

Caragh Lake

Caragh Lodge was my home from 1947 until I left Oxford in 1955 to live in London. In 1962 my parents sold Caragh Lodge, but built Western Ridge on part of the grounds. My father died there in 1970 and our family links with Caragh were finally severed when my mother moved to Ibiza in 1972 and I sold Western Ridge. Caragh Lake is a beautiful place, and I was lucky to have lived there.

Background

My parents bought Caragh Lodge in early 1947 to escape from Ballynegal (her parents' home in Westmeath) and by the time I came home from Winchester for the Easter holidays, they were settled in. It was a traditional house of local stone with rendered walls, standing on twelve acres of woods and fields, which sloped down to the foreshore of the lake. Built about 1920 (by a formidable lady called Mrs Mills who personally supervised construction) it was a gentleman's house with front and back stairs, a courtyard with stables and a gravelled drive to the front door. The principal rooms (3 reception and 4 bedrooms) had splendid views to the lake and the mountains. Backstairs there was a substantial kitchen with range, scullery, larder, and downstairs toilet plus (up the stairs) a box room, two maids' bedrooms and the only bathroom.

It seemed strange that in a house built so late, one should have to go through a door into the servants quarters to get to the bathroom! Although they maintained it, my parents never altered the house. There were no main services. Water was pumped from the lake (baths were brown), hot water came from the range, the house was heated by turf fires and we generated our own electricity - my father spent a lot of time turning off lights! We all led active lives, and needed to - in the winter we kept one room tolerably warm. At first we had live-in staff (cook and maid), but by 1950 we replaced them with locals from down the road.

Caragh Lodge was full of family antiques and pictures from Ascot Place via Winkfield Manor, Ranelagh Cottage, The Shieling (Bembridge I.O.W), and Ballynegal. Over the years these were slowly depleted to pay for education - several valuable things were sold to dealers who came down from Dublin. Money was tight and my parents lived frugally - they bought few new clothes, never went out to dinner, drank little, and took sandwiches or a picnic if out for the day. Caragh Lodge was put in my name, and when they sold it and built Western Ridge (also in my name), they gave me the £3000 change, which came in handy as we were losing Val's income from Shell - upon the arrival of Dominic.

My parents attacked the gardens and grounds with gusto. Labour was cheap in 1947 - our excellent gardener John Murphy cost £2 -10/- per week, and two of his sons, Maurice and John (available straight from school at fourteen) less than £1 per week each. My parents were both keen gardeners, and planted exotic shrubs and tree ferns, which thrived in the mild Kerry climate. My father grew several hundred *pinus insignis* from seed, and created new woods on waste ground. He pruned sprayed replanted and expanded the orchards - mainly with popular varieties of eating apples, which he stored and later sold. He grew fields of celery and outdoor tomatoes, and erected several unheated greenhouses for chrysanthemums and yet more tomatoes.

My mother loved dahlias, and eventually had a quarter of an acre of them! Cut dahlias and chrysanthemums were sent up to Dublin on the train from Caragh Lake station for sale in the market - at times they did well but sometimes barely paid carriage costs. In winter my mother advertised and sold named dahlia tubers. Apples, celery, and tomatoes were taken into Tralee every week where several shops relied on our produce. Although my mother sometimes took herself out fishing which she loved and my father occasionally went sailing until his dinghy was destroyed in a storm in 1950, my memories are of my parents planting picking packing and delivering - they had created a treadmill for

themselves! All this activity did not produce much net income after deducting labour and motor expenses, but they both liked fresh air and growing things, and their enterprise gave them occupation and purpose.

