

## Mayo Walks

**Sample walks are described. The meaning and background to placenames is given. In Irish culture, these describe geology, recall folklore, record history. They can contain words surviving in Scots Gaelic. Scots and Irish Gaelic were carefully kept as one, until the Gaelic Homeland was sundered. Full appreciation of this Brief would need a Gaelic-speaking guide, interacting with the Tour Guide.**

## County Mayo

### Introduction

County Mayo possesses great geographical contrasts for visitors. They may enjoy a variety of experiences, with the ocean as an ever-present backdrop. Awe-inspiring cliffs of the north coast and those on the western edge of Achill Island surely provide the country's finest coastal walks. More inland, the lonely **Nepin Beg Range** is a world apart from the very public (and rocky) Croagh Patrick. The name, **Néifinn Beag**, the Lesser Nepin, derives from **Nemed**. He was the son of **Agnoman of Scythia**. He sailed to Ireland from the Caspian Sea, in 1731 BC, in the chronology of the Historian, Priest and Poet, **Seathrún Céitinn**. **Mweelrea (Cnoc Maol Réidh** – the Smooth, Bare Hill), the highest peak in the county, is challenging. Waymarked routes provide, in all, more than 200km of walks through moorland, forest, farmland, villages and towns.

### History

The earliest settlers were Neolithic farmers. They had occupied the area by c3000 BC. Stone buildings and burial places were mostly enveloped by the subsequent spread of Blanket Bog, a factor mainly of Climate Change. Some 160 Megalithic tombs or dolmens are known. Walkers more commonly encounter forts {duns (**dún** – **hill fort**) or raths (**ráth** – **ring fort**)} dating from c800 BC to 1000 AD. They enclose the summits of isolated hillocks or promontories on the coast. Monastic settlements sprang up in many places, from the 6<sup>th</sup> century on, inspired by St Patrick.

County borders were defined in 1585 AD, to reflect the **Mac William Íochtar Lordship** (the **Lower or Mayo Mac William**, being both a title and a territory). The title was carried by gaelicised Normans. As such, they received the symbolic **White Rod**, on assuming office, a practice also in **Gaelic Scotland**.

**Muigheo** (also spelled Maigh Eo), means **Plain of the Yew Trees**. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the English established their ownership of land in Mayo, by force, following on the destruction of the Gaelic Order. They engaged in the wholesale evictions of Irish farmers from their smallholdings when, in intermittent times of famine, when they could not pay rent. The county later became a centre for agitation, in support of tenant-farmers, who were in fact renting their own land at exorbitant rates. Michael Davitt, a founder of the Irish Land League, in 1879, was a Mayo man. The bridge across Achill Sound is named in his honour.

In 1926, Mayo's population was almost 173,000 (it had been close to 400,000 in the late 1840s) and, 30 years later, it had dropped to 133,000. Despite the arrival of branches of multinational companies, from the early 1970s and the opening of Knock International Airport in 1986, it is only between 1991 and 1996 that the overall population actually increased, by some hundreds, to 111,400.

### Natural History

Some momentous events and processes formed the geology of Mayo. Silts, sands and grits, laid down in the ocean about 500 million years ago, were transformed into hard, white quartzites. They were the principal building blocks of the mountains in the area. These latter were then subjected to erosion and to a process known as the **Caledonian Orogeny** (a mountain formation process). The Ice Age resulted in their burial under advancing and retreating glaciers, with valleys carved out and deepened and corries gouged out (ie basins with precipitous walls, at the head of a glacial valley). **Coire** in **Scots Gaelic** means 'kettle'.

In northern Mayo, Blanket Bog covers large tracts of low-lying ground. To the south, Peat Bog occupies flat and poorly drained ground. The combination of thin, poor soils, exposure to wind and high rainfall and damage from sheep-grazing, permit a limited range of vegetation to thrive. Species of wild flowers are few. Heather or grass moorland is widespread. There are commercially cultivated forests, mostly conifer plantations of pine and sitka spruce.

Wildlife is limited. Irish hares and foxes may be spotted. Birds are numerous and diverse. On the coast, fulmars, great black-backed gulls, common gulls, guillemots and cormorants are plentiful. Skylarks and meadow pipits are tuneful moorland residents, together with the occasional grouse. Kestrels and the ever-present Black Ravens complete the picture.

## I Dún Chaocháin

### Introduction

The remote, rugged north coast of Mayo, in an area known locally as Dún Chaocháin from Gaelic times, is one of **Ireland's best kept secrets**. The cliffs reach half the height of Donegal's **Slieve League** (**Sliabh Liag** or Grey Mountain) but they extend majestically east and west - as far as the eye can see.

Walking from west to east provides more varied views. Loop walks are worth planning. Several streams have cut very steep valleys into the raised coastline. A walk from here starts off through sand dunes along a beach: then the cliffs begin. They continue almost without interruption for about 30km. Negotiating a path along these will account for up to 1,510 m of ascent.

The best way to do the full walk would be as a backpacking operation, camping en route. [There are few sources of fresh water.] The walk is mainly over short, firm turf. Longer grass and short, springy heather will also be met.

### History

The placename recalls a man in Folklore dubbed 'Caochán'. The name means the 'Little Visually Impaired Fellow'. The suffix '-án', or 'little' is pejorative here. The placename was recorded in the manuscript called **An Leabhar Mór Leacain** (the Great Book of Lecan, 1397 AD) as **Dumha Caechain** (the burial mound of the Caochán). The nasal 'n' was subsequently introduced (dún). In 1838, a local official reported a structure more like a dún (castle), so the name Dún Chaocháin was confirmed. The castle had been found perilously close to the sea, half washed away.

