

## AN UNFREQUENTED IRISH RANGE

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EVEN among Irish mountains, the Blue Stacks in Donegal appear to be amongst the least visited and the least written about, and perhaps this may be accepted as the justification for introducing an account of some wanderings around a group whose highest point is only 2,219 feet. Mere height, however, is not everything, and these hills have qualities of remoteness and wildness which I think transcend their modest height.

Although the sea is not far away and can be seen in more than one direction from the top, the mountains have their feet in the land. They are granite, rising from carboniferous limestone to the south and otherwise from schist and gneiss. The highest point, Croaghgorm, appears to be an alternative name also for the entire group, which stretch in a semicircle of 8 or 9 miles some way north of Donegal town.

Of all the literature which I have read covering this part of Ireland, guide books and more impressionistic accounts, mostly the Blue Stacks are accorded a mere mention and they are worth more than this. Only in two small guides issued by the Irish Tourist Association is any direction given for approaching them, and the route suggested is from Lough Eske up by the Corab River to Lough Belshade; this is probably the best way for anyone with a car who wishes to return to the same point. My own route started from Donegal, and I approached from Meenataggart, more to the west so that I could make a traverse over the highest part of the range. There are several steepish slopes and lower summits to be gone over from the west before reaching Croaghgorm itself, and whilst the summit is broad enough—the cairn would be almost impossible to find in mist—there are steep drops all the way on either side of the main chain. From Croaghgorm to the col above Lough Belshade is about 2 miles of rough and rocky way, and then there is a not so simple scramble of about 1,000 feet down to Lough Belshade. At the top of the col is a most beautiful and placid little lake, framed in granite rocks, which must have few visitors to appreciate it. It is another 2 or 3 miles of hard pathless going from Lough Belshade before striking a farm track near Edergole Bridge, which runs down to Lough Eske and a road.

On my first visit to these mountains I confess to leaving a compass on the top pointing in the direction of Errigal, and some months later paid a further visit to see if it was still there. It wasn't—the Blue Stacks cannot be as unfrequented as I thought. I approached from the south again, from Lough Eske station on the little County Donegal railway to be precise, but tried a different line midway between the previous routes of ascent and descent. This was up to the ridge of moor leading on to Banagher Hill southwards, from whence a route through all sizes of rocks and up a gully can be made more or less direct to Croaghgorm. I was fortunate with the view this day (May 1959), which extended from the Sperrins, 45 miles east, to the Ox Mountains, 50 miles south-west. The better-known peaks of North Donegal—Errigal and its companions—are, of course, prominent from here, and there was a long tableland of a hill down to the south-east, probably Slieve Beagh (1,222 feet) on the Fermanagh-Monaghan border, where the view extends into the dimness and vastness of the Central Plain. The outliers of the Blue Stacks northwards, such as Gaugin, are shapely if not of impressive height. The ridge to the little lake above Lough Belshade was worth doing once more, and at this point I made north-east between Glascarne Hill and the main ridge aiming to get off northwards. Past this col there is a decidedly steep descent to Cronloughan, a tarn ringed in the dark and steep ridge behind. Probably a descent to the north is seldom made; you are a long way from anywhere when you get down, but I was making for Stranorlar and found myself faced with about 4 miles of bog-walloping to gain a lane circling Garranbane Hill and a few more miles of lane and road got me to Stranorlar about 10 P.M.

Some of the granite rocks look big enough to give rock climbers a course or two, but I cannot make any definite statement as to this. For those who might find this remote ridge of interest, the area is covered by the Irish Survey 1 inch map, No. 24, and the  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch map, Sheet 3. The nearest hostelry will be the guest house at Ardnamona Estate by Lough Eske, which is far from cheap.