The social life of Kerry was pretty relaxed. Most of my parents' friends were English or Anglo-Irish retired professionals. There were no lunch or dinner parties, but everyone threw two sherry parties a year where one met the same fifty people living within twenty miles. There were a few organised shoots around Killarney, but my father was a reluctant shot, and after he had been given a rocket by The Macgillicuddy of the Reeks (the local laird - Reeks to his friends) for missing his pheasants, he gave up shooting altogether, and I got both his guns. Reeks took a great liking to my mother; he let her fish for salmon on his private stretch of the Laune and took her deer stalking on the mountain moors behind Killarney. I remember trying to avoid his wife Madame Macgillicuddy at drinks parties! This bright elderly lady - stone deaf since a riding accident on her honeymoon - would thrust a notebook and pencil into my hands, read what I was starting to write, answer any question or comment on my observations before I had even finished writing them down, and then expect me to write something new! There were few young people (of my background) in the area and no parties or dances for teenagers which made me backward in mixed company - several of my contemporaries at school boasted of girl friends by seventeen.

My parents supported the Church of Ireland. They attended Killorglin church every week and went to occasional services in Glenbeigh. Although both were agnostic, my mother was anti-Catholic therefore pro Church of Ireland, while my father believed that established institutions such as the Church underpinned civilisation and should be supported. So my mother played the harmonium and took Sunday school where her enlivened versions of bible stories proved very popular, while my father, as a churchwarden, read the lesson, and tried to keep church finances in some sort of order. Church of Ireland parsons were considered "above

the salt”, so Charlie Foster (for many years our hopelessly incompetent vicar, but about the best salmon fisherman in Kerry) and his bitchy wife Helen came to our sherry parties to which - as middle class Irish - they would not otherwise have been invited. My father also represented the British Legion in Kerry and spent a lot of time visiting and helping old WW1 soldiers.

Rural Ireland in the late forties was very poor. There was no starvation, but few children had shoes and nearly all the older women over sixty still wore the traditional black shawl. Schooling for most stopped at fourteen. Families were often large (our gardener John Murphy had ten children, and my mother once met a woman on the train to Killarney who had had twenty six - mainly twins) - there were not enough local jobs for school leavers and many went across to England to work in menial occupations. Although some families still lived in the picturesque thatched hovels universal in my mothers childhood, most (like John Murphy and his wife) had had their cottages replaced by basic two-room bungalows - one room for sleeping and one for living/cooking. Cooking was a stockpot over a turf fire into which things (whatever happened to be going) were dropped to go along with the staple boiled potatoes. Only the affluent had cars, and most families used a donkey or pony cart.

Although Kerry had been IRA country during the troubles and my father was an English officer, everyone was very friendly. Both my parents were liked and respected by the locals and we never felt threatened which shows how quickly attitudes can change once a *casus belli* has gone (Ireland was independent). No one in Kerry was too bothered about Ulster.

By the early 60's the house and garden were getting too much for my parents. My father's arthritic hip meant he could no longer do prolonged work outside, maids were harder to find, and the house was too big. So in 1962 my father sold Caragh Lodge and most of the land to Rolf Schaper – a charming Berlin eye surgeon with a wife and daughter. They

spent a lot of money turning it into a smart hotel/guest house. In due course the Schapers retired to a (lovely) house which they built on the far side of the grounds, and their daughter Inez and her husband ran Caragh Lodge before selling on to the present owners - the Gaunts. Val and I went round for a drink with the Schapers in 1995.

On the two acres he kept, my father built a bungalow - Western Ridge - with lake frontage and fine views. It was a functional but dreary four-bed bungalow to my parents' design but it had mains electric and oil central heating, and suited them well enough. My mother had insisted on a small courtyard with lockable storerooms, which she kept full of everything - she had a siege mentality, a hangover from the war. My parents had plenty to keep them occupied making a new garden and employed John Murphy's youngest son, William, one day a week (he was kept on by the Scotts who bought Western Ridge and was still there 33 years later in what was by then a show-piece garden when I met him in 1995). My father put up two small greenhouses for flowers, tomatoes, cucumbers and melons – the latter were incredibly hard to grow, but he got a lot of fun out of trying (he only got ripe melons twice). On my later visits to Western Ridge with Val and young family, my father was in a lot of pain from arthritis and poor circulation. Although he still pottered around his greenhouses, he spent most of his time smoking clay churchwarden pipes and reading biographies in a high rocking chair, which gave him some relief from his bad hip, and his memory was deteriorating. My mother, only two years younger but still active and sharp, added various "silly old Rab" stories to her repertoire (they had once called each other Bunny and Rabbit), which did not please me.