People have lived here since Neolithic times - the remains of a settlement near **Belderg** (**Béal Deirg**, the River Deirg Estuary) have been partly excavated. **Dearg** (Red) is an Ossianic hero (ie from the tales of the hero Ossian), associated with Fionn Mac Cumhail, in the folklore of **Scotland** and **Ireland**. The settlement can be seen, close to the road, near the eastern end of the walk. The occupation of Promontory Forts (strips of land which project into the sea) dates from the Iron Age (about 400 BC to

600 AD). Protected by the sea on three sides, a rough stone wall across the neck of a promontory is all that may now be seen of any man-made defences. There is little evidence of human activity over the next several centuries.

In the later 17<sup>th</sup> century Irish people, driven from Ulster and elsewhere, spread throughout Dún Chaocháin. **Cromwell's soldiers**, indeed, confiscated lands from Irish owners throughout the country. A soldier might, tradition says, retain the land around which he could ride, in a day. The new Cromwellian landowners strengthened their position by settling their lands with Protestant families from England, leaving the Gael to fare as best they might.

Family names, from all over Ireland, still bear testimony to the refugees who came to Dún Chaocháin. The land there was so poor that anyone - who was able to come here and find two acres to occupy - could hope to live somehow.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the English authorities, under the threat of a French invasion, built signal towers along the coast (there was one in **Glinsk (Glinsce, or Gleann Uisce, the watery glen)**). Late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Congested Districts Board built piers and boathouses for fishing communities. A landing slip was built at **Porturlin (Port Durlainne)** in 1886, since replaced by a pier.

'**Duirling**' means a 'stony shore'. In Primitive Irish (in **Ogham inscriptions** on monumental stones), 'Duir' meant 'Oak'. Using the **-ling suffix**, shared with **German**, Duirling meant a hard thing, eg a stony thing. A function of the '-ling' suffix is to convey the properties of the root word (eg Oak) to the new object described (eg Stony Beach). [Note 'Scwächling' from 'schwach'.] Of course, the Ogham alphabet had a similarity to ciphers of the **Germanic runes**.

After Irish independence, the Land Commission purchased the area (still an English-owned estate). Tenants once again became land-owners. The land was parcelled out in narrow enclosed strips. The old Rundale System of farming, based on the communal use of unenclosed grazing land, was ended. Evidence of both patterns of land use can be seen.

## Natural History

The Dún Chaocháin cliffs consist of ancient Precambrian schists, as well as quartzites - derived from sandy sediments about 600 million years old. The five jagged, rocky islands, the **Stags of Broadhaven (Na Stácaí)**, form a group in Broadhaven Bay (**Cuan an Inbhir**, the Bay of the Estuary: the word **Inbhear** exists also in **Scots Gaelic**). The Stags are some 1.6 billion years old.

Only a few places merit a forewarning of dramatic beauty. Such will greet those few who are fortunate enough to visit the Stags. Four kilometers from the beach, they are surrounded by foam and rise to defy the sky. One Stag is bisected by a long, narrow cave and all have arches which speak of Nature's captivating architecture. The Stags are a favourite spot for kayaking. The local Irish-speaking community have names for the Stags. The central one is called **Teach Dónal Ó Cléirigh (Dónal O'Cleary's House)**. Another is called **An Bád Bréige** (the Artificial Boat) and another **Carraig na Fola** (the Bloody Rock). A certain dark humour may be picked up with these names.

In from the northern coast, Blanket Bog covers the flat country. Along cliff edges, low vegetation includes bell heather and bilberry, with drifts of fluffy, white **bog cotton** on poorly drained soil.

A fox may appear along the way, although the Irish hare, with its characteristic upright stance and long legs, is a more likely sighting. Amongst the large population of seabirds on the cliffs, fulmars and great black-backed gulls are the most common: guillemots, kittiwakes and cormorants also live here.

## The Dún Chaocháin Walks

An excellent guide is available, in Irish and English: '*Dún Chaocháin Walks*' by **Uinsíonn Mac Graith** 7 **Treasa Ní Ghearraigh**. Walks for 3 days are covered by the Ordnance Survey (OS) 1:50,000 sheets 22 and 23.

### Day 1: Ceathrú Thaidhg to Na Príosúin

**3½-4 hours. 10 km. 300 m ascent**

Set off along the road at Ceathrú Thaidhg (meaning **The Quarter of the Taidhg Family**), keeping to the right past 'An Siopa' (The Shop – now replaced by a new shop, on the other side of the road, with a name incongruously in English). Then bear left at a fork after about 100m. From the end of the tarmac, past the last house, walk up across open grassy slopes to **Garter Hill (Cnoc a' Ghairtéil)** for good views of the inlets of Broadhaven.

Descend south-eastwards, initially towards a ruined building. This was a chapel from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, until 1911. After a few hundred metres turn south, down to the shore, through grassy sand dunes or areas of **machair**.

A **Machair**, in **Scots Gaelic** (and **local Mayo speech**) is an area of level, stable, sand-dune grassland. In geographical terms, the Irish word '**Machaire**' means a plain of wind-blown sand, which arises behind a sandy beach. Here, there is some 2 km of golden beach to walk, if the tide stays out, to the flat promontory of **Binroe Point (An Bhinn Rua, the Red Peak – Iron Oxides occasioning the colour)**.

Cross the road here (about 1½ hours away from Ceathrú Thaidhg) and climb above a small beach, keeping to the seaward side of the fence. On reaching open ground, climb north-west, then north above the cliffs. Detour inland to cross a steep-sided stream. Soon, the coast makes a major change of direction, as it turns eastwards - opposite **Kid Island (Oileán Mionnán, Island of the Young Goats)**. A few hundred metres east of the flat-topped area here, there is an imposing view of a huge **sea cave**.

Continue around the cliff tops to the small bay, surrounded by steep cliffs, which only sheep can climb. It is unsurprisingly called '**Na Príosúin**' (**The Prisons**). To return to Ceathrú Thaidhg (c2 km), follow the road from the bay and turn left before the houses.

