

Wally Pitcher and Donegal

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Wally Pitcher loved Donegal – its geology, its landscapes and its people – and his ashes have been scattered there. In this short tribute I want to remember him through some Donegal stories and experiences. As Bernard Leake retells in his longer appreciation, what became the great Donegal project began in a rather offhanded way, with H. H. Read, the then doyen of international granite studies (and on the say-so of Robert Shackleton), placing his thumb across a large area on the 1:1 million-scale geology map of Ireland. This area included the southern part what we now know as the Thorr granite; thereby in effect giving his new member of staff and research student licence to go and sort out the Donegal granites. A daunting task indeed for one whose principal research achievements up to that time were an amateur knowledge of the faunas of the Tertiary London Clay and a good grounding in industrial wet chemistry. Perhaps his experiences of war service gave Wally added maturity and also a sense of purpose, for history has shown that he certainly warmed to his subject. The project ran for 25 years, becoming renowned for its detailed and precise mapping, producing numerous theses and publications, and summarised in the beautifully written and still iconic *Geology of Donegal* (1972) (with A. R. Berger) – the first large-scale detailed description of a granite batholith and its envelope. If the book was one of his legacies to the world of granite studies, then the wonderful one-inch-to-one-mile geology map of Donegal was surely his legacy to Ireland and its people.

Ireland in the post-war period was economically at a very low ebb and Donegal, farthest from the nation's capital and cut off from its natural economic hinterland by the tightly-controlled international border with Northern Ireland, was isolated and economically and socially deprived. Poverty was abroad, and the kindly people of the county survived by living simply and modestly off the land. There had been few visitors during the war years and this had left a thirst for interaction with strangers and new visitors. And so Wally, as told in the story related by Bernard Leake, was generously entertained, to the point where he was unable to keep to his science schedules and had to evolve ingenious methods to avoid the embarrassment of turning down the hospitality and curiosity of these good folk.

There were other lighter moments, especially on the occasion when he encountered the 'little people'. Walking back to his accommodation along the narrow Maas–Portnoo road, after a tiring day in the field, he became aware of an unusual sound behind him. Turning, he was confronted by two very small bearded men in emerald green waistcoats, small red boots, shirts with broad starched white collars and little red pointed caps. They jabbered and jeered at him in high-pitched tones, running up to him, poking at him with their very small fingers and then cheekily retreating. After a few minutes they jumped into the roadside hedge and disappeared. The Reader of Geology at King's College, London stood, transfixed, for a long moment, his brain a seething turmoil of contradictions, wondering if he had momentarily crossed into some other space/time framework, or if it was time to see a psychiatrist. He returned to his digs, yet such was the potential embarrassment of publicly admitting either of these possibilities that for some days he declined to mention the matter at all to his landlady.

When, rather coyly and circumspectly, he eventually did, it was revealed, to huge hilarity all round, that he was simply the latest victim of a duo of midget brothers living in a cottage close to that road who, for amusement, would dress up as leprechauns to terrorise strangers!

Over the years, as the Donegal project proceeded and he eventually took over its management from H. H. Read, large amounts of data and many new exciting ideas, not just about Donegal Granite but also about major world granite issues, began to accumulate. Wally became, in the geology world, 'Mr Donegal' and he was smitten by, and engrossed in, its conundrums. The extent of his engrossment is well illustrated by a story handed on to me by Tony Berger. It relates to a journey, with Wally driving his own car from one end of Donegal to the other, introducing this new and somewhat overawed student to the geology of the area and to the problems that he had to tackle. There had been a shower of rain early in the journey and the windscreen wipers had been switched on. Whilst the weather had then improved for the remainder of that long journey, Wally had talked so continuously and enthusiastically, as well as pointing out many features that were passed by, that the wipers were entirely forgotten, despite their scraping and unbearable screeching on the now long-dry front windscreen!

Even after the publication of the 1972 book, the geology of Donegal was not a shut case to WSP. Perhaps one of his greatest attributes was that he always acknowledged what was difficult to explain and was always enthusiastic about new ideas and new methodologies. In this way he was extremely supportive, throughout his life, of young people and young scientists. I was one such. It was on the famous Donegal field trips that these young ones met the really famous names in granite. It was here that doors could be opened to influential people and opportunities taken by the new blood in the science.

The ambience of Wally's Donegal trips was very special. One remembers particularly WSP, in Donegal tweeds, a cotton shirt and tweed tie, a soft cap and old leaky leather boots striding off across heather and bog politely bellowing instructions at the great snake of people struggling to keep up behind. Wally somehow absorbing, without noticeable affect, the steady drizzle of a soft Irish day, surrounded by others in the latest head-to-toe multicoloured products of the hill-walker shops, who by contrast looked distinctly wet and uncomfortable. Similarly when the rain stopped and the midges came out, all except our leader would be driven to distraction.

These trips seasoned and set proper field-based horizons for many generations of new petrochemical analysts and granite theorists. One often remembers sitting in a huddle in the middle of a Donegal bog, sheltering from a steady drizzle under a solitary tree, eating a lunch of soggy cheese sandwiches (care of Sweeney's hotel) and politely refraining from noisy conversation while WSP teased out the finer points of the morning's field observations as he put to rights, in the most polite and gentle way, the new hot idea of a young, intense Ivy League post-doc.

We always stayed at Sweeney's in Dungloe – Wally's old base in Donegal and now virtually a place of pilgrimage for

those of us who 'served' on his field trips. Sweeney's – mountainous breakfasts and dinners; the evening discussions in the old Victorian sitting room on the first floor where, surrounded by odd Irish artefacts, the great granite controversies of the day would be debated by the great and the good from the four corners of the earth – all in front of the blazing turf fire; Ceilidhe Night, when the young ladies of the village in their Irish finery would dance the jigs and reels to the amusement and delectation of our many overseas guests; the highlight, at evening's end, when old Mrs Sweeney, in her

high-pitched wavering voice, would sing – with no dry eye in the house – *The Hills of Donegal*.

Those trips; the wonderful days spent on Thorr, the Rosses, Ardara, the Main Donegal Granite, the Appinites, Barnesmore; those days, as the song goes, 'have gone forever' – yet they are alive, vivid and now with great poignancy in the minds of those who were privileged to take part, and to have known this great and kindly man in his natural element, doing superbly what he loved to do in the place that he loved the most.