
NEPTUNE'S LEGACY

An Exhibition of Paintings Inspired by Northern Ireland's Coastline
by Hector McDonnell



Celebrating Fifty Years of
Enterprise Neptune



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Celebrating fifty years of Enterprise Neptune
A spectacular programme by The National Trust
To preserve our Coastal lands

In the Stableyard Theatre, Castle Ward

The private view will be from 5.30 – 7.30pm
on the 19th of July.

It will be opened by David Lindsay, Lord
Lieutenant of County Down.

The exhibition will be open daily from 11am
to 5pm from the 19th to the 29th of July 2015

In association with Hector McDonnell's
representatives,

JAMES WRAY & CO

NEPTUNE'S LEGACY

By
Hector McDonnell



Lord and Lady Antrim at the Enterprise Neptune Ball, 1964

It is an enormous pleasure to put on this exhibition for the National Trust. My childhood was greatly coloured by my father, Lord Antrim's, passion for getting important parts of Northern Ireland's coastline brought under the care of the National Trust for the benefit of future generations. As a result he took me on expeditions to such places as the Giant's Causeway and Downhill on the north coast or to properties around Strangford Lough and the Ards in the 1950s. Our home at Glenarm was also beside the sea and going out in a small fishing boat was a daily activity in my childhood, so the province's coast, rocks and sea have always meant an enormous amount to me.

In the early 1960s my father was invited to go to London to be chairman of the English National Trust, largely because he had been so involved in coastal preservation here, and there was a wish to achieve something similar in England. The result was Enterprise Neptune. Its success has been enormous, and it was a matter of great pride to me that two beautiful coastline sites, the Golden Cap in Dorset and a farm at Murlough Bay in County Antrim, were purchased in his memory soon after his death.

Fifty years have gone by since Enterprise Neptune's inception. Its drive to conserve and protect so many unspoilt tracts of coastline for posterity is undoubtedly one of the National Trust's greatest achievements. I can only say that it is an honour and a privilege for me to commemorate it in this fashion.



*Lord Antrim and a seal on Lindsfarne
photo by DM Smith, Berwick-on-Tweed*

CELEBRATING THE COAST OF NORTHERN IRELAND

The paintings of Hector McDonnell

The greatest painters of the coast of Ireland are its writers and poets. They paint with words. No images produced with oil paint, or watercolour, or etching plate can match the power of the plays of Synge and Beckett, the poems of Yeats and Heaney or the writing of O'Sullivan and Trevor. In the twentieth century Ireland never produced a group of painters comparable to the Scottish Colourists or the St Ives School. Why is that? Is it simply that the Irish are more a literary nation than a visual one?

The answers to those questions are bound up in the history of Ireland and its tragedies. The famine of 1845-1852 cast a long shadow over coastal communities. So did the emigrations. Music and song seemed better able to express the desolation and loss. Simply painting dramatic landscapes might have seemed a denial.

But there were other factors which mitigated against Ireland's painters. Artists such as Orpen often found themselves drawn to rich patrons in London and then, in his case, to the Western Front. His friend Sean Keating begged him: 'Come back to Ireland. This

war may never end...I am going to Aran. There is endless painting to be done.' But Orpen never went. And who would have bought such paintings anyway?

In recent years the tide has turned. The coast of Ireland can, it seems, now be celebrated in ways which in the past were difficult because of the burden of history. This is particularly true of Ulster's painters. The recent work of Hector McDonnell suggests some of the reasons why this revival continues apace.

Perhaps the most compelling reason is that much of the coast of Northern Ireland is not only so exceptionally dramatic and beautiful. It is also remarkably unspoilt. Poverty can be a great preserver, just as new-found wealth can be destructive. But its preservation is not just an accident of history. It came about because of the work of a handful of far-sighted individuals. The instrument that made their work possible was the National Trust.

