

President's Address for AGM 24/06/2020

I would like to welcome all the Delegates to this year's online AGM. For many of us the last few months have been unusual and challenging. It will have impacted on all our lives, both personally and professionally. For Mountaineering, it has meant not being able to access the places we love with all the benefits and enjoyment that brings.

2019 proved a busy year for Mountaineering Ireland; our Hillwalking Committee formed in early March and begun to get into its stride right from the very start. This has coincided with the appointment of Ruth Wheelan in her new role as Hillwalking Development Officer. Ten new Clubs were affiliated with Mountaineering Ireland in 2019 bringing membership to a total of 14,200, which includes 191 Clubs and 1,770 individual members as of 31st October 2019. Club Support meetings were held around the four Provinces with over 45 club representatives in attendance.

The 2019 Women With Altitude event was extremely successful with over 90 participants attending. Our Autumn Gathering was hosted by Kilmacthomas Walking Club and was a great success. One of the highlights of the year was the Mountaineering Ireland Lynam Lecture. The 2019 speaker was Sir Chris Bonington and he captivated the audience and the event sold out with over 400 in attendance. Alan and Margaret Tees have concluded their work on completing the *Irish Peaks* book, which is now off to our Publishers and should be available towards the end of July 2020.

The three annual Climbing Meets continued to grow in size; the Fairhead Climbing Meet is one of Mountaineering Ireland's biggest events and in 2019 attracted around 350 people, as always hosted at the courtesy of the McBride family who continue to support the development of climbing. Climbfest in Donegal and the Burren Climbing Meet had about 80 participants each. Youth Climbing Team – Rob Hunter took on the role as Head Coach from Terry O'Connor. Eimir McSwigan reached 3rd place overall in the World in the UIAA Ice Climbing rankings.

It is also important to reflect on the challenges faced by climbing wall owners. There is now widespread recognition that a culture of litigation and increasing insurance premiums represents a real threat to all adventure provision in Ireland and requires urgent government intervention. The exit of insurance providers from the Irish market has exacerbated an already difficult situation. Indeed, at the recent Mountaineering Ireland Climbing Wall Seminar insurance was identified as the number one strategic threat to the climbing wall industry in Ireland. I would like to thank the Climbing Committee and the Climbing Officer; Damien O'Sullivan who have continued to work closely with the sector, providing support to regular competitions and through continued development of High standards through close work with Wall Owners, Insurance companies and the Route Setting Association.

Our Access and Conservation Committee and Access & Conservation Officer, Helen Lawless have continued to work tirelessly to support Access to our Mountains and Crags and promote a responsible approach to our use of the land. Comhairle na Tuaithe was re-energised in June 2019 with a new Chairperson and a new mandate. This comes as welcome news for Mountaineering Ireland as health, wellbeing and environmental sustainability are featuring more than in any previous Comhairle discussions. Comhairle is moving forward on several outdoor recreation projects. However, the indemnity arrangement promised for the two Mountain access Areas has yet to be delivered.

Mountaineering Ireland was active on a number of access issues, for both hillwalkers and climbers. While Mountaineering Ireland had campaigned for the mountain lands of Luggala estate to be purchased by the State as part of Wicklow Mountains National Park, the estate was sold in its entirety to a swiss-based buyer. Mountaineering Ireland has had positive engagement with the new owner and access is continuing as previously.

With increasing footfall on Ireland's mountains, trampling and path erosion are ever more evident. Mountaineering Ireland continued to advocate for appropriate responses to this issue, based on the Helping the Hills Guiding Principles. By working with local management groups and members in the area Mountaineering Ireland contributed to several upland path management projects in 2019. These include Slieve Donard where much progress has been made by the National Trust. Planning permission was secured for path repair work at both Errigal and at Croagh Patrick. Discussions have continued in relation to how to manage visitor impacts at Cuilcagh.

Mountaineering Ireland established a new Access & Conservation Network of over 100 members, this will allow members around the island of Ireland to feed into policy development, submissions, and specific projects. An initial Network event took place at Irish Sport HQ in November, with 47 participants.

The period of time immediately before and since the lifting of Covid19 Restrictions has seen huge pressure, particularly on honeypot areas in Wicklow and the Mourne where issues with Dogs, camping, litter and fires have presented significant challenges. There is clearly a challenge for us all in how we can reach out to new hill users to educate and inform and something that Mountaineering Ireland will have to focus on in the year ahead.

We have also seen significant work completed by the Mountain Training Board Ireland (MTBI), supported by the Training Officer, Jane Carney in the past year. Mountain Training United Kingdom (MTUK) continues to develop and one new change in 2019 saw its name change to *Mountain Training United Kingdom and Ireland* (MTUKI). This properly reflects the full extent of our strong partnerships and shared learning across these islands and I would like to pay tribute to the CEO of MTUKI and all its partners in the respective nations for its ongoing support. This included the Completion of the MTUKI Climbing Awards Review, culminating in the revision of the existing climbing awards and the launch of the new Rock Skills Personal Proficiency Scheme, Indoor Climbing Assistant, and Rock-Climbing Development Instructor.

Whilst sadly we have had to cancel the 2020 Alpine meet 2019 seen our best-attended Summer Alpine Meet, with almost 70 members enjoying the delights of the Mont Blanc massif. Four Irish Guides worked on the meet, reflecting the growing pool of very high-level award holders at the pinnacle of Mountain Training on the Island. The meet also seen extremely high level of attendance by young Alpinists making up 44% of those attending and a 58:42% male to female ratio. We have continued to develop strong partnerships between Mountaineering Ireland and Mountains for the Mind, Adventure smart, and the Irish Girl Guides.

In Northern Ireland, our Youth Development Officer Kevin Kilroy has continued to provide great support to the development of clubs with a particular focus on young people. I have had the pleasure of working alongside Kevin and some of the young people who show a level of enthusiasm that will spark a lifelong involvement in the Mountains.

I want to acknowledge and thank Murrough and all of the staff team for their work throughout the year, driving forward our strategic plan and delivering for our membership. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank our Funders, Sport Ireland, and Sport Northern Ireland for their continued support to enable us to engage with all of our members and the tremendous growth potential that lies ahead.

2019 also saw the loss of several from our community. On behalf of all our membership, staff and Board, I extend our deepest sympathy to their family and friends.

Can I wish you all safe and happy journeys in the year ahead.

Paul Kellagher
President, Mountaineering Ireland.