We were staying with Brian and Ursula Laver at Caterham when my ICI boss phoned with news of my father's death the night before (on my 38th birthday August 22nd 1970). I flew to Dublin within hours and drove down the same day to find my mother distraught and my father still lying on their bed where she had found him dead - he had retired

early not feeling well and had had a heart attack. He was nearly 76. I stayed a week to sort out his affairs - he is buried in Glenbeigh churchyard. I had a great regard for him - he had a good brain, few prejudices and was a shrewd judge of people. He was always straight and fair, made no enemies (unlike my mother), and had a dry sense of humour. He was physically courageous as shown by his Military Cross and two Mentions in Despatches during WW1. But he was not ambitious and did not like conflict, and these fine qualities were probably his principal defects. He might have achieved more outside the army, but his parents and uncles put pressure on him to stay on after WW1, and he acquiesced. My mother badgered him to go to Ireland after the war, and he went against his better judgement (it was just lucky it worked out). He was not physically well during much of WW2 (the problem was found to be a grumbling appendix & removed) and this stopped him serving overseas where I think he might have made major-general. My parents shared the same sense of humour and outdoor interests but my mother was more creative. She had a vivid imagination, and her quick intuitive intelligence sometimes led her into over-hasty judgements. She liked to get - and usually got - her own way and she never shrank from conflict.

My mother coped well at Western Ridge on her own, but she found it lonely and my sister Monica did them both a good turn when she encouraged her to move to Ibiza. On the day she left Ireland - March 13th 1972 - my mother wrote in her poem "Erin Exile" about "How lonely is an empty house when happy days are fled" and how it was "Better by far to turn the page and leave the past behind". In Ibiza she got a new lease of life!

After my mother left, we came over as a family to clear up before completion of our sale to the Scotts, who still live there. He ran a business in Killarney. She is a poisonous woman, and when I telephoned her in 1995 to say "Hi" (I would have liked to go round), she said that "it

was not convenient for me to come to the house” but that I could “talk to William in the garden, provided I did not take too much of his time which they were paying for.”

G at Caragh Lake

From the day I arrived I found Caragh Lake a stunning place to live. I remember my elation at the beginning of a school holiday when I drew the curtains on my first morning home, knowing that I had four (or eight) whole weeks to fish, shoot, climb hills, collect wild flowers or generally scramble around. During these years I got to know my parents better and to enjoy their company. Although I did help them with picking or packing at peak times, they did not expect much assistance from me and provided I turned up by supper I could do what I liked. Monica was rising twenty when we moved to Caragh and came over for a few days a year (which might or might not coincide with my holidays) so I have few memories of her there.

I had done a lot of sea fishing at Bembridge, but I remember the thrill of my first outing on Caragh Lake in the spring of 1947. My mother and I were trolling (dragging artificial lures behind the boat) and within an hour, we had got four nice trout and two salmon. Both the salmon were “spent fish” known as kelts or slats, fighting their way back to the sea after spawning - we let them go - but the sound of the reel screaming as they tore the line off the spool was very exhilarating! By the end of the holidays I was allowed to take the boat out myself, and fishing became my main pastime in spring and summer - mainly in the lake, but I sometimes cycled to various little tarns on the bog roads above Caragh Lake. And in the early years my father occasionally towed a small boat on a trailer behind our 1934 Vauxhall so we could fish the larger loughs - Acoose, Cloon and Coomasaharn - the latter a rather sinister very deep lake beyond Glenbeigh which had its own unique sub-species of arctic char.

