

# CHAIRMEN OF THE IRISH ORCHID SOCIETY

## THE MOST MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION

When I was young orchids were a mystery as the gardening media never spoke of them and I had no photographs for reference. That was until a fateful lunchtime back in 1984 when I visited the Tropical Ravine glasshouse in the Belfast Botanic Gardens with work colleague Albert Cooper. As we glanced from the perimeter balcony over the sunken ravine, we were awestruck when before us suspended in a basket from the roof, was the most indescribably magnificent *Cattleya* with over a dozen huge deliciously scented lavender blossoms. Unquestionably it had sovereignty over everything floral beneath it and indeed every flower I'd ever seen. Instinctively we both knew this was an orchid and that we were to be forever enchanted and, as every orchidophile understands, it is futile to consider escape.

Albert and I joined the Northern Ireland Orchid Society in 1986 which had only a handful of regular members who met monthly in the modest Cregagh Library in Belfast. Nevertheless, at each event there was consistently a table smothered in flowering orchids of all shapes and forms accompanied by the infectious enthusiasm of their growers. These demonstrations made me aware of the infinite diversity of the orchid family and I started collecting them in earnest. As I was easily the youngest in the society, the other members were especially warm and ultimately feted me with the chairmanship in 1991 which was mostly titular as my most demanding duty was to serve the tea and biscuits. I realised by then that orchid people were a special family of quirky, passionate obsessives and connoisseurs who were willing to share their homes and their bank accounts with their objects of desire in a manner that no other gardening hobbyist would contemplate.

I moved to Dublin in 1993 where I joined the Irish Orchid Society in 2006 after visiting the Glasnevin Botanic Gardens Spring Orchid Fair. I recognised how much I had missed the connection with fellow enthusiasts. In contrast to the Northern Ireland Orchid Society I found the Irish Orchid Society to be more formal with a larger membership with meetings held in the grandeur of the National Botanic Gardens where frequent lectures, fundraising activities and field trips were organised. The IOS has a members' newsletter and a website. However in my opinion from my experience the most important success factor for any society is that it maintains a core group to anchor the ship steadily regardless of undulating membership numbers and finances and thankfully both societies share such coteries and indeed Campbell Gardner of the Northern Ireland Orchid Society, who was there when I began, still captains his ship to this day!

If the Northern Ireland Orchid Society gave me the passion, then the Irish Orchid Society gave me the education. I developed an appreciation of orchids outside cultivation to learn their romantic history, folklore, art, evolution and ecology.

You cannot walk through the atmospheric buildings of the Glasnevin Botanic gardens on any late evening without sensing history. Glasnevin was once part of the great British orchid triad of Kew and Edinburgh at the time of Orchidmania in the mid-nineteenth century and holds several firsts in orchid cultivation. So when I became Chairman of the Society in 2009 I was conscious that I stood on hallowed ground.

The oxymoron that the best way to learn is to teach certainly applied to me as Chairman and all of us are indebted to the Society founder and our jovial sage Brendan Sayers. The great thing about growing orchids is that people experiment by trial and error until they find which group they are most successful with and then can impart advice. For example, I am an experienced *Pleione* grower but had difficulties starting the dormant pseudobulbs into growth in early spring until I learned from *Pleione* novice Hylda Beckett the importance of not forcing with high temperatures.

Because of the infinite diversity of orchids it is not unusual for a member to arrive at a meeting to present a fragrant specimen you will not have seen previously, at least in real-life, and that wins over books or the internet and is the reason why joining a society is so much more fulfilling. I am inspired by the individualistic personalities that abound in the society each with their own passion to share. Which members can forget Sean Phelan bringing his *Dracula* collection carried bat-like on hooks in his specially constructed transportation box like something straight from the "Hammer House of Horror"

The artist has also held a special place in the history of orchids and we are honoured to have several such distinguished talents in the Society who can capture the orchid personality in a way no camera can achieve. In this spirit we held an orchid painting competition for local schools in 2012. As orchid growers skew towards the middle aged it is also important to instil interest in young people. I have huge admiration for the Writhlington School initiative in the UK. However, I am also delighted to see the IOS has gained several young faces including those from other countries including Marina Andreeva who I believe has a great future as an orchid expert from her studies with the RHS.

For a Society it is nice to try new things but also it is enjoyable to have traditions such as the annual trip to North Bull Island in Dublin. I recall my first excursion as it was lashing rain as I stood alone awaiting the other members to materialise but realising that no one in their right-mind would venture out on such a dire evening I just congratulated myself on having made the effort but then sure enough as I turned the corner to go home before me stood about ten Society members attentively listening to Brendan Sayers discussing the sex-life of the Twayblade unmindful of the drenching!

On such field trips a Bee orchid sighting is always top of everyone's wish list but not always guaranteed so when one is spotted there is unbridled commotion and I can recall our group charging towards the call from a member who had one in his sight. However, to my amusement, they were oblivious to the courting couple in the sand dune nearby who looked startled and bewildered at what was happening around them.

So much has changed for the orchid hobbyist since I began. The variety of species and hybrids which can now be purchased inexpensively online and delivered to your door within a few days is staggering and I wonder what the intrepid Victorian explorers who travelled the globe for them at great cost and personal risk would make of it all.

The availability of so many plants will inevitably lead people to experiment and gain confidence so new trends will emerge. Orchids have had their fads. In the eighties the gaudy multi-coloured *Odontoglossum* hybrids were all the rage and now are seldom seen. The *Phalaenopsis* once the preserve of the specialist grower having growing-cases equipped with "life-support" gadgets is now a ubiquitous house plant.