### Day 2: Na Príosúin to Porturlin

**4-4½ hours one way, 14 km. 410 m ascent**

From the end of the road to Na Príosúin, head up across the grassy slope, safely parallel to the rim of the cliffs. A steady climb, of c2km in length, proceeds to the unforgettable **Benwee Head** (255 m, **An Bhinn Bhuí, The Yellow Peak**: the name describes the colour of the soaring, quartzite cliffs). The wide-ranging view takes in Slieve League across Donegal Bay and the peaks on **Achill Island**, to the south. **Oileán Acla, the Island of Acaill means Eagle Island**. The Gaelic manuscript, the **Annals of Loch Cé**, referred to this in 1235 AD.

To continue, cross a fence near the summit and keep safely to the coastal rim. Walk in a generally north-easterly direction. **Hag Island (An Bodach, the Lout)** and its dense population of fulmars and gulls come into view. Descend across the deep, wide indentation of **Doonavilla (Dún a' Bhile, Fort of the old Tree)**, where there are huge slabs of stratified rock. They are partly separated from the cliff and

tilt towards the sea. The Promontory Fort is defined by a line of boulders, across the narrow neck, which separate this inaccessible site from the main cliff.

A little further on, near the end of the long finger of land, which protects the western side of **Portacloy Bay (Bá Phort a' Chlóidh (the Bay of the Port of Defeat))**, are two relics from the Emergency (as World War II was called in **Southern Ireland**). There is a derelict lookout: the letters **ÉIRE**, about 10m long, are formed by flat stones on the ground. Such structures were fairly common, along the coast, to remind warplanes that they were in neutral airspace.

To reach Portacloy Beach, walk south across the hillside, over a stream and through a gate. Bear left, to the end of a fenced-off road: the pier is 100 m further on. To return to Ceathrú Thaidhg, follow the road south from the pier and take the first turn right, up the slope. Then go left, at a fork, and keep on the **bóithrín** (boreen, or small road) south-westwards for about 600 m, to where it swings west. Continue south-west across open, ground to the road at the eastern end of the village.

To continue to Porturlin, from Portacloy, climb the very steep slope from the beach to gaze upon stunning vertical cliffs, where fulmars sit on tiny ledges. Descend gradually to the southeast, over another hillock, to the extremely steep descent over Porturlin. Head towards a pair of gates, in a fence, about 75 m south of the cliff edge. Go through the right gate, to a fenced path, which leads to a gate at its far end. Cross the field, between two houses, to a gate and the road. The small pier is a short distance to the right.

### **Day 3: Porturlin to Belderg**

**4½-5 hours one way, 12 km. 800 m ascent**

From Porturlin, head south-west away from the coast, for about 800 m, and turn left. Then take the second left. Climb the slope. When the gradient eases, bear northeast to the cliff edge. Fulmars glide by, at times almost at arm's length. Skirting the next bay, walk above a vast, deep cleft, where the opposing cliff faces almost touch, midway down to the sea. Then, a steep descent almost to sea level at **Pollagh** {**pollach** means a place of (bog-)holes} is followed by a sharp rise, to the right of patches of scree (pebbles), through heather and bracken (large ferns).

Keep to the right of the crest of this hillock and cross the small valley, towards the rocky point ahead. There is a fine view from the next hilltop, of crags (masses of rock, projecting upwards) and deep clefts to the east. Continue to the U-shaped bay, called **Skelp (Scealp/Sceilp** means chasm/indentation), with its vertical walls above a shingle strand.

Pass close to the edge of a conifer plantation, cross a fence and, further on, go up to the left, to cross another fence. Climb steeply, a protective fence ensures safety. Continue up to the point marked '238 m' on the map, close to the cliff edge (2½ hours from Porturlin). On the way up, the difference between the close-cropped grass on the landward side of the fence and the lush growth, with many flowers on its seaward side, shows the impact of sheep-grazing.

A steep descent next leads to a narrow col (a pass between mountain peaks). Cross a fence, with a cultivated forest close by, then climb south-eastwards and continue eastwards to the foot of the final ascent to the townland of Glinsk. From its flat, peaty summit, unadorned by a cairn, the low profile of the view ahead shows that the eastern edge of the dramatic coastal landscape has almost been reached.

Descend via the northeastern spur of Glinsk, for a few hundred metres, then turn east to follow the line of a low, turf dyke (marked on the OS map), which leads towards the last prominent feature – **Benwee Geevraun Point** {**Binn bhuí Ghaobhráin**, the Yellow Peak of the Wind-swept Spot (cf gaomhar)}, 196 m. Leave the dyke, at some convenient point, to climb to the summit, for an inspiring view along the coast, westwards to Benwee Head. Head south from the summit, across some boggy ground and peat-cutting areas, to the boreen which leads down to **Belderg village**.

## II Achill Head and Croaghaun

### Introduction

A truly spectacular 3 km walk above coastal cliffs, the second-highest in Europe (600 m), with sweeping mountain and sea views. There are five **corrie** lakes on the slopes of **Crougnaun** (**Cruachán**, small Stack or Hill).

Achill Head and Croaghaun (688 m) together make one of the most dramatic coastal walks in the country. Fine weather will ensure an experience second to none. The going underfoot is generally good: well-grazed grass, low heather, rock on the steep climb (total ascent 760 m).

A circuit which avoids the road back from **Lough Acorrymore (Loch a' Choire Mhóir** – the Great Kettle Lake), goes southwards from above **Lough Bunnafreva West (Bun na Fréimhe**, the Base of the Root) - another of the corrie loughs), passing above Lough Acorrymore, across Croaghaun's broad spur and back down to the start at **Keem Strand** {**Cuan** (Harbour) **na** (of the) **Cuime** (Feast – **Scots Gaelic**)}. For a much longer walk, go northeast from Lough Bunnafreva West and east over the low hills, past the signal tower to the deserted village at the foot of **Slievemore (Sliabh Mhór**, High Mountain – 672 m).

