

Colpey Autumn 2021

A spinney of aspen stands out bright yellow on the hillside behind our farmhouse at Colpey. It grows on the edge of an ancient woodland that stretches a mile west to Gortcormican. If you look and listen closely, the leaves tremble in a gentle breeze; aptly named *Populus Tremula*, or in Irish, Crann Creathach, the tree that whispers with the world beyond. The aspen blaze briefly on the damp spring line that marks a pattern of old settlements, our farm included. Each tree is most likely suckered underground, a clone of its near neighbour, hence the spinney.



On arriving, some thirty years ago, we planted thousands of trees that have now become a forest; but not the aspen, who knows how long they have been here. As the verdant shades of spring, and the reds and yellows of autumn bookend each growing year, so this autumn bookends our time living here at Colpey. Next spring, we will have moved into our renovated terraced house near the pier in Buncrana.

After the forest was planted, we established a tree nursery. At the time we had three young children, Berenice was about to return to teaching, and shortly I would be offered work at an engineering start-up, both better paid than the unknown returns from a risky venture. However, the notion of some type of farm enterprise had always attracted us and had brought us here in the first place. We had the energy, and farming the '25 good acres' with its cattle and sheep seemed not enough at the time. The nursery, primarily a large poly-tunnel, was planned and set up with green hopes, to grow an annual crop of forty thousand broadleaf saplings. During the first and second years we found it impossible to discard the ten percent or so of plants that didn't make it to saleable size. These saplings, no taller than twenty centimetres were set aside, and when time permitted, were dug into stony and rocky ground, near the aspen, where we thought they might survive. A few did, a handful of the couple of hundred we planted. They were either too small or weak to survive the rampant grasses and briars or were browsed by cattle. The nursery itself survived for about five or six years, its scale too small, the climate too wet, the soils too heavy.

The forest we planted seemed, on the face of it, simpler – and there's a very inaccurate saying about forestry that you plant it and close the gate on it for forty years, until harvest. After a few years we had to replace hundreds of young wild cherry trees after they became infected with a canker; many of the sycamore and ash stems forked, needing to be heavily pruned; deer came to browse other young trees, and now over thirty years on, hundreds of semi-mature ash trees are dying with ash dieback disease (caused by an invasive fungal pathogen *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*). Last winter many of these ash trees were replaced with sapling birch, and a new generation of deer came for the tasty green shoots. Tending

the forest is good and pleasant work, and goes on. To see the forest, grow tall and full of wildlife is a wholesome pleasure.

About twenty years after we saved those small puny plants, I discovered a surviving oak tree, now over six meters tall. How had I, and the cattle, missed it all that time, although it had blended into the rest of the alders, ash and sycamores? It grows beside a track I walk regularly, into what we call 'the rough ground'. It is tall, upright and sturdy. I gave it a hug last summer but missed its reply. For now, I am happy that it might be referred to as 'Stan's oak', though its future is unseeable. A stone's throw away is the spinney of aspen, which with the oak and rest of the trees on the hillside, will glow in shades of yellow and gold for autumns to come.

The townland name 'Colpey' – with only two farmsteads - or 'Colpey Rocks' as I have heard it called, is likely to derive from the old Irish word colpa or collop, meaning the area a cow would graze in summer; perhaps that too is appropriate for us now, alluding to an autumn movement to more clement pastures.

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