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Look at the Canalscape

By Stephen Rynne

For me the canals spell two things: placid surrounds and intimate views of private Ireland. There is nothing exciting about canal exploration on foot, or from the water by barge or boat. One does not speak of thrilling experiences; nothing sensational occurs; there is nothing gigantic nor magnificent to be seen. What one must say to oneself is, Here I am surrounded by square miles of blissful peace and confronted with a wealth of unusual detail.

Insomuch as I have done propaganda for Irish tourism or written in praise of topographical features, I have dedicated myself to detail. I haven't, I hope, added an 'Ah' or an 'Oh' to the national scenery. The lakes of Killarney and the hills of Donegal owe me nothing for I have done nothing for them. Always I can't see the scenery for the trees, plants, gateposts, fanlights and other trifles. So it is I joy in the canalscape.

I am remembering an early summer voyage in a barge; a late summer stay on a cruiser moored to a bank near Robertstown, and towpath excursions on bike and foot beyond all counting . . . It will be seen that I am no great explorer; I've brought no parrots back from Drumshambo nor have I had a girl in every port.

First fascination is the clarity of the water. One looks down on a gently swaying jungle of pond and water weeds. Where water milfoil predominates amidst the sub-aquatic plants, one is reminded of an aerial view from a plane over pine forests. Small fish slip in and out of the greenery: perch, roach and an occasional pike — he looks the cruel, cold-blooded villain that he is. Canal fish are translucent as if they had built-in lights. But then canals are shallow and there is no impenetrable darkness between their banks. The what-one-must-call the canal bottom 'atmosphere' is a sort of sour sandy-green — not an attractive hue when put that way, but refreshingly novel.

The canalscape is full of novelties, the sort of things we never see from roads or railways. Canals are different; they are not to be confused with natural water courses; they have a character all their own. Canals (and we canalside dwellers tend to forget the fact) are entirely artificial. The building of them some two hundred years ago was a terrible affront to nature, a shocking taking of liberties with the privacy of an inland countryside. I can imagine how indignant I would have been if I were alive at the time they proposed rooting up our townlands to bring dirty barges from Dublin. But they came, these artificial water courses, got absorbed in the landscape, cast off their man-made looks and went wild.

Time works miracles. The bridges, locks, quaysides and sundries, all erected in utilitarian mood, have mellowed into things of beauty. The Undertakers of the Grand Canal built those bridges because they darn well had to be built; they didn't think of bridge arch framing blue-green views and sunsets; they didn't think of reflections . . . of spleen-worts growing in crannies of the masonry, of stalactites ornamenting the under arch. The locks were problems for engineers and nothing else. Today they present a new world of old world detail: white capped posts and bars; two hundred years of rope scars on the wooden bollards; the pole holes set in the masonry to protect the precious fly-boats from scratches.

Here allow me to digress on a modern affront to rural scenery: P. & T. and E.S.B. poles. They, too, have come to terms with nature. The first sort meekly march along the towpaths, carrying a single wire, each pole capped by a miniature roof of galvanised iron — as inoffensive as the bushes in the fields. The two-legged E.S.B. pole with its strings of inverted saucers, reminiscent of a Chinese pagoda is, of course, a pleasing item of landscape furniture.

On the whole long interior journey from Dublin to the Shannon, or down the Barrow to Waterford, one sees nothing but the simple and the harmless. It is a placid passage through broken land, half agricultural, half waste, a great deal of bog. A stillness and a remoteness; a feeling that this is the Ireland you should have known always but somehow didn't. The comforting confidence that your progress disturbs no one, scares no one; you are not going to kill or be killed.

I have said that there is nothing exciting about canal exploration. The flora, or canalside vegetation, offers no rarities. When the artificial waterways were laid down, the water loving plants saw an opportunity to extend their territory and did so with enthusiasm. The Willow family — to begin with trees — is represented in a big way: white and pussy willows, common and eared sallies. A curious feature of the canalside is the number of thwarted ash saplings, half in, half out of the water and never making good. Alders and birch are frequent; may-bushes and furze abound.

Reeds, flags and rushes have under-water footholds. That they are hinderances to navigation need not prevent us admiring them. Winter-struck or green, reeds shake and whisper; if they haven't souls, they have some sort of an indwelling spirit — a dryad, maybe — desperately trying to give a message to the world. Reeds and flags (the yellow wild iris) have grey-blue foliage, rushes have a dark blue bloom; there is no monotony of green on the canalside.

The most showy canal plant is, of course, the waterlily. If water-way traffic was what it should be, the waterlily would disappear. As I want increased canal traffic, I am forced to say that I hope this plant soon takes itself off to stagnant waters. The bogbean will remain. There are

few wildflowers to match this white and pink gem of water verges; if bigbeans grew in gardens they would be considered one of the most classy specimen extant. Happy is the garden owner who lives in ignorance of wild flowers; to know real flowers in real settings shows up horticulture as a sham.

The early summer flowers include marsh marigolds, Lady's smock, lesser spearwort and cowslips. Later there is purple loosestrife, yellow iris, water hemlock, willowherb, lousewort, watermint, marsh, cinquefoil, forget-me-not, Marsh St. John's wort, figwort, marsh ragwort and meadowsweet. Fluffy, creamy, scented — meadowsweet beats the ice-cream makers at their own game; no matter how disappointing a summer may turn out, a bank of meadowsweet makes a sort of summer in itself.