One thing certain for the future of the Society is that there is an inexhaustible supply of subject matter for us all to explore and when the eminent geneticist J.B.S. Haldane remarked "God has an inordinate fondness for stars and beetles" I think surely orchids could be added!

Unlike many of the emotional recollections of life which fade in intensity as time passes. I can often relive that rapture experienced in the tropical ravine all those years ago when setting eyes upon a new orchid treasure presented by a Society member. I owe much to the orchid societies both north and south of the Irish border for giving me that priceless gift.

Footnote: The Tropical Ravine glasshouse in the Belfast Botanic Gardens has been extensively renovated and is expected to reopen within the next few months.

**SHANE KERR**



*The Tropical Ravine glasshouse, Belfast*

Having been a founder member since the formation of the Irish Orchid Society in 2001 and subsequently honoured to be a committee member for some time, I was tasked with the development of the society's website in its early form.

As webmaster of the Irish Orchid Society portal for some time, at the Oct 2005 IOS Meeting, I was nominated and duly elected as the new Chairman of the IOS committee, taking over from Brendan Sayers. Having just finished my Masters Thesis, I was deemed free! Brendan was always going to be a hard act to follow and recall stating at that time that I hoped I could "fill just one of his shoes". I could never hope to fill both!

Also elected that year were Tom Petherbridge,, Michael O'Leary and Jacques Grandjean. Mary Bradshaw, Ian Millichip, Tony Cullen and Marie Hourigan continued as committee members and all were a great source of help.

Soon after, we were stunned by the death of Jacques Grandjean. Jacques was a fantastic and enthusiastic IOS founding member having been a persistent instigator of the formation of the IOS since the mid 90's as Brendan will testify. He was and still is sorely missed both as a personal friend and a great source of orchid knowledge.

IOS Membership stood at 146 at that time.

The Society held 11 monthly meetings per year incl potting workshops, informal nights, guest speakers, member and guest presentations and Christmas fun nights. The ever popular Orchid Fayre included UK Nursery attendance and Marie Hourigan's well attended tours of the Orchid Houses were always eagerly anticipated. Member show table plants always offered the opportunity of "bragging" rights for another 12 months

The field trips were always a highlight whether they were to Bull Island, the Burren in Co Clare or the long drive up to Mullaghmore in Co Sligo. Ulli Peiler, Petra Janssen and Trudy Lomax always ensured a warm welcome to the West while Brendan and Marie were always on hand to guide the Bull Island trips. We are indeed fortunate to live on an island with such a wealth of native orchid species. It was a great eye opener for me, as up until those field trips, I was completely unaware of the beauty and diversity of our native orchidaceous flora.

Highlights of my tenure as chairman included visiting lecturer Dr David Roberts from Kew Gardens on the Orchids of Madagascar in March 2006 followed 3 weeks later by the ever popular Orchid Fayre. The field trip in May 2006 to the Burren to see *Orchis mascula* and *Neotinea maculate* was also memorable.

The visit in July 2006 of Orquideas de Valle, from Columbia for a lecture on the orchids of Columbia was very satisfying for me as it had been a nightmare to organise but to be present and see all the hard work come to fruition was fantastic. The subsequent sales booth was also a great opportunity to obtain hard to source species.

When Brendan also requested to step down as acting editor of

the newsletter **Pollinia** in July 2006, I took over as acting editor, thus ensuring that I filled that other shoe! I was to continue in the role as editor of **Pollinia** for the next few years. Thus by July 2006: I had become Chairman of the IOS, Webmaster of the Society's website and now Editor of **Pollinia**. Phew!

Membership stood at 150

I was delighted to give a well attended presentation in November 2006 on Masdevallia: The Jewels of the Andes. It was on this occasion, I was happy to present Brendan Sayers with the inaugural "Jacques Grandjean Memorial Award" for services to the IOS in its first few years as Chairman

Another personal highlight was the presentation in Jan 2007 by Marie Hourigan on her trip to NZ & Australia

The March 2007 Orchid Fayre was a fantastic success with the addition of over 40 new members! And finally, after a couple of years of low submissions, the members show table had been the best advertisement we could have hoped for the IOS. 21 plants grown to perfection.

Unfortunately Ian Millichip and Tony Cullen had decided to step back from their committee duties due to other commitments. Ian and Tony were founding members of the IOS. Ian was the original editor of **Pollinia** and Tony's presentations on his plants were always memorable.

I was delighted to welcome Scott McNaughton and Shane Kerr to the committee

**Pollinia** had now expanded to 32 pages. The pressure of four issues per year with low volumes of membership contributions continued to pressure me for content. It was calculated that just 3% of membership submitted 95% of Pollina's content. Improving that statistic was to prove frustrating.

Brendan Sayers presentation in May 2007 on his recent trip to Costa Rica to attend the 3rd International Orchid Conservation Congress was of great interest and delivered to the great interest of all attendees.

At the AGM of June 2007, after two years in the role, I gave my last chairman's address as I was stepping down due increasing work commitments and ongoing health issues.

Membership now stood at 181

In six short years our newsletter, **Pollinia** had grown from a black and white, photocopied twelve page document to its then format in 2007 as a 32 page, full colour, professionally printed magazine.

With a cash balance of over €6000 in the bank, it had been a good financial spell for the society, due to the tireless work of the committee especially Tom and Michael who kept a sharp eye on events and fundraising. However, a society does not exist to have a healthy balance sheet. In retrospect, my one regret as chairman is that the available funds could have been put to greater use in the form of grants for students in the orchid field or a significant contribution to an orchid