

Midsummer Madness 2010

(Jim Sheehan)

For the third time, I organised the midsummer campout on Lugnaquilla with a view to seeing a glorious evening sunset and shortly afterwards an equally glorious sunrise, marking the shortest night of the year. That was the plan. But *the best laid plan of mice and men oft gang aley* as the Poet said.

The first year Cecil made his way from home over the mountains and pitched his lonely tent on Lug on the appointed night in the rain and wind, while I decided that discretion was the better part of valour and opted out of a solo ascent from Fenton's. I left a message on Cecil's phone that I would pick him up at noon the following day, which I did.

Year 2 (2009) and Cecil repeated his traverse over the mountains in three days. I, on the other hand, was attending a wedding in Barberstown Castle. Terry Dignan had agreed to stand in as organiser. The weather was more promising, but late in the evening a mist-laden wind contrived to dampen the occasion. Terry arrived on Lug summit to find Cecil snugly in his tent, but he opted to descend to a more sheltered location lower towards Camara Hill to pitch his tent. Next morning he was met by Cecil and they proceeded down to Fentons and thence back to breakfast in Terry's house in Dunlavin.

Would it be third time lucky? As before Cecil set out from home on the Thursday and camped at Kippure Bridge that night and at Lough Firrib the following night. He made his way to the summit of Lug by early Saturday evening and pitched his tent in the rays of the setting sun.

Meanwhile, I made my way to Glenmalure and stopped at the hotel to see if any unannounced adventurers were awaiting my arrival there, but the demands of holidays, sailing, Fathers' Day and the World Cup meant that I would be ascending alone. I checked with the Hotel that breakfast would be available from 8.30 on should we descend early, and drove up to the Youth Hostel where I parked my car.

From there I started off up the forest road under the steep cliffs of Benleagh, enjoying the balmy evening air and the surprising amount of birdsong. Leaving the forest road, I ascended the steep path alongside the Baravore and gained the bowl enclosed by Ballinaskea, Cloghernagh, Cannow and Benleagh.. Here, I chose to travel in a south-westerly direction to gain Cannow's ridge by the easiest line of ascent. Just as I reached the ridge at 9.55, I saw the last segment of the sun disappear into low clouds on the distant horizon and decided that in future I should aim to reach this point sooner if coming from Glenmalure again. Turning left, I followed the track up the gentle slope on to the summit plateau and soon made out the cairn and Cecil's tent in the twilight.

By now a breeze had started to blow. As I readied my tent for erection a gust caught the inner and carried it towards the edge of the South Prison. Clutching the flysheet, I raced after it and luckily caught it before it took off towards the lights of Rathdangan far below. I aligned the length of the tent with the direction of the wind, and with the assistance of Cecil, soon had it ready for occupation. I readied my carrymat and sleeping bag, changed into a dry base layer and settled down for the night. But the wind shifted towards the north-east and was now blowing quite strongly. It was blowing under the flysheet and through the inner and finding the cold spots in my sleeping bag, preventing my body heat from collecting in the bag. After a while I felt quite cold and decided that the solution to the problem would have been to get into a bivvy bag, but I had not brought one, reasoning that the flysheet of the tent would serve that need if it arose. I did deploy my rain jacket and fleece between me and the windward side of the tent and that alleviated the problem, besides which the wind soon fell calm.

I was awakened by the flutter of meadow pipits' wings at 4.30 and looking out of the tent, I could see the lights of Wicklow Town to the right so I reckoned that there should be a good dawn in about fifteen minutes. I waited and got out just in time to see the first rays of the sun illuminate the sky behind the Great Sugarloaf to the north-east. The dawn was spectacular and it was worth the trouble to see the first rays light the summit cairn with a rosy hue. After about 15 minutes I retired to my sleeping bag and dozed a while. I heard a lone walker arrive just before 6 a.m. and two ravens came calling soon after. Another couple arrived at 8.30 and at this stage I decided to get up. Cecil joined me for breakfast at the cairn and soon some more walkers arrived.

The Rescue helicopter appeared on a direct course for the summit. It circled the summit twice before touching down on a level spot some 500 metres east, and then departing again, presumably on a training exercise.

We packed up and left the summit just after 11 am and started down Canno and into the basin above the Baravore. Now we were met by several groups of walkers and hill runners. We started down the left side of the river on an old path which soon proved difficult due to forest debris and wet patches, so we cut back towards the main track which was now being used by several people taking advantage of the fine weather and good visibility. Here we met Sean de Grae, the leader and only participant in the Club Sunday walk. He had waited in vain for club members and had eventually decided to head for the summit alone.

Cecil and I made our way down the valley to the Youth Hostel, where my car was waiting, and soon we were on our way past the crowded carpark to the Hotel where we had refreshments before heading over the Sally Gap to drop Cecil off at home.

The whole adventure was just as I imagined it should be. Perhaps an earlier start to the evening leg would allow time to set up camp in daylight and enjoy the sunset with more leisure. Of course more bodies would be welcome to create more atmosphere in the camp. This points to the difficulty of organising more than one activity at a time, as we do not have the numbers of regular walkers to facilitate multiple activities.

In addition, there are several regular walkers on holiday at the moment and a lot of interest in the World Cup matches and there was Fathers Day too.

But, all in all, I really enjoyed the experience and I can only recommend it, especially if the weather is as kind as it was last weekend.