* that make it hard to distinguish at first sight, especially in summer as it does not flower until autumn. Then, during the months of November and December, it is unmistakable with its bright red berries hanging from the upper branches like perfect round strawberries. The plant is a member of the unusual Lusitanian group found in the south-west of Ireland, even though it is more native to the shores of the Mediterranean. Its main significance however is not just in its rarity here in Ireland but more in the fact that it represents the old order that existed in the country before the demise of the forests. Thus its presence here in Glengarriff indicates that some remnant of the former forest is still surviving in the district, despite much of the damage that has been inflicted by commercial planting and illegal felling of the oaks.

(16) Continuing on along the road another track branches off to the right, but ignore this and keep going straight on.

(17) Soon afterwards a Y-junction is reached, with a sign for the 'Eshnamucky Walk'. Go RIGHT, heading downhill along the track, which is rather rough and weather-torn – thus it will be muddy during wet weather. Mixed in with the oaks are some older Scots pine, which are also probable remnants of the former native forest.



The strawberry tree's characteristic warty red fruits are unmistakable in late Autumn – but they are not edible.

Lower down, the trees begin to become enveloped in thickets of *rhododendron*, an alien species that was introduced from Portugal and the Middle East in the last century by the wealthy landlords of the time. Sadly the plant left its mark on these woods in a way they could not have imagined. Obsessed with the desire for order and beauty in all things, the late Victorian gentry sought to further enhance the appearance of their estates with exotic varieties of shrubs. Into the very structure of the aboriginal forest they carved elaborate paths and avenues that allowed them to experience the delight of these wonderful wooded hills. Exotic shrubs lined the paths that led to cascades, high vista points and the beautiful cottage orne, but none of these exotics has been more devastating than the evergreen *rhododendron*. A native of warmer climes, it has thrived in the mini-tropical climate of West Cork. Spreading like a plague through the woods for the last hundred years, it has snuffed out the entire forest floor in an impenetrable tangle of inter-twining branches. It blocks out all light from the ground throughout the entire year, and all native ground flora has been completely exterminated. The leaves resist decay and cannot be eaten by animals and the branches offer little protection for nesting. *Rhododendron* when established drastically reduces the wildlife potential of the habitat.

As of 1998, vast amounts of the rhododendron has been removed. This can look a bit drastic at first, but it has given new life to the forests. Look for the amount of regeneration of young oaks that is taking place. The Department of Wild Life are to be greatly commended on their efforts to restore the ancient woodlands, as are voluntary groups like the

Irish Wildlife Trust, which provides voluntary support of environmentalists from around the world, through its 'Groundwork' programme. This is an organisation very well worth supporting.

(18) At the bottom of the hill the track leads back out onto a tarred road. Go LEFT. A few cars will be met here, so do walk with care. The roadway is overhung with mighty *oaks* that tower above the thickets of *rhododendron*, which, despite the problems they cause, are quite impressive in June when their large pink and red flowers come into bloom turning the roadside into a tropical garden.

(19). After a few bends in the roadway a small picnic site is reached on the RIGHT. This has a number of seats and a signpost for a river side walk. Turn in to the site and follow the riverside walk which goes up a number of stone steps on the LEFT of the large rock. The footpath winds its way through the thickets of *rhododendron* and past some boggy heath. The bog is a small patch of wilderness that has not been planted, and thus supports a good variety of wetland flowers in summer.

(20) Further on the path comes close to the river and leads on to an excellent example of the more natural and open forest. Around here you should be able to see *tree creepers* scrambling up the tree trunks in search of insects, and *red squirrels* scurrying about the branches. The fine trees are well spaced, leaving plenty of room for the natural woodland flowers and shrubs to develop. In March and April rich blankets of the white-petalled *wood anemone* grow before the appearance of the oak-leaf canopy. In October and November the deep leaf-fall covers the woodland floor and a variety of attractive *fungi* may be found pushing up through the golden-brown leaves.

(1) Keep close to the riverside path until you meet a timber bridge on your LEFT. CROSS the bridge to arrive back in the carpark.