### Natural History

Quartzites and some schists are the main rocks of Croaghaun and, indeed, the rest of Achill Island. Although the ice sheets which covered most of Ireland, during the last Ice Age, probably did not extend as far as Achill, there were some small, outlying glaciers. Lough Acorrymore and Lough Bunnafreva West, sitting on a wide ledge between lines of cliffs, are classic examples of the glacial features typical of Ireland. They face east and north, respectively, as do corrie loughs in other, clearly glaciated areas.

'Transhumance' is a term for the age-old tradition amongst rural communities of taking stock, usually cattle, away from the home fields, to graze in mountain pastures during the summer. In Ireland it is known as '**booleying**', from the Irish word '**buachailleacht**' (cow herding).

This 'seasonal nomadism' was an essential part of the farming year under the **Rundale System**, which prevailed before fields were formally enclosed by stone walls. Each summer, families took their cattle up the mountains, or at least to the foothills, where they could be let loose on lush grass. Several members of the family could live there, in simple stone huts.

In autumn, people and cattle returned to a '**clachán**' (in **Irish and Scots Gaelic**, a hamlet in which basic services were provided). This was home for most of the year. The animals were put out on fields from which harvests had been taken. The village of **Dugort (Dubh Gort**, Black Field) on the north coast on Achill Island is a good example of a clustered, clachán-style settlement. Between Achill Head and the western ridge of Croaghaun there are the relatively well preserved remains of the booleying village of **Bunowna (Bun na hAbhannn** – the Lower Reach of the River).



### Planning

Fine weather is more important for this walk than for most others, since the route passes along the rim of towering cliffs. Given this, most times between late May and early September would be suitable.

### Maps

The OS 1:50,000 sheet 30 covers the walk; sheet 22 shows all but a short section of the walk, south of Keem Strand. The way south, shown on both maps from Keem Strand, along the cliff top to an old lookout tower, does not exist as a continuous path. The marked path is generally the line of a low turf wall.

### 3 hours, 14 km, 760 m ascent

Climb the grassy slope rising steeply above Keem Strand to the cliff edge, taking in the signal tower perched high above **Moyteoge Head (i mBáiteoig** – in a Morass). From there, walk north-westwards, along the cliff top, either contouring below the rim, to avoid the ups and downs, or taking them head on - including the high point (302 m). Here, the cliff edge looks straight down on the sea, far below. The wide views extend from the hills above the Dún Chaocháin cliffs in the north-east to Croagh Patrick and beyond to the southeast. After about 1½ hours, the headland narrows to a relatively low, exposed cliff. The walk should end here.

Walk back, for about 800 m, towards Keem Strand. Then head down to the wide, flat col, reaching it northwest of the small tarns (corrie lochs – the mountain pools formed in a cirque by a glacier). On the way, are the remains of booley huts, along the stream below to the northeast. To the right are farm buildings associated with the notorious Captain Boycott.

The best way to tackle the climb up the almost impossibly steep hillside to Croaghaun is to go east-northeast across the slope, changing tack to northwards once the broad south-eastern spur comes into view. An effort of about 45 minutes brings you to the crest of the summit ridge, where there is a well trodden path.

On your left is a precipitate drop to a wide, grassy basin, on top of a lower line of cliffs. The path leads along the **arête** {a narrow ridge, sculpted by glaciers (un mot Français là, svp)} to the summit and its modest **cairn** (or mound of stones, to mark the summit). **Saddle Head {Rú na Córach** from Rubha na Córach, the Point of the Favourable Wind) nearby points its cliff-edged arm northwards towards the low Belmullet Peninsula and crags of Achill Head.

Continue along the rim north-east, then eastwards above the beautiful, pear-shaped Lough Bunnafreva West, its shore tidily lined with stones. From here, follow a southeasterly course to skirt the cliffs above Lough Acorrymore (Lake of the Great Corrie) and descend towards the northern side of tiny Lough **Corryntawey {Corr an tSamhaidh**, the Round Hill of the Sorrel (an edible plant)}. From this pond, it is hardly 500 m to the retaining wall across the outlet from Lough Acorrymore.

## III Corranbinna

### Introduction

The walk comprises a fine circuit over three summits, on the western side of the Nephin Beg Range, with splendid views and a short, exciting scramble.

Few ranges of hills in Ireland are as remote as the Nephin Bogs, extending into the fastness of the North Mayo bogs. Although the semicircular walk described here, around the **Glendahurk Valley (Glenn dá Thorc, the Valley of the Two Hogs)**, does not cover the highest of the Nephins (to the north-east), there is ready access to it and not too many Peat Bogs. Apart from short sections, along a vehicle track at the start and finish, the walk crosses rough, trackless country over **Ben Gorm (Binn Ghorm, the Blue Peak, 582 m)** to the high point of **Corranbinna (Corrán Binne, the Hollow in the Hills, 716 m)**, with the most broken ground on the long descent from Corranbinna South (681 m). Between the two Corranbinnas, the ridge narrows to a rocky **arête**. The trek along this sharp crest is exhilarating.

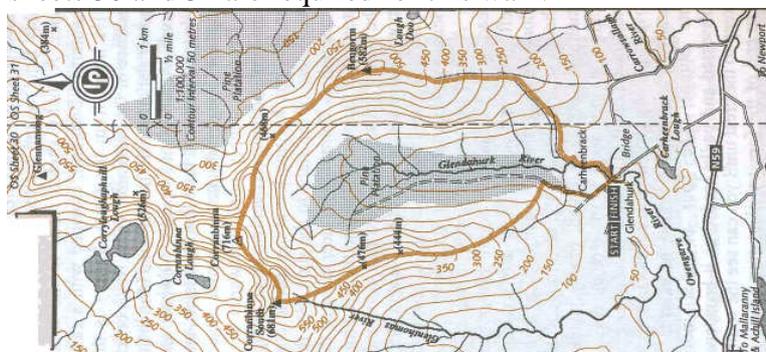
If time permitted, a visit to the outlier peak, **Glenamong (Glenn na mBó, Valley of the Cows, 628 m)**, could be undertaken (c3.5 km north-north-east of Corranbinna, climbing a further 370 m).