Most people fished Caragh wet fly for trout - rowing up-wind and casting while drifting down. But I found that although I could get reasonable bags, I was slow at striking to drive the hook home. I could get as many rises as anyone so I was presenting the fly properly, but some people (like my mother) could hook more trout than me. I never overcame this difficulty, so when on my own I preferred to troll artificial lures (I could fish two rods), which gave me more exercise and a much better chance of catching salmon or possibly record cannibal trout. I liked eating trout for breakfast, but I cracked that problem by setting nightlines baited with worms, which I rowed out from our foreshore. These produced eels (very good eating and I got handy at skinning them) and trout, and I remember going up to my parents bedroom in the early mornings with my catch on a large dish to show them what I had got everyone for breakfast.

One night a line became detached from its mooring and drifted onto the foreshore of a neighbour who had let his house for a year to a disagreeable man called North-Bomford who claimed to have got a hook in him when having his morning dip in the lake. There was an awful row and talk of legal proceedings, so I stopped this variety of poaching and built an otter board instead. This was made with a piece of wood weighted with metal at the bottom so it was just buoyant and would float vertically upright. It had a harness rigged so that it would cut through the water pulling away from the boat and rode almost at right angles to it (in the war they used a similar device called a Paravane to sweep mines). From the line I mounted thirty flies on droppers so that each fly swept different water and a large area could be covered simultaneously. When I saw two or three hooked fish jumping, I turned downwind to "harvest" them. I could get about twenty trout an hour this way if they were rising.

When I was about sixteen I gave up the Otter Board and concentrated on catching salmon, which I never liked eating, and could sell in Killorglin at 6/- per pound. I could row for eight hours even when the lake was

rough without tiring, and knew every rock and shallow and the ledge where the salmon lay. I worked for my fish, and I was happy to get one a week. I also hoped to break the trout record for the lake - held by a nine pounder on stuffed display at the Caragh Lake Hotel (now demolished). I caught one fine trout of over seven pounds but - heartbreak day - lost an enormous one of at least twelve pounds which jumped twice before the hook came loose.

At seventeen I was out fishing when I got awful pains in my lower stomach. I managed to row back and put myself to bed - my parents were in Tralee selling produce. When they returned, they called the doctor who diagnosed acute appendicitis and I was operated on that night in the Bon Secours nursing home in Tralee - according to the surgeon my appendix would have burst by morning. Within a week I was fishing again!

When I came to Caragh, I was given my first shotgun - a single barrel 410 - and I went after pigeons and rabbits, but within a year my father let me use one of his double barrelled twelve-bores. Except for rabbits, shooting was confined to the winter, and I concentrated on snipe and duck, with hares, pigeon, woodcock and plover in the bag from time to time. Caragh Lake had lots of nearby bogs which I could walk or bike to, and I became a good snipe shot with the necessary quick reactions (so why was I so bad at striking fish?). Snipe were lovely to eat, but one needed three for a meal, and I was glad we had a maid to pluck and truss them! I continued shooting if home during the winter for many years, and after I learnt to drive in 1953, I often took the car to distant bogs - in those days one could shoot anywhere without permission. My last outing was Christmas 1959 when I took Val home to meet my parents (see photos, but she was only posing) but I have grown sentimental with the years and would not now want to hurt beast or bird.

When I was about fifteen, I saw a duck mallard on a small tarn (Lough Beg) on the road to Glencar swimming under a hanging wood, and I

crawled close and shot it “sitting” – not very sporting and a fact I intended to keep to myself. I had to swim about twenty yards across the freezing tarn to collect it, and pedalled home with it in triumph. That night a local man called “to see the Colonel” - I had shot “his” (domestic) duck. It cost my father 5/- to settle the matter, and I got teased about the incident for years - the tale of George’s Duck told in an exaggerated brogue became one of my mother’s most popular stories. Although there was no way I could have known it was not wild (there were no houses around Lough Beg) I was painfully conscious that this mistake could not have been made by a sportsman who only shot duck when flying!

In the early days we did many scenic all-day runs in the car – Killarney, the Ring of Kerry, the Caha mountains of Cork, and the Dingle peninsular. At the end of the Dingle, the island of Great Blasket was still inhabited and we met islanders who could not understand English! We occasionally hired a fishing boat at Valencia and visited Skellig Michael, a pinnacle of rock which early Christians monks colonised. It was before the days of seat belts and as I tended to be car sick, I was allowed to stand on the front seat with my head out of the Vauxhall’s sunshine roof, which was a wonderful way to see the countryside.

