In the Land of Milk and Money : State Sanctioned Rare Oakwood Destruction On Eve of First Dail 1919, 100th Year Commemoration

In the words of a renowned Harvard University Biologist. **“Destroying rainforest for economic gain is like burning a Renaissance painting to cook a meal.”** ― **E.O. Wilson**

Against the backdrop of State sponsored events to mark the 100th centenary of An Chèad Dail, Monday January 21st 1919, it is both painful and sad to learn of the destruction of an extremely rare and ecologically valuable old growth oakwood in the townland of Slivergrove/Doire Airgead or Silver oakwood as gaeilge, in the Toon river valley area, in county cork. A proposed Natural Heritage Area, an oakwood that was clearly marked on the first Ordnance Survey maps of the 1840’s and in the possession and protection of a Cork family for 14 generations, until it was sold in 2010.

This townland is in the constituency of the Minister for Agriculture who is responsible for the Forest Service forest regulatory body who granted the felling license for this destruction.

What is extraordinary, is the fact that this oakwood was surveyed and mapped for the 2008 Native Woodland Survey report and was considered to be one of the finest examples of an undesignated annex 1 habitat type oakwood and worthy of immediate protection under the Natural Heritage Area criteria. This work was overseen by Dr. John Cross who was for a time the chief state scientific advisor/specialist for Native woodlands. Ted Cook who was corresponding with Dr. Cross and had alerted him to the Toon valley oakwood importance, said it was one of his last tasks before he retired. It is our understanding Dr, Cross was not replaced and this important advisory position has lain vacant for some time.

Dr. Cross filed a full report and recommendation to the NPWS ( National Parks and Wildlife Service ) for whom he was working, seeking NHA designation for this site, this was in 2013 as the first step towards full SAC (Special Area of Conservation) status. Dr Cross was interviewed by the Southern Star local newspaper on January 7th, 2012, repeating the above in an article titled”Toonwood deserving SAC status” by Catherine Ketch

The local environment group MDEG with some members of the local community had identified the significance of this important oakwood as far back as 1987 seeking its protection and designation under NHA. It was this community groups hard voluntary work on the ground that ensured the woodland was finally mapped and surveyed. Despite claims that the terms and conditions of the thinning/limited felling license had been breached, the Forest Service seem to have overruled it’s own local Forest Inspector who agreed the terms of the license had been breached and sanctioned the clearfelling to proceed.

The next phase of the works involved heavy machinery on site over Christmas 2018 and they proceeded to continue the clear-felling of the old growth oakwood. They went so far as to uproot stumps to ensure there could be no regrowth from the old roots, and then put down grass seed, effectively turning the diverse forest into a farm parkland with occasional standing trees.

With uprooting done and piles of canopy material piled up for burning along with stacks of valuable hardwood timber stems including oak, most likely destined for firewood, the activity was finally stopped in early January 2019, after a detailed complaint sent by MDEG to a list of regulatory bodies, including the EPA, who are responsible for the Habitats Directive and the Water Framework Directive, both of which appear to have been breached. We also understand that the EU Environment Commission has been notified of the issue. An investigation is now underway. The run off from the clearfell and from the stripping of riparian riverbank trees, entered the river potentially impacting on the endangered freshwater pearl mussel and rare otter habitat, both also Annex 1 protected species under the EU Habitats Directive.

See selection of photographs with Kevin Corcoran and Ted Cook founder members of MDEG with 5 other MDEG members and 15 other concerned local people, walking the damaged site with the Sinn Fein MEP Liadh Ni Riada, she vowed to follow this to the highest level and was “ Alarmed at the fate of this old growth oakwood, which Dr John Cross had once described as deserving of SAC status”.

All of this destruction was completely avoidable if State agencies had acted responsibly and moved to ensure that NHA status was conferred on this old growth oakwood in 2013, of which we only have approximately less than 2% of an already low total of 11% forest cover mostly made up of non native commercial tree farms. At the very least there should have been communication between the Forest Service and the NPWS or shared and recorded knowledge of the importance of this old growth oakwood.

This outrage is also happening at a time of unprecedented Climate change and calls for Climate action, Ireland is claiming it wants to become a leader, while we learn for the second year running we have been listed as the worst country in the EU for tackling Climate change.

Andrew St Ledger, The Woodland League PRO said, “This is a crime against us all, as well as future generations, it is our collective environment and it’s biodiversity that we are all dependent upon, this case highlights just how far we have to go to live up to the latest government Climate action aspirations. Can the public really trust that this State is serious about Climate change ? The fact that no EIA ( Environmental Impact Assessment ) was conducted on this large area of precious old growth oakwood, covering 30 ha, or 75 acres, with a proposed NHA designation says it all”.

Our understanding is that an EIA is required for high natural forest of more than 10 ha, which matches this site criteria. The fact that not one of the regulators notified of the impending destruction via a series of complaints over many months, were of the opinion that an EIA might actually be a good idea also speaks volumes.