## Natural History

The Nephin Beg Range is an inverted Y-shaped group of quartzite hills, north and north-east of **Newport Bay**, deeply intersected by numerous streams flowing from its broad, generally steep slopes. In Irish, the town of Newport is called **Baile Uí Fhíocháin**: the Town of Ó Fiacháin, the name of a sept associated with the Midlands. **Lough Feeagh {Loch Fíoch}** (from 'fíodhach' meaning 'wooded'), between the two arms of the range, was carved out by ice sheets many thousands of years ago. The corries facing north and north-east, from the peaks covered in this walk, are also of Ice Age origin. The highest point in the range, an unnamed summit of 721 m, broods over the flat boglands to the north: Corranbinna is slightly lower. However, the solitary massif of Nephin to the east overlooks both, at 806 m, and is the second highest peak in Mayo and Galway.

## Maps

OS 1:50,000 sheets 30 and 31 are required for this walk.



## The Walk

**5½-6 hours, 14 km, 1020 m ascent**

The turn-off from the N59 has a very modest sign, best seen from the east - 'Carheenbrack'. The turn-off is 7.5 km west of Newport (GR 919964).

From the deserted farm buildings, walk northwest along the road for about 200 m and, just before the bridge over the **Owengarve River (Abhainn Gharbh or Raging River, a tributary of the Moy)**, go through a gate on the right into open country. Head upstream fairly close to the river; narrow footbridges cross small tributaries. After about 500 m, as a low spur takes shape ahead, change course and climb eastwards up the long, grassy slope of Bengorm's broad south spur. Grazed by the ubiquitous sheep, the banks of the tributary stream of the Glendahurk River provide the firmer ground, going up to the spur.

The west bank of a stream, which unconventionally flows down the spur's crest, provides reasonably firm footing for the long haul up the spur. A rocky stretch leads to the small summit of Bengorm, crowned with a cairn (1½ hours from the start). There is a panoramic view of Achill Island's peaks, Newport and Westport Bays and their flotilla of islets and the ever-vigilant Croagh Patrick. Ireland's first commercial wind farm, near Bellacorrick, has been in operation since 1992.

The **Bellacorrick (Turf) Power Station**, was demolished in 2007. **Béal Átha Chomhraic** means the Mouth of the Ford of the Confluence – at the confluence of inland streams). There is no arable land in the townland of Bellacorrick. The village (now comprising a public house) lies in the middle of a vast Blanket Bog.

Descend steeply north-westwards to a small col and press on over two broad hillocks on the spur, keeping left at the second one, well clear of the slabs to the right. For the final effort to Corranbinna, steer clear of the steepest of the boulder fields to the left. From the survey pillar, there is a fine coast-and-mountain panorama, with the Nephin Bogs added to the many sights from Bengorm (1½ hours from Bengorm).

A short descent takes you to the arête leading to Corranbinna South. Bear left for a scramble along its crest. Corranbinna South is a broad, grassy plateau falling steeply north to the elongated Corranbinna Lough. The long descent begins over squelchy ground; some rocks intervene and peat hags (soft spots) intrude around the intermediate bumps.

The spur becomes more dissected and badly eroded as it broadens; keep to the crest until you can see the southern end of the forestry plantation below in **Olendahurk (Oileán dá Thorc**, or Island of the two Hogs). Head down to that point, to meet a forestry track, which emerges from the plantation. Follow it south, then turn left at a T-junction and head back to the start of the walk (2½ hours from Corranbinna).

## IV Croagh Patrick

### Introduction

**Croagh Patrick (Cruach Phádraig**, Patrick's Mountain, 764 m) occupies a special place in Irish cultural tradition as the most hallowed place of pilgrimage in the country. Every year, tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world, climb to the summit. To seek more of God's grace, many climb in their bare feet.

The Pilgrims' Path starts from the village of **Murrisk (Muraisc**, from Muir-riasc, Sea-marsh), on the shore of Westport Bay, about 8k m west of **Westport (Cathair na Mart** or the Stone Cattle Compound) and climbs directly up the northern face of the mountain, to the main ridge. A relatively gentle section continues below the crest of the ridge to the final steep climb to the church on the summit.

Apart from the Pilgrims' Path, an east-to-west traverse of the entire mountain ridge makes a very fine walk. It includes a short section along the Western Way. Over firm ground, with only a few peaty patches at the western end, it affords unparalleled views. The ascent involved, 960 m over the course of the walk, exceeds the height of Croagh Patrick at 840 m, with two deep cols on the ridge, east and south-west of the summit. The route of the western section of the traverse, from **Roilig Mhuire** (the Virgin's Cemetery), is marked with large, widely spaced cairns. There is also a rough path. The eastern approach, without markings, has a cairn on each of the minor summits on the ridge.

### Maps

The OS has put the mountain on the corners of four 1:50,000 sheets. Sheets 30 and 31 are the most important, covering the northern approaches and the main ridge. Sheet 37 shows the descent to Roilig Muire and part of the climb towards Bengorm.

As an alternative to making the pilgrimage in person, you can visit the Croagh Patrick Web site ([www.anu.ie/reek/](http://www.anu.ie/reek/)) and make a virtual pilgrimage.