The man who drove forward the campaign to protect the coastline of Northern Ireland was Hector McDonnell's father, Randal, 13th Earl of Antrim. Ran, as he was always affectionately known by benefactors and staff alike, was Chairman of the National Trust's Northern Ireland



Ballintoy rocks



Rose and Coco at White Park Bay



Wendy and Rose at White Park Bay



Looking towards Magilligan Point from the Mussenden Temple

Committee from 1947 to 1964, and of the Ulster Coastline Appeal. He then became Chairman of the Trust's Enterprise Neptune Appeal, then of the Trust itself from 1965 to 1977. There are memorials to him: Ballyhenry Island was bought in 1980 by his admirers; and Innisfree Farm, just south of the Giants Causeway, was purchased with money from the Lord Antrim Memorial Fund. At Benven, adjoining Murlough Bay, there is a memorial to him, set in the wall beside the house.

In the very earliest years of the National Trust its founders were keen that it should have a strong presence in Ireland. In 1900 Sir Robert Hunter, its first chairman, completed the acquisition of Kanturk Castle, in County Cork. It is a substantial, fortified house, built in the first decade of the seventeenth century. Hunter was Solicitor to the Post Office. The papers dealing with the transfer are in Hunter's handwriting, on Post Office notepaper and sent from its office in Dublin. A few years later the Post Office was assume further, more traumatic historical significance.

The turmoil which engulfed Ireland in the early twentieth century meant that property acquisitions in the North were slow in coming. Ballymoyer, a wooded glen in Co Armagh, was given by Major R.Hart-Synnot in 1938. The same year Miss Nesta Robb gave Lisnabreeny in Co.Down. Then, with the appointment in 1947 of Antrim as Chairman of the Northern Ireland Committee, the pace

quickens. Derrymore House came in 1953; and Cushendon was acquired through the Ulster Land Fund in 1954. The turning point, thanks to Antrim's vision and commitment, was the launching of the Ulster Coastline Appeal in 1962.

Protection of the coast was very much in the minds of the Trust's founders. Its first acquisition, within months of its formation in 1895, was Dinas Oleu, overlooking Cardigan Bay, in Wales. It continued to buy coastal property before and after the First World War, particularly in Cornwall, on the south coast and in Norfolk. In 1929 one of its benefactors, the historian G.M.Trevelyan, wrote a book which he called 'Must England's Beauty Perish' – a 'Plea on Behalf of the National Trust' – which set out a strategy for saving the coast and advocated a survey of unspoilt coastline which might be brought under permanent protection. His proposal seems to have been set aside during the war years, but by the 1960s the threats to the coast, in Ireland and in England and Wales, had become starkly apparent. It was in Ulster that the campaign for protection swiftly gathered impetus.

Antrim had found an ally in one of the senior civil servants at Stormont, Dick Rogers. In 1949 Parliament had approved the Ulster Land Fund Act, which was an extension of the idea of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Dalton, that there should be a Memorial Fund to honour those who had given their lives in

the war. Through sympathetic drafting the Ulster Land Fund gave Stormont wider powers than applied in the rest of the United Kingdom, including the ability to fund not just acquisitions, but repairs and future maintenance. As a result, a string of outstanding properties were transferred to the Trust, including Florence Court, Castle Ward and several coastal properties. Dick Rogers had a powerful influence over how the Ulster Land Fund was used. Antrim also enlisted him as honorary Secretary of the Northern Ireland Regional Committee. Together they steered some exceptionally important properties into the inalienable ownership of the National Trust.

Far and away the most important was The Giant's Causeway, bought in 1963 with the help of a grant of £75,000 from the Ulster Land Fund. Within a year the National Trust had successfully launched the North Antrim Cliff Path. The National Trust's Regional Secretary for Northern Ireland, John Lewis-Crosby, negotiated to buy ninety-three acres outright, with restrictive covenants and access agreements over a further forty-three acres. A right of way had been established over ten miles of one of the most attractive coastlines in the British Isles.

