

EARLY DISCOVERERS  
XXVIII

RICHARD PRIOR'S 1699 DESCRIPTION OF AN IRISH  
ESKER

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Two words from the Irish language have passed into the terminology of glacial geomorphology: drumlin and esker (Quin and Freeman, 1947). In an earlier contribution (Davies, 1966) it was pointed out that an Irish author, Charles Smith, was in 1744 perhaps the earliest writer to liken the appearance of a drumlin swarm to the surface of a basket of eggs, and it is fitting that what must surely be the earliest description of an esker in British literature should also have come from the pen of an Irish observer, Richard Prior.

Richard Prior was a landowner in County Leix (then Queen's County) and a relative (perhaps the father) of the better known Thomas Prior (1682–1751), who in 1731 was one of the founder members of what is now the Royal Dublin Society. Nothing is now known of Richard Prior's scientific interests but in November 1699 he wrote an account of one of the eskers near his estate for the benefit of Robert Hooke (1635–1703), the brilliant polymath who was the Curator of Experiments to the Royal Society. This account was published among Hooke's posthumous papers in 1705 (Hooke, 1705, p. 437–38).

The present writer alluded briefly to Prior's description in an earlier publication (Davies, 1964) but otherwise it seems to have escaped notice, deeply buried as it is within the pages of a massive folio volume. Such a pioneer description of an esker deserves to be reprinted and it is therefore reproduced in full below. It is clearly the work of an astute observer and Prior must be forgiven for the tentative suggestion that the esker owed its origin to the "Noachian Deluge". The "Deluge" was then a favourite geomorphic device and it was almost 200 years before the true nature of eskers began to be appreciated. As recently as 1893 two distinguished Irish scientists, W. J. Sollas and R. Ll. Praeger, spent a fruitless day searching for marine shells in the very same esker as Prior had described in 1699 (Sollas, 1896).

A DESCRIPTION OF THE RIDGE OF MARY BURROW IN THE QUEENS COUNTY IN IRELAND

This Ridge runs North and South, from Tymohoe [Timahoe] to Mary-burrow [Port Laoise], about seven Miles, from thence towards Montmelick [Mountmellick], four Miles further, and as this Author was inform'd through the King's County of Westmeath [Cos. Offaly and Westmeath], towards Athlone, but in these last mention'd Countries is much lower than in the Queens County.

From the said Tymohoe to Montmelick, being both in the Queens County, it is about fourteen or fifteen Foot high, where highest, as near as this Author can conjecture, being laid as irregular as the Sands are usually laid by the Waves on the Sea-shoar, with several bendings in and out, high and low; the Sides so steep, that in most places not easy to ride up, and in many places Trees growing on the Sides, and a little thin Skin of Grass, apt to be burnt or scorch'd with the least dry Weather.

It is so broad on the top as to afford room enough for four Horse-men to ride a Breast, the Road, in many places, lying on the top thereof.

It is compos'd altogether of small rough Pebble grayish Stones about the bigness of a Mans Fist, and other smaller ones mix'd with Sand or Gravel, but no mixture of Clay or Loam, as this Author ever observ'd, which several times he sought after as he travell'd that way.

None of the Lands adjacent to this Ridge have any of the materials whereof it is compos'd, mix'd with their Soils; in most places there are Bogs to within a very few Yards of its Foot, and where any Arrable lies near it, there is no mixture of the above Pebble or Sand therewith.

So that it should seem probable that this Ridge of Pebble and Sand was brought from some remote places by some violent motion of Waters, and dispos'd into the form it now remains in, which induc'd the Author several times to say, he believ'd it to be the effects of Noah's Flood, the Consideration whereof he refers to better Judgments.

If any farther Particulars relating to this Ridge are desir'd, and a few Lines sent by the Post directed to the Author at Rathdowney near Burris, in Ossory [Borris in Ossory], Ireland, they shall be carefully inquir'd into and answer'd by

Nov. the 14th  
1699

Your most humble Servant  
Ric. Prior

This Ridge is distant from the Sea about thirty Miles.

To this letter somebody, doubtless Hooke himself, has added the following footnote:

The same curious Person who is now return'd to his Estate, which lies in the Queens County not far from it, has promised me to make many other Observations about it, which I desir'd, and has promis'd to send me an account of his success, by which I hope I shall be better enabl'd to explain the Cause and Reasons thereof; 'till when I shall forbear for the present to make any further Reflections on it.

Perhaps Prior kept his promise, but if he did, his later observations on the esker have not been discovered.

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