

It was the Earl of Roden, who had previously done the climb, who suggested it. 'Ireland's longest rock-climb – Carrot Ridge', he said, 'just round the corner from here, up on the Connemara Bens. Come back and do it next year.' I was staying at his house overlooking the orange-weeded shore of Cashel Bay, the sailing boat he co-owned with my future climbing partner bobbing offshore on a slight swell. It was to this house that the poet, Ted Hughes, had brought his partner, Assia Wevill, and their three children, three years after the tragic death of Hughes's wife, Sylvia Plath. It had been found for Hughes to rent by his friend, the Irish poet Richard Murphy, who sailed a boat called a Galway hooker, taking tourists out to the maze of islands offshore. I was also promised a chance to get on a hooker by Robert Jocelyn, Earl of Roden, when I returned. That would be something to tell my wife. Recently, Robert and his wife Ann, have been drawing people from all over Ireland to an annual Ted Hughes weekend at this house, Doonreagan, and I was lucky enough to be invited back in July last year as a speaker about Hughes's work. But this time I booked in for a week at one of their holiday lets in the hope of having just one day dry enough to attempt Carrot Ridge, a Diff of 370m.

Also at the Hughes weekend last year was Robert's sailing partner and co-owner of the boat, Lesley Emin, a lovely lady with streaming red hair and a wide smile who offered to do the climb with me as it was on her list too. She had retired early from business in London to 'work from home' just along the shore from Doonreagan and admitted to 'not actually doing much work from home' as Connemara activities – sailing, cycling, fishing, hill-walking and climbing – and cultural events between the Galway and Clifden arts festivals, not to mention judging the All-Ireland Dog Show at Roundstone, took up so much time. Of course, judging a dog show and sailing in Connemara were clear indications that Lesley was into dangerous sports. It was in dark December when I asked her for a picture for this piece and she emailed me from her phone: 'I know the picture you are looking for and will forward tomorrow or Friday. You catch me aboard a boat in a Force 8/9 with the skipper and three RNLI lifeboat crew, all in our foul weather suits. The boat broke its moorings in a bad storm last night and the wind carried her across a bay and deposited her on a rocky shore. Now, we're waiting for the tide to float us off the rocks. Conditions not ideal (!) but no one hurt.' Last year she had been about to spend two months in the Himalaya climbing and trekking – a trip in which three of her party were killed by rockfall - so we had to wait for the next year's Hughes weekend anyway for Carrot Ridge. A whole year of waiting for a Diff might seem no big deal to many younger people. (You can even climb it on You Tube without leaving your chair.) But for me the route grew in all dimensions with the long anticipation and Carrot Ridge did not disappoint.

With permission from the farmer, we parked below his small house at the entrance to Gleninagh and stepped out into a landscape of the past. Below us were six white stones clearly visible embedded in the patchwork of July green grass and black peat. Tim Robinson's Connemara map marks this as 'SA' for Stone Alignment. At the winter solstice Robert and Ann still stand, aligning the stones, to watch the setting sun roll down the ridge of Bencorrbeg. Apparently Saint Patrick records that he arrived in Ireland to discover a country of sun worshippers. Having experienced the west of Ireland's 'four seasons in one day' on every one of my seven days in Connemara, I can totally sympathise with sun worshippers. In fact, I think I might be one myself. Beyond the stones was an embanked mound and from the climb we saw two fields of south-facing lazybeds that may have been in use for centuries. We were in an eastern bowl of the Twelve Connemara Bens, or Pins as they are known here, that held history, myth and wildness (forget footpaths) in a heady mixture stirred by the constant wind.

Carrot Ridge cannot be mistaken. It stands proud of the widest expanse of rock in view, marking its left edge, a white carrot shape that would turn slightly pink if the sun came out. The hour and a half walk-in goes from the track to a sheepfold, down to a river crossing,

bog (gaiters are essential in for walking anywhere in Ireland) of various hues, bleached bog oak roots, peat steps and loose rock. During the approach the carrot had shape-shifted into a banana. It's that kind of country. We started gearing up in sunshine, but by the time we'd tied on to the rope a mist had descended, dampening the rock. Lesley took a bearing to find our way back to the car from here if necessary. (It's the only time, in over fifty years, that I can recall rock-climbing with a partner with a compass round her neck for a possible escape. 'Four seasons ...')