Is this to be the legacy of the 100 year centenary of the founding of the State, a betrayal of the original principles by the current State and a devaluation of the natural heritage birthright of this Island and its people, by the licensing of the destruction of a fragment of old growth oakwood, which should have been designated a protected annex 1 habitat ?

Is grazing for cattle more important than old growth oakwood sites, a Temperate Atlantic Rainforest, internationally recognised as being an extremely valuable land based habitat for biodiversity. This seems to be the message coming from the Department of Agriculture/Forest Service in this very clear statement of intent, which they have sanctioned.

Quote from Ted Cook, MDEG PRO and Woodland League founder “ The Forest Service have in effect facilitated the annexing of a rare ecologically valuable old growth native oakwood, a proposed Natural Heritage Area, of national importance and value, to facilitate the sowing of grass for dairy cattle, it is quite astonishing”.

The first Sinn Fein Teachta Dàla from 1919 would be horrified and ashamed, it was the vision of Michael Collin’s and others in that house, to see the restoration of Ireland’s oakwoods, it was a metaphor for a resurgent nation.

***Arthur Griffith speaking at Sinn Fein’s inaugural convention in 1905, described Ireland’s reforestation with all of it;s attendant Industries as a main component of his party’s mission statement. Combined with the harnessing of Ireland’s rivers and streams for sustainable energy in order to cut our dependency at the time on imported coal. These were the two main tenets of that new party’s economic policy in 1905, which was the key to maintaining Independence.***

Update : Ted Cook has just received a letter from the Taoiseach’s office, Friday 18th January 2019, in response to Ted’s request for intervention to confer the stronger SAC (Special Area of Conservation) status on to the the Toon valley oakwood remains, under Annex 1 of the Habitats Directive to mark the 100th centenary of the first Dail. Ted reminded the Taoiseach that the groundwork for this had all been laid down by Dr John Cross in 2013.

The letter acknowledged receipt of the request and informed Ted that the matter has been passed by the Taoiseach to the relevant Minister, Josepha Madigan, for consideration.

To conclude, what MDEG and The Woodland League now demand are the following,

1. Full and proper transposition of the EIA Directive in Ireland.

2. Prosecution of those responsible for this environmental crime.

3. SAC status conferred on the remainder of the Toon woodlands larger area, and fencing off of the

remaining damaged area to allow natural regeneration with some remedial planting.

4. Seizure by the State of the remaining piled up stacks of hardwood felled illegally to prevent

anyone profiting from this environmental crime.

Notes:

**A quote from a National Parks and Wildlife report of 2008: "The top scoring 19 undesignated sites are shown in Table 3.13. Of these, three sites – Toon Valley (Site 1314) 65 Cork, Cappaghbaun Park (Site 1564) in**

**Clare and Carrig East (Site 1735) in Kerry – all scored over 80%, indicating that these are excellent quality woodlands. The National Survey of Native Woodlands 2003-2008 Volume I - BEC Consultants Ltd." https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/general/nsnw-vol-1.pdf:**

**21st Century Deforestation in Ireland**

**A EPA, Deforestation report in January 2018, highlighted the fact that the most vulnerable sites are the native woodlands and semi natural woodlands, of which we have so little and can ill afford to lose. The pressures were coming from developers clearing sites and farming to increase grazing combined with weak regulation.**

**http://www.epa.ie/researchandeducation/research/researchpublications/researchreports /research221.html**

Chronology of recent events:

A new owner of the site applied for a felling license to conduct some thinning of the 30 ha, oak woodland in 2015 on foot of a plan submitted by a consultant, which lapsed and was reapplied for in 2017, work commenced on site and stopped on foot of local complaints regarding a potential breach of the license terms and conditions, whereby it appeared to be a clearfelling operation rather than thinning. A tracked harvester machine had cleared large areas of woodland and hedgerows.

In August 2018 the excavator returned and finished clearing woodland, riparian vegetation and scrub north of the road. Again complaints were made.

8-10-18 The Forest Service suspended the licence

Some time later the licence was reinstated.

December 2018-Jan 2019 Two mechanical tree harvesters enter site and begin cutting trees. Most of the remaining 30 acres of woodland are felled.

Jan 9 2019 Felling is ceased as licence is again suspended pending suspected breaches, local opposition and high profile complaints.

**The poem below is by Alice Milligan a prominent member of the Gaelic League who were**

**instrumental in preparing the country for Independence in 1919 via restoration and**

**awareness of the rich cultural and natural heritage of the Island.**

*Fallen in Eireann are all our leafy Forests,*

*The oaks lie buried under a bogland mould.*

*Only in legend dim are they remembered,*

*Only in ancient books their fame is told.*

*But seers who dream of times to come,*

*Have promised forests will rise,*

*Where perished these.*

*And of this desolate land,*

*It shall be spoken.*

*In Tirconnell of the territories,*

*There are trees.*

By Alice Milligan.

" Alice Milligan is the most Irish of living Irish Poets, and therefore the best - It is fitting that this Irish poet is a woman "

Thomas McDonagh, 1914