## The Walk

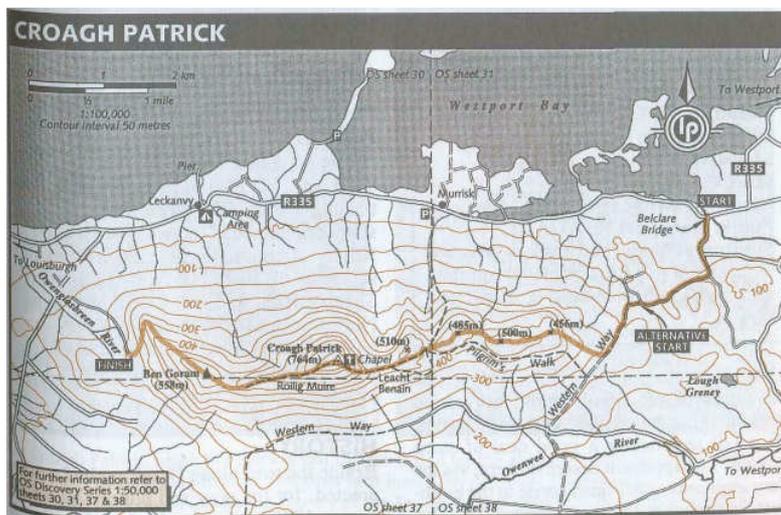
### 4-4½ hours, 10 km, 960 m ascent

A large car park is at the start of the Pilgrims' Walk in Murrisk. The walk starts from the main road, going southwards, along a leafy, narrow lane. After about 500 m, the lane bends sharply left to meet the Western Way. Following the Way, and bear right at a fork about 400 m further on.

After about 1 km, the road bends sharply right: a vehicle track continues ahead. Go through the gate and climb steadily along the track, to reach the open moorland on the broad ridge to the west. Go through another gate in the fence, paralleling the track for about 600 m. Keep to the north of another fence, going uphill, to come to a high, old, stone wall. Go through a gap in this and continue up to the crest of a heathery ridge.

From a small summit, nearly 1 km further west, descend steeply to a peaty col and the remains of the same stone wall crossed earlier. Up again, over a hillock or two, go down to meet the Pilgrims' Path and proceed to the summit of Cruach Phádraig.

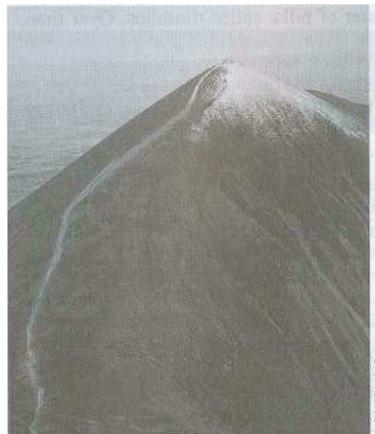
Continue westwards, on a stony but narrower path, generally down, to Roilig Mhuire. From here, a modest path continues westwards down to a narrow col. Climb north-westwards to Ben Gorm, a small plateau, and continue in the same direction, soon beginning to lose height. Two large cairns mark the start of the final, very steep descent. Keep to the north-west until you are well down to avoid precipitous crags on the western flank of the ridge. As the gradient eases, bear left and head across to the road (1 hour from the summit).



## Natural History

Croagh Patrick has a distinctive volcanic profile. However, its origins are not volcanic. It is composed largely of white quartzite, derived from sedimentary rocks, laid down hundreds of millions of years ago and later completely transformed by upheavals of the earth's crust.

The quartzites have been fractured and shattered, into the whitish mantle of scree, which gives the mountain its beautiful outline and makes the rock-strewn climb require a degree of physical alacrity. While 'The Reek', as it is known locally, bears slight evidence of the impact of the Ice Age, the bay above which it rises provides textbook evidence of glacier's retreat. As it melted, the debris accumulated within the ice was left behind in a cluster of hills, called drumlins. Over time, some of these have disappeared. The survivors have been worn down, their west-facing slopes carved by wind and the sea into steep cliffs. The protected slopes to the east are relatively unchanged



## History

Ireland's best known mountain is so known from Folklore, History, Tradition and Archaeology. A rich tapestry of knowledge is properly woven, using the tools of each discipline. Folklore, History and Tradition can be misunderstood, usually by people who have little background in these things. Patrick had a vocation to become a priest. He came to Ireland, to spread the Message of Christ, because he was familiar with the country, pagan at the time. Because of his association with the mountain, people named Croagh Patrick in his honour. They did so basically on their own accord, in the manner in which we Irish do things.

The original Irish name of **Cruach Phádraig** was Crochan Aigle, the Mountain of Aigle. The **Dinnseanchas (den seanchas** – 'of the lore') is a 10<sup>th</sup> century manuscript, which records Placenames and the Folklore which they call to mind). This book says that Crom Derg (the Stooped, Red-haired Man) killed his nephew Aigle, for his having killed a lady under his protection, called Cliara. The nearby **Oileán Chliara** or Clare Island is named after her. 'Crochan Aigle' is frequently mistranslated as 'Eagle Mountain' because of similarity to the name Oileán Acla (Achill Island).

Sun worship may well have centred on the mountain. It is believed that early kings of Connacht (the Western Province) built a road to the summit from **Ballintubber (Baile a' Tobair**, or the Town of the Fountain - about 20 km to the east). The line of the road is at least partly followed by the stone wall stretching across Croagh Patrick's southern slopes. It has been said that archaeological excavations have uncovered evidence of a prehistoric settlement on the summit, dating from c300 BC.

The association with Patrick (Pádraig), **Ireland's Great Apostle**, is enduring. He fasted for 40 days and 40 nights on the mountain, in the manner of Moses, in the Bible. The mountain was significant in his conversion of the Irish to Christianity. He performed acts of prayer and worship on what was a sacred Celtic site. Tradition also has it that Patrick expelled snakes from Ireland whilst on the mountain. The truth underlying this is likely that he acted successfully to counteract what Christian doctrine would see as wrongful behaviour.

Historic records of Christian pilgrimages to the mountain date back to the 12th century. The chapel on the summit (Ireland's highest church) was built in 1905, on the site of a temporary building erected in 1883, which had been close to the remains of the first Christian chapel there, dated between 430 and 890 AD.

The principal days of pilgrimage are **the last Friday in July (Garland Friday)**, **the last Sunday in July (Garland Sunday)**, and the 15<sup>th</sup> of August (**the Feast of the Assumption**). The first two days relate the pre-Christian era.

