



TINDERBOX: Firefighters spent days battling a fire in the Mourne. A 20 per cent reduction in rainfall helped the blaze to spread

Mournes gorse fire exposes our failure to battle climate change

FOR three days, dozens of firefighters battled intense heat and smoke to extinguish a gorse fire – thought to have been started deliberately – which raged across the Mournes.

An image of one exhausted firefighter on Slieve Donard wiping sweat from her face as the charred landscape behind her continued to smoulder shows how hard the fire service fought to put out the blaze.

The National Trust has said the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty on upper Slieve Donard has been completely destroyed and will take many years to recover.

At the time of writing, devastating fires in Killarney National Park in Co Kerry and Dunmanway in west Cork were continuing to devastate vital habitats.

We talk a lot about the beauty of the Irish landscape. Most of our tourism industry is based on selling the views that so many of us take for granted.

Belfast-born CS Lewis, who lived and worked in England for his whole adult life, wrote about the magic of the Mournes and often went back there in his imagination.

"I have seen landscapes, notably in the Mourne Mountains and southwards which under a particular light made me feel that at any moment a giant might raise his head over the next ridge," he wrote.

And the area inspired his most famous creation. In a letter to his brother, Lewis wrote: "That part of Rostrevor which overlooks Carlingford Lough is my idea of Narnia."

If our landscape means so much to us, why, then, are we so bad at caring for it? During lockdown, the Mournes saw a huge increase in visitors. Some people who jetted away on foreign holidays every year, and wouldn't have dreamt of hiking up a mountain, fell in love with the hills on their own doorstep.

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Yet the influx of visitors has also seen a sharp rise in littering, dog waste and disturbance to wildlife. Last year the National Trust warned that people visiting its sites had dropped "unprecedented" amounts of litter. Wildfires were reported at several sites, including at Bloody Bridge in the Mournes – the same spot engulfed by the weekend's gorse fire.

Our apparent inability to care for the most precious resource we have goes right from day-trippers to our administration at Stormont. For years the north has been the only devolved administration without targets to cut emissions and its own climate change legislation. The New Decade, New Approach deal, agreed in January 2020 following the three-year impasse at Stormont, committed the parties establishing an independent environmental protection agency and

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developing a climate change strategy.

Well over a year on, nothing has changed.

In answer to a written question by SDLP MLA Sinéad McLaughlin last week, Economy Minister Diane Dodds said a lot about very little. Her department has launched a consultation on energy policy but this was only done at the end of last month.

"My department is developing a bold and ambitious new vision for the Northern Ireland economy," Mrs Dodds said.

"The ambition set out in this vision is to drive economic growth through a focus on innovation, to achieve a fairer distribution of opportunities for all our people and to contribute to environmental wellbeing."

So that's clear then. Incidentally, all departments want a 'bold and ambitious' vision. It's the rare minister, apart from Edwin Poots on post-Brexit checks at the north's ports, who will admit to wanting unadventurous and superficial policies. Bold new visions, however, mean nothing without action.

Although the fire service believes the Mournes fire was started deliberately, a 20 per cent reduction in rainfall this month, compared to recent years, undoubtedly made it easier for the blaze to spread.

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Lockdown has shown that ministers can take swift and decisive action when needed. The success of our vaccine rollout has demonstrated what huge strides can be taken when the political will is there.

This is the time when Stormont has to come together to fight climate change. Not in a few years, not in a few months. But now. We, and our environment, have no more time to waste.

ON THIS DAY

APRIL 28 1921

Specials Ambushed

A SENSATION was created in Newry on Tuesday night when eight members of the Special Constabulary, in charge of a Head Constable, were ambushed and the entire party wounded – five of them seriously. The affair occurred at the junction of King Street and Merchant's Quay at 9.20.

From the details available, it appears that the patrol had just turned the corner into Merchant's Quay when four young men with their hands in their coat pockets approached, apparently in a friendly way. Suddenly they commenced to hurl bombs at the unsuspecting Specials and opened rapid fire on them with revolvers. The entire patrol fell at the first onslaught with the bombs – several severely wounded. Those of the Specials who were able replied to the attack with their weapons but the attackers fled.

Another patrol of Specials arrested three young men: Peter McNulty of Kiln Street; Peter O'Hare of Caulfield Place and Matthew Gray. On being searched fully loaded Webley revolvers were found on each of the men.

Party Collisions

THE Old Lodge Road district of Belfast was in a very disturbed state yesterday afternoon. The disturbance, which broke out some time after the passing of the Duffin funeral and seems to have originated with some schoolchildren making use of party expressions. As too often happens on such occasions, the women came on the scene and before very long large numbers of men made their appearance. Soon opposing parties were firing revolvers and vigorously stoning each other. The trouble intensified when a number of people who had been attending the funeral of the brothers Duffin were recognised passing along Stanhope Street.

The police kept the opposing elements apart as best they could until the arrival of an armoured car and Crossley tender. The occupants of these opened revolver fire with the result that a number of people were injured, one of them, Henry Montgomery (18) sustaining a bullet wound to the head.

A milk vendor had an exciting experience on the Crumlin Road. He was engaged in his rounds when the cry was raised: "Here's another Sinn Féiner". He managed to jump clear of the mob from his cart and rushed into licensed premises close to hand. A howling mob assembled outside but the police got the man away.

The countdown to the first 'partition' elections witnessed a clearly orchestrated escalation of IRA attacks on the Specials in nationalist areas where their presence was resented. Then, as in more recent times, funerals proved the focus of sectarian clashes – in this case the republican funeral of the Duffin brothers on its way to the Glens.

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