Other spectacular properties followed. In 1967 The National Trust bought Carrick-a-Rede for £14,000. This rugged outcrop of rock in Co. Antrim is reached by a rope bridge high above the sea, and includes a salmon fishery. Ireland's first nature

reserve at Murlough, Co. Down, was purchased in 1967 by the Ulster Land Fund, and transferred to the Trust, with further additional land being added in 1975.

In 1966 the Strangford Lough Wildlife Scheme was initiated, to protect most of the foreshore of the internationally important sea lough. The lease of the foreshore to the National Trust was granted by the Crown Estates Commissioners and many local landowners donated land for hides and car parks. It says much for Antrim's powers of persuasion that he could bring together such a disparate group to provide lasting protection.

Part of the explanation for the Trust's success lay in Antrim's personal commitment and good humour. He always believed that working for the National Trust should be fun, and was able to convey that attitude to its committee members and staff. They quickly learnt that the way to get the Chairman's approval was to make him laugh, and that was not difficult. On one occasion the Chief Agent of the Trust, John Gaze, was trying to convince a sceptical committee of the need to purchase a small and undistinguished property to tidy up a messy boundary. 'So this a whitewash job?' asked Antrim. Quick as a flash Gaze retorted, 'Yes, whitewashing you, Chairman.' Antrim roared with laughter – and the acquisition was approved.

His jokes were shared with staff at every level. The receptionist at the Trust's Head Office at 42, Queen Anne's Gate in



Strangford Lough from Castle Ward



Strangford Lough from the Temple of the Winds

Westminster, was a cockney, Mrs Brown. She tended to address visitors in a rather grand, toffish accent which encouraged them to feel that they were privileged to be allowed into the building. With Antrim she used her broadest cockney: 'Hello, dearie. Had a beastly day, have you?'

Behind Antrim's good humour was a deep concern for staff, and while he was Chairman, the Trust greatly improved salaries and pension arrangements. Gradually it became no longer necessary to have private means to work for the Trust. As a result it was able to recruit people with fully professional skills and experience, who would lay the foundations for the rapid growth of the organisation in the years following Antrim's death in 1977.

It would be easy to take for granted the protection of so much of the coast of Northern Ireland. Would things have been different if so much property had not been brought into the inalienable ownership of the Trust during the 1960s and 1970s? In the 1967 I made the first of many visits to friends with a house overlooking Dingle Bay in Co. Kerry. It was one of the most beautiful, unspoilt coastlines anywhere in Europe. As I have returned over the years it has been transformed, and not for the better. On the top of almost every viewpoint are large, characterless bungalows, usually with enormous double garages. The traditional white cottages - often festooned with fuschia - that delighted

writers and painters are mostly derelict or have been demolished.

After the war planning legislation was weak or in practice virtually non-existent in Northern Ireland and in the Republic. In Ulster only inalienable ownership by the National Trust provided secure protection. Where there was not that possibility, in the Republic, the consequences are all too evident. The threats are still very real north of the border. The Environment Minister of Northern Ireland has recently approved proposals for a holiday village, luxury hotel and golf course within view of the Giant's Causeway, which is a World Heritage Site. It is a coastline that many visitors, particularly those from abroad, come to see precisely because it has not been despoiled. A policy of development anywhere and everywhere, to provide jobs, is incredibly short-sighted.

Hector McDonnell's exhibition is a celebration of coast that is stunningly beautiful and largely unspoilt. Its natural beauty and its wildlife are recognised in international designations. But his paintings also celebrate the remarkable achievements of his father, Lord Antrim, who played such a crucial role in assuring the preservation of so many of its finest stretches by the National Trust. Without his tact, powers of persuasion and sheer hard work there would be much less worth painting.

Merlin Waterson



Castle Ward Bathroom and Strangford Lough



Wendy at Murlough Beach



Coco, Rose and Fair Head



Benone Strand and Magilligan Point