Pagan festivities began on this last Friday - **Aoine Chrom Dubh** (the Friday of Crom Dubh) and lasted to **Domhnach Chrom Dubh** (the Sunday of Crom Dubh - **Garland Sunday**) – which leads into the first day of the Harvest Season (the festival of **Lughnasadh**).

On August the 1<sup>st</sup>, the festival of **Lughnasadh**, the pre-Celtic Harvest god **Crom Dubh** (the Stooped Dark One), brings forth heavy sheaves of wheat from the Underworld of the **Earth goddess Áine**. He is the god most associated with the feast of Lughnasadh in **Ireland, Scotland** and the **Isle of Man**.

**Lugh**, a Celtic Sun god, was responsible for ripening the wheat (cf Latin '**Lux**'). In Irish Gaedhealg (spelled Gaeilge today), Lughnasadh or Lugh's *nasad* is the word for 'August'. In Old Irish, *násad* meant a celebration, involving sports (cf **Nás na Ríogh** – the town of Naas of the Kings). In **Scots Gàidhlig**, the word is **Lùnastal**. In the third country of our sundered Gaelic Homeland, the Isle of Man, the Manx word for August is **Luanistyn**.]

Pilgrims do the three 'Stations of the Reek'. The climber prays at each station. They are as follows:

**No. 1 Leacht Benain** (named after Benignus, Saint Patrick's disciple), a circular mound of stones at the base of the mountain.

**No. 2** At the mountain-top, including walking around **Leaba Phádraig** (Patrick's Bed).

**No. 3 Roilig Mhuire** (the Virgin's Cemetary), three mounds of stones on the western side of the mountain.

The **Aramaic** word **Miriam** means 'Star of the Sea'. The Irish language has a special name for Mary, when applied to the Mother of God. This is '**Muire**', related to the word 'Muir', for 'Sea'. The name for 'Mary', in general usage, is **Máire**.

## V Mweelrea

**Duration 6½-7 hours \* Distance 16 km (9.9 miles)**

### Introduction

This is highest peak in Mayo: a mountain of great character with spectacular corries and wide-ranging, panoramic views.

**Mweelrea (Cnoc Maol Réidh, Grey, Bald Mountain)** can be climbed by several routes. They all entail negotiating steep ground. The approach described here, via the very impressive cliff-lined corrie to the northeast, is probably the most spectacular. This leads to **Ben Bury (Ucht a' Chreagáin, Breast of the Little Crag, 795m)** on the northern rim of the broad, central arc of the mountain, a good 2km from the summit (814 m). The descent described here, over **Ben Lugmore (Binn Log Mhór, Peak of the Big Hollow, 803 m)** and via the eastern ridge, is extremely steep and hazardous in wet weather.

It may be preferable to descend via the main south-eastern spur (from GR 815673) to the Delphi Adventure Centre (GR 840652). However, this puts a greater distance between the start and finish of the walk. The distance in the route described is about 3 km; from the adventure centre, it is another 1.8 km. The upper reaches of Mweelrea are generally grassy.



## Natural History

Mweelrea differs from many of the mountains in Mayo and adjacent Conamara { **Conamara**, from **Connhaicne Mara**, the Hound-sons of the Sea (**Connhac** means Hound-son, an ancient personal name, meaning 'Tough Man')}. Mweelrea consists mainly of gritstones and sandstones laid down in an ancient sea about 500 million years ago. Though later bent and squashed by convulsions in the earth's crust, these rocks are hard and resistant to erosion. Conglomerates, slates and some volcanic material are also present. However, Mweelrea is similar to most other mountains in the region in displaying the effects of the last Ice Age - the spectacularly deep corries scooped out of its northern and eastern flanks.

The mountain's attraction lies not only in its sheer size, but also in its wonderfully contrasting setting. The steep southern flanks soar dramatically above the shores of **Killary Harbour**; to the east, a deep pass separates the mountain from the sprawling **Sheefry Hills** and the Ben Gorm massif. Northwards, Mweelrea overlooks low-lying pastoral lands by the shores of **Clew Bay**. At its feet, to the west, superb sandy beaches face the Atlantic.

**Killary Harbour** (**An Caoláire Rua**, the Red Firth ) is Ireland's only **fjord** and separates Mayo from Galway. **Sheefry Hills** (**Cnoc Shíofra**, the Changling's Mountain, (a Changling was a child exchanged for another by 'Fairy Folk': no doubt, the idea related to the easement of a particular social pressure).

## History

Beside the road along **Doo Lough** {**Dubh Loch**, Black (or Deep) Lake} is a cairn erected 'for the poor and hungry who died here in 1849, and in the Third World today'.

There are local memories of people who walked from **Louisburgh** (**Cluain Cearbán**, Meadow of Buttercups (**Wiese der Butterblumen**) to Delphi Lodge, in the dark years of the Famine, hoping to be accepted as paupers and gain admission to the Poor House at Louisburgh. A Poor House, most often, was a place to die with some dignity. Entry was refused. Some died of cold and hunger in the lodge grounds, Others perished on the way back to Louisburgh. The road itself was built in 1896 as one of the projects of the Congested Districts Board to improve conditions for people in the poorest parts of the country.

The town of **Dephi** was called after Delphos. He was a son of Poseidon and Melanthe (daughter of Deucalion). The Delphic Oracle was the most important in classical Greece. Apollo was worshipped there, after he killed the Python, the previous resident, who had protected the navel of the Earth.

**In the West, the spelling of anglicised names is often not stable:** longer, poetic, Irish placenames resist the process of inane translation. In the cases of Newport, Westport, Louisburgh and Delphi, for example, the English found it simpler to overwrite the Irish names altogether.

## Maps

The OS 1:50,000 sheet 37 covers the walk. Ben Lugmore on the eastern ridge is not named on this map.

## The Walk

**6½-7 hours, 16 km, 1150 m ascent**

Follow a rough vehicle track from the road, parallel to the north-western shore of Doo Lough. Cross a small stream of stepping stones at a ford, or by a footbridge about 100m upstream, and rejoin the track. This, however, soon fades. Continue generally south and cross the stream which drains Mweelrea's awesome corrie. Follow the stream up, into the corrie.