I stepped onto a marble staircase with little steps on its very left edge. It is a Diff designed by Michelangelo in exquisite compact marble reaching into the clouds in the land of sun worshippers. It was strangely difficult to tune in to this rock, to see what was flat and what was sloping. Right away my foot slipped off a wet hold. Caution tensed the senses and I found only one runner in the first pitch, and two in each of the next two pitches. I had flown over to Ireland with only three Friends (2 to 3 1/2) in my light rack and was very glad of them. We both agreed that the second pitch was the crux in our conditions, when finding flat footholds on which to step without slipping off was the key challenge. Stepping up and ever leftwards at the edge of the buttress was steep, but encouragingly unfolding, until an easing of the angle brought a wide ledge and (not the last) possible escape. But the mist had lifted and the sun made an appearance. Again, wonderfully provided little flat nicks of marble led to another broad ledge and the view backwards over the whole glen which opened like old tale of invisible comings and goings of people and animals, weather and flora, small joys and the great hunger. Looking backwards was a rewarding theme of this climb in this historically rich, now apparently bleak landscape.

At another spacious ledge the mist dropped again and I was getting wet. 'It's not really rain, only cloud', Lesley informed me. I pulled from a pouch my lightweight rain jacket, sold to runners as sealed-seam waterproof, which an Irish mist can expose as a lie within seconds. I'd not have been without it, however, as bright psychological encouragement on this long journey - of the mind coping with the body - that was to unfold on this endless route. Here I consulted a print-out from the guidebook, then found my own way up the everlasting buttress. An apparently smooth ramp leaned leftwards with a promising crack in its spine. Little flat footholds appeared unbidden, but I could not get a runner into the crack until quite high up. Then the buttress leaned back a bit. On following this pitch Lesley preferred to go right of the ramp up a wall and had difficulty getting across left again for my runner. A violent jerk on the rope solved that problem. When Lesley did her own thing, most things fell into place. Including lunch. We were apparently above the First Step. The long day, route finding and damp rock built tensions that were immediately defused on belay ledges, where, at some point Lesley revealed a lavish lunch pack that only lacked the lobster sandwiches that the earl had hinted might be in her rucksack. Again, we relaxed and looked outwards as cloud shadows caressed folds of green.

A traverse left into a recess brought us to the foot of an open corner where bridging led left again onto a platform. Scrambling for 90m on the ridge as it narrowed and levelled out below an easy slab gave momentum and rope drag. Above reared the Second Step, guarded by a wall that narrowed to the left. A pull through here and a traverse right brought a groove which took gear and led to a slab of thinner moves and eventually a stance. All that was left was the Third Step that leaned back benignly and the easy scrambling suddenly ended at the top of the buttress. By now I was feeling very tired and had been alarmed by spasms of cramp in my left thigh. We coiled ropes and looked across at the recommended scree descent beside the buttress. The boulders were huge and my knees screamed at the sight of them. Neither of us was drawn to embrace them. So it was over Bencollaghduff on our right to descend to the head of Gleninagh where an ancient path the length of the glen had been becoming more distinct and attractive as we had gained height with each stance. But

first there was another 200m of ascent from the col at Mám na bhFonsai, just above Carrot Ridge, from which the view south suddenly revealed a sparkling sea.

Lesley was concerned about my body language which was registering 'fairly knackered'. But her look around the corner for a traverse below the summit to the col on the other side was unpromising. Actually, the gentle slabs ascending Bencollaghduff were not too bad and, after a huge false summit cairn, the views from the top of sun-shafted sea and islands off the complex coast around Roundstone were to live a long time in the memory. We needed to go west but the rocky hint of a path dropped south immediately from the summit. It soon disappeared and Lesley was leading the way through grass fringed rock steps in a landscape I could not read. In English and Scottish mountains a vertical drop off was likely to indicate a crag below. But Lesley wove a way over the edge of little walls, down short gullies and round small outcrops. It was pathless, punishing country unlike any other I'd experienced. Quite apart from the inevitable rising and falling mists, this was serious mountain terrain. On the following Saturday, Lesley told me later, a walker died on these Bens – in mid-July. Finally a long scree run brought us down to the col called Maumina where there nestled a half-circle stone shelter with stone seats and a wall just high enough to cut the wind at the back's cold spot. Across the col, on the path that came up from Gleninagh, there was a stone offertory – a cairn with an inset shelf on which coins had been placed. You need all the saints on your side in these mountains.

We reached the car again at 8pm after twelve hours on the hill. On the TV in the back room of Lough Inagh Lodge, the first bar we came to, the world cup final was underway. It mattered far less than a simple seat, two pints of Guinness and Lesley's unfailing wide smile. At the restaurant at the back of the Cashel pub the earl was generously hosting a final meal for speakers at the conference from which we'd been playing hooky on its last day. Apparently, when we entered, we *looked* as though we'd had a twelve hour day on the hill. But we were just in time to order food. They had taken all the mussels. It mattered less than resting ours and two more pints of the delicious Black Stuff. A band was playing the old songs in the bar and still to come was a storm tossed journey to an island on Macdara's Day, two days stalking a salmon and sailing on that fabled Galway hooker, the Truelight. But for the moment our day on Carrot Ridge was turning into its own fable that was much more than just the longest climb in Ireland.