

Donegal, September 2019

August can be the wettest month outside winter, so this year's trip to Donegal was planned to take place in early September to take advantage of the fact that the weather gets better when the children go back to school. And so it proved.

This was a C group walking weekend, although the main walks were of B group length. The numbers going on the trip dwindled until there were eight sturdy ramblers left, although we didn't have all eight on any given walk. The eight were: Robert Marshall (A/B walker), Noel Rice and Norman Patton (B walkers), Dermot MacDermott (B/C walker), Kingsley Thompson, Ray Gray and Toni Taylor (C group walkers), all led by Peter McGowan (C group walker). Due to work commitments, Robert couldn't walk on the Friday, and Noel couldn't arrive until Saturday night, while Toni and Norman had the good sense to take time out on Sunday and Monday respectively.

We stayed in Teac Campbell, which the club has been using for many years. It describes itself as a "humble B&B", although it is anything but: we were made very welcome during our stay, and even had time to swap hiking stories with Charlie, while the *bean an tí* ("woman of the house") was making us a cup of tea.

Teac Campbell also has the advantage of being only a few yards away from the Sean Óg Bar and Restaurant, to which we retired each evening.

The weekend started with a curtain raiser walk around Lough Salt on Friday afternoon, with the walk on Saturday being up the Poisoned Glen and over Slieve Snaght, followed by a linear walk over the Aghlas on Sunday. We finished the weekend off with an ascent of Muckish on Monday before heading home.

Lough Salt

We met for lunch at the Mountain Top Service Station on the outskirts of Letterkenny and then drove in a convoy to the car park on the banks of Lough Salt at C120260. The weather was kind and we had a pleasant introduction to walking in Donegal with a walk of 6.7 km and ascent of 320 metres. This took us nearly 3½ hours, with plenty of stops for photos.

Slieve Snaght and the Poisoned Glen

This walk will go down in annals of the Mourne Ramblers as a great "learning experience".

It started beside the ruins of a church on the banks of Dunlewey Lough. We followed a "track" into the Poisoned Glen (the track soon disappeared), but we found the gate through the deer fence easily enough. The climb up the boulder-strewn gully to Ballaghgeeha Gap was challenging but it was good to get out of the wet glen. From here, we could see the outline of the rest of our walk; it appeared to be a decent ridge walk with good views down the Poisoned Glen. However, "ridge" is an interesting concept in the Derryveagh Mountains, if steep descents and ascents can even remotely be described as a ridge.

We started off in blissful ignorance to make our way to Slieve Snaght.

The best I can say is that it was a challenging walk; at the time, that was not the phrase I would have used. The terrain made a mockery of my estimated timings, and we arrived belatedly at Slieve Snaght just as it was being covered in mist. The prescribed route would have involved venturing further into the mist, so we retraced our steps and found a good path down to the valley, thanks to some scouting work by Robert, Noel, Norman and Kingsley.

We then made our way back to the start, only to be held up by a fast-moving river (which none of the guide books had adequately warned us about – maybe it was a mere trickle on the day they did the walk, or maybe there was a conspiracy against us). After searching for a place for tired legs to cross, we

eventually followed the river to the start of the valley and crossed it at a suitable point and then used a stone stile over a wall to regain solid ground.

To make matters worse, time was running out if we were going to get something to eat. Fortunately, Noel had arrived from work and was in Sean Óg's, so he was able to charm the staff into keeping the kitchen open for a group of hungry Mourne Ramblers.

We had to down some Guinness to keep our strength up, but retired to bed early, some of us scarred for life. The stats for the walk are 16.4 km with 975 metres of ascent, but this doesn't do justice to a walk that took over 9½ hours to complete.

The Aghlas

This walk forms part of the Glover Highlander Challenge Walk. The route we chose was from the shrine at Muckish Gap (B999268), over Crocknalaraghagh, Aghla Beg, Aghla Beg South (or "Ardloughnabrackbaddy") and Aghla More, then down to Altan Lough and thence along a track to the R251 road at the base of Errigal (C953205).

A battered and bruised, but undaunted, group of Mourne Ramblers faced this challenge manfully, with a grateful nod to the only woman in the group, Toni, who although not doing the walk, kindly agreed to drop us off at the start, so that we had all the cars waiting for us at the end.

This walk was one of the best of the weekend; the weather was kind (at least until we were on our way back to the cars), there were good tracks to follow, and we could see the route ahead. The walk was 13 km in length with a climb of 890 metres, with Errigal a constant presence in front of us. It took us nearly 7 hours, but we had many stops on this enjoyable hike.

Muckish

We finished the weekend with an ascent of Muckish, via the Miners Track and descending to the shrine at Muckish Gap where we had started Sunday's walk. (This also forms part of the Glover Highlander Challenge Walk.)

The walk up the Miners Track was marvellous; it looks intimidating, but the track is generally well marked, with only one or two places where you needed to scramble over rocks (and even here, there were good hand- and foot-holds cut into the rock). Care has to be taken to ensure that you stay on the path in the early stages where there are many false tracks, but as you get higher up, the main track becomes very obvious, and if you get sidetracked, you should aim to rejoin it as soon as possible.

Once on top of Muckish, good navigation skills are required to stay on course, although we discovered some occasional small red flags that reassured us that we were following the correct route for the Glover Highlander. We descended to Muckish Gap after 2¾ hours having walked 4.3 km and climbed 430 metres.

Peter McGowan