About 45 minutes from the start, over rough and, in places, soft ground, the foot of the only break in the lower line of cliffs is reached, around the head of the corrie. Climb a grassy spur, between two rivulets, and bear right with the slope, with cliffs close on the LHS. After a few hundred metres, move more to the right and continue up on a grassy spur. Eventually you reach a narrow path across a scree slope, which leads to a grassy col on the edge of the plateau, where there is a substantial cairn (1 hour from the base of the corrie).

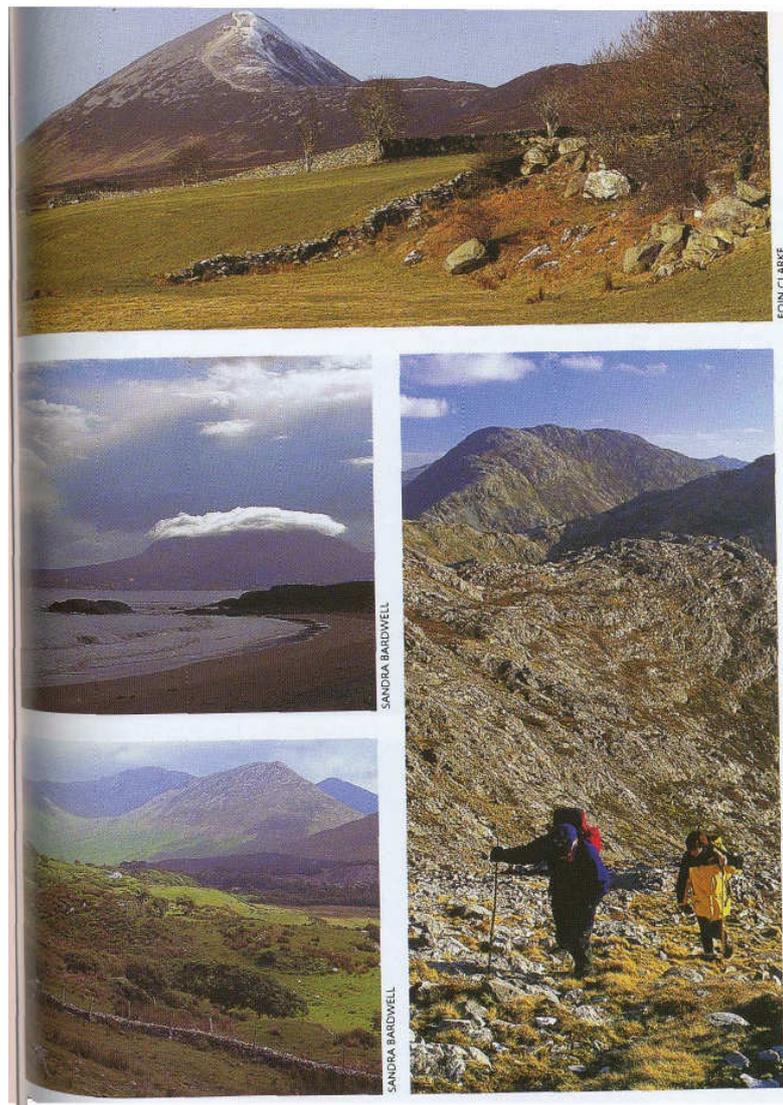
The next objective is Ben Bury (795m) on the northern rim. The views from either of the small cairns on the flattish summit extend far into North Mayo, across **Clew Bay** (**Cuan Modh**, the Bay of Modh (a personal name). The driest route south-west and southwards to the col, below Mweelrea's summit, is on the left across flat, stony outcrops. From the col, climb steeply, veering left for an expansive view of the wide and deep corrie, which embraces **Lough Lugaloughan** (**Lug a' Locháin**, The Hollow of the Lake). The flattish summit (an hour from the large cairn) is badly eroded but an outstanding vantage point: Killary Harbour, the **Maumturks** (**Mám Toirc**, the Boar's Pass) and the **Twelve Bens** (**Na Beanna Beola**, the Peaks of Beola (a Chieftain of the Fir Bolg, early Germanic arrivals to Ireland), the cliffs of

**County Clare** (**An Clár**, called after the Norman, de Clare) and Achill Islands, Croagh Patrick, and the Nephin Bogs are all laid out below. The contrasting flatlands far to the east graphically mark the limits of the mountainous area.

Return to the cairn south-east of **Ben Bury (Ucht an Chreagáin, Breast of the Little Crag)** by working across its slope, just below extensive drifts of scree. Climb up the eroded slope and proceed along the airy crest above the mighty corrie, scaled earlier in the day and climb steeply up to the pinnacle of **Ben Lughmore (Lug Mór, the Big Hollow)**.

Follow the undulating rim of the cliffs for about 1km. The long descent south-eastwards, towards the outlet of Doo Lough, is over broken, rocky ground, which gets steeper with the descent. Proceed down carefully, to the south-east, to avoid cliffs directly above the Lough. Then walk a few hundred metres upstream beside the **Owengarr River (Abhainn Ghearr, Short River)** to cross the outlet from the Lough by a causeway, a short distance across slightly soft ground, from the road.

### **Parting Pictures**



**Top:** Croagh Patrick, where St Patrick fasted for obligatory 40 days and 40 nights.

**Middle Left:** The brooding form of Mweelrea seen from Renvyle (**Rinn Mhaoile**) Beach, Connemara.

**Bottom Left:** The popular yet testing country of the Twelve Bens (**Na Beanna Beola**, the Crater Rim Peaks) as seen from near the **Maumturks (Na Sléibhte Mhám Toirc**, the Mountains of the Boar's Col).

**Bottom Right:** The rocky peaks of the remote Maumturk Mountains are a challenge for any walker.

*Curtha in Eagar ag an nDr Liam SS*

*Réamonn*

9/Aibreán/2012