When not fishing or shooting, I was scrambling up hills. I climbed Carrantuohill – at 3414 ft. the highest mountain in Ireland - more than twenty times (once starting and returning on foot to Caragh Lodge which was a 30 mile round trip). I also became knowledgeable on the flora. Kerry is wet and very mild and many plants not found elsewhere in UK are indigenous there. On our own foreshore we had rare sedges, the Royal Fern (*Osmunda Regalis*), Blue Eyed Grass (*Sisyrinchium Angustifolium* - a tiny member of the Iris family) and the showy and unique Kerry Violet (*Pinguicula Grandiflora*). At Glencar there were some unusual orchids in the virgin oak forest, and up on the mountains several interesting saxifrages not found elsewhere.

We had family pets. At first we just had our beloved Fluffy brought over from Bembridge, and adored by all the family. We then got Kerry as a puppy, a very handsome black white and brown collie of working stock. He was a good-natured and very bright - the dog of my life - and my constant companion when I was not fishing or shooting (he was terrified of gunfire like all collies). He went on most trips to Killorglin and was allowed to stand in the passenger seat (on top of the passenger if any) barking out of the window to his various friends on route, who barked back and usually ran out just behind the car to give chase. One sad day when we happened to be towing the little boat, two of his pals charged out as usual only to be caught by the trailer wheels, and we killed them both.

Kerry occasionally used to go off for days after some bitch, returning exhausted and sometimes bleeding. One day (in the early 50's when I was on vacation from Oxford) he came back limping very badly and developed a large hernia. He was in obvious pain and much to my distress, my father had him shot by John Murphy. We put a stone over his grave, but I could not find it in 1995. Fluffy had disappeared earlier - we think that she was shot by North-Bomford, who I had entangled in my night line a few months before - she was last seen in the field below our house near the NB boundary and a shot was heard. North-Bomford said he was frightening away a badger in his orchard! Some months later he was found down by the lake with his head blown off and his twelve bore beside him - justice will out! We later had a series of perfectly nice Siamese cats (Tatty Bogle and Titten) and a very dim collie (Tigger) but none of them registered with me.

During Oxford vacations I took black and white photographs of the magnificent scenery - and of Puck Fair, the age-old festival in Killorglin where a goat is crowned and left on a scaffolding tower for three days in August. I went to my first race meeting (at Mallow), lost my shirt, and

decided that horse racing bored me stiff. “The Reeks” annual cricket match at the Macgillicuddy’s stately home at Beaufort was always fun.

I went sea fishing from time to time, catching bass at the end of Rossbeigh, pollock off the Dingle and mackerel and big skate from boats - and saw hundreds of magnificent basking shark, which congregatec off the west coast in the summer. My mother and I used to pick bilberries in August on “Brown Mountain” (where a new road now takes one to a scenic view of the lake). I once tried to play golf on Dooks golf course (now a fine links, then nine holes with a clapboard clubhouse.) - I went round in about 120 (excluding air shots) and decided it was not my game! I had some appalling journeys to and from school and was often very sick on the boat. My parents used to pay for me to go first class, but I usually travelled steerage and pocketed the difference! I went (with my school trunk) Winchester to Waterloo, across London to Paddington to Fishguard to Rosslare to Mallow - change trains (wait four hours - I got to know Mallow quite well) to Farranfore (where Kerry airport now is) - change trains (wait 2 hours) - to Caragh Lake station. After the latter closed, my parents met me at Killarney and later still I went Fishguard to Cork or flew. But however long the journey, I was always happy to come home.

My mother often used to ask me whether I might live at Caragh someday, and I always gave her discouraging answers about jobs and money. But deep inside, I thought I might. Now I never will, and perhaps it is just as well - there would be too many ghosts!

*George Ferard, 12th February 1999, revised 17th January 2003,
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