You must imagine all these plants and many more (mine is a short list) in their natural settings: knee-deep, waist-deep or bending over the water; doubled by reflections, arranged in insolent irregularity, a rest from the formalities of gardens and the institutionalisms of public parks.

I would like to claim that bird life on the canals is first rate. It isn't really; there is nothing unique about it. As in the case of the plants, the water loving birds moved in and extended their territories when the canals were built. Swans found a new place to cruise and exhibit their snowy, exquisite parts: swans are the film stars of bird-dom. They are also intelligent: when we lived on a boat, a pair made twice daily visits for meals; they knew all the scrounging ropes and as good as asked to be fed; they had dog-like good manners and wagged their tails by way of thanks for crusts.

Moorhens invaded the man-made canals in a big way. They are attractive and interesting birds, always garrulous and making a fuss about themselves. In summer the youngsters sometimes come off the swim to walk on rafts of reed flotsam, the frail platform sagging under their weight. Herons visit the canals for fishing; like human anglers, they assume a stoical look ('God send me a fish, please') and have a sort of a patience which could easily be mistaken for fedupness. I have never seen kingfishers over the canal although I have seen them flashing along adjacent water-courses. Grey wagtails are only to be found where water splashes, as at locks; calm water seems to bore them. Swallows find the over-canal air good for fly collecting; the most common member of the family is the Sand Martin: brownish, soft-flitting and bat-like.

I have only mentioned the water loving birds. Any short excursion from the actual canalside will be rewarded by such wildlings as reed buntings, whinchats, stonechats, greenfinches and linnets. In early summer there are corncrakes in the young corn, cuckoos in concealment and larks in the sky. All the time there are the common or garden birds:

blackbirds, thrushes, chaffinches, robins, wrens. I don't think one could make the claim that the canalways are a bird watchers paradise, but I know no territory where one is so much in the company of birds.

That's enough about birds and plants. I haven't mentioned darting dragonflies at all — or the mysterious aquatic insects (the larvae of water-beetles perhaps) which inscribe endless V's on the water surface. There's a life study in the canalside insect world.

Let us consider a 'still', or a scene viewed for many days at different times and in different moods.

For long serene seconds water, wayside trees, bushes and poles are picture still. Then there is a breath of wind — no more than an exhalation — and all the reflections quiver. The top of the pole becomes like the bit of a boring instrument; the wire is thrown out like a lasso; rushes immersed close to the bank reflect as corkscrews, and then the breath dies down and all is picture still as before.

At night the moon and stars have their day; the canal and the countryside belongs to them. I have said that canals offer no thrills, but one night I saw a shooting star mirrored in the water; that was a thrill, at least by my standards. The wonder of dawns, the lingering of sunsets, the splash of rain on water, strong winds that blow up wavelets — these must be seen to be appreciated.

So much for the descriptive piece. I have laid myself bare as a nature lover and shown myself an enthusiast for canals as pleasure resorts. You have had good value in the romantic.

Now let me tell you something.

Inland waterways are no playgrounds — not as the hard-boiled business world reckons these things. Traffic on European continental waterways is on the up and up. In 1965 traffic handled in West Germany amounted to over 195 million tons, an increase of seven per cent over the previous year. There were like increases in Belgium, the Netherlands and Yugoslavia. Finland is building new canals to connect lakes. The only decline in waterway traffic took place in England and Italy. So much for Europe. In the United States and Canada new records of waterway traffic are being set up. In rapidly developing Africa, canals are being built. There is world movement.

Once and for all, let us get the notion out of our heads that canals are obsolete or things to pass on to pleasure seeking tourists. Canals

provide cheap transport; they are of economic value. We canalside dwellers are cheered to see pleasure boats, but we look forward eagerly to a return of commercial traffic. It is no time — no more than a handful of years — since barges plied on the canal carrying merchandise from Dublin to Limerick and other centres. It would take no time to restore that traffic if government goodwill existed. The canals are in fine working order.

One can say all one likes about Ireland being a small island with very little to transport one way or another, but having said all that the fact remains that sand is sand, turf is turf, beet is beet and concrete blocks are concrete blocks. These bulky materials come by road — how often have you been the exasperated driver behind a lorry and trailer containing them? They could come far more cheaply and just as safely by water.

Let's not be woolly in this campaign for the preservations of the canals. Instead of saying 'Hands off the Canal', let's demand that the canals be put back to use.



My Herbert Place nursery, the first-floor drawingroom below it and the dining-room under that all had a watery quality in their lightness from the upcast reflections of the canal. The house was filled, at most daytime hours, by the singing hum of the sawmill across the water, and the smell of new-planed wood travelled across. Stacks of logs awaiting the saw overtopped the low tarred fence that ran along the bank on the opposite side. The woodyard was fed from some of the barges that moved slowly up or down the canal, sinking into then rising again from locks. Not much wheeled traffic went past our door, but from each end of Herbert Place, intermittently, came the ring and rumble of trams going over bridges.

— from *Seven Winters* memories of a Dublin childhood

by Elizabeth Bowen.

