

The Apple Club NEWSLETTER

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Willem Traas

One way to put it is that Willem Traas had a fruitful life. He was born in Biezelinge, Netherlands, to a fruit-growing family, where from a young age he was involved in fruit-growing, participating in the harvest from eight years of age, and becoming more involved as he got older. As Holland was occupied during the war when he was young, Willem often reminisced about the poverty and uncertainty that prevailed at the time. He was educated in fruit-production, and then participated in the mandatory service in the army, where he enjoyed the nursing and engineering training in particular. Because of his work ethic he was accepted into the Commando unit, something which in later life he viewed with a mixture of pride because of the honour involved, and regret because he did not like the macho culture surrounding the army special forces.

He entered into a partnership with his dad, and they grew fruits such as cherries, redcurrants, strawberries, plums, apples and pears, which in Holland were sold at the local “veiling” like farmers in Ireland sell livestock at the mart.

Looking for a more independent existence Willem came to Ireland, as there was a farm in Fethard looking for a manager, and Willem travelled to consider the job. When here he decided that rather than take the job on offer, he should think about setting out on his own, and thus he began to look for farms in 1966.

In 1967 he and his wife Ali bought the farm in Moorstown from Tommy Sampson, an electrician who was emigrating to Canada. The purchase price was £9000, which while not so much these days, was a lot back then.

One of the conditions of purchase prior to Ireland’s entry to what is now called the EU was that the farm should be used for horticulture production. Willem planted orchards in 1968, and also began producing strawberries, tulips, dried peas for Batchelors, as well as brassicas such as cabbage and Brussels Sprouts. He also rented land for growing beet and grain, and did work on contract for other farmers, being noted for his early starts in the day, where he would often commence work at 5-30 in the morning.

With his initial horticultural crops he would travel to shops and wholesalers to sell them. However over time he realised that these small businesses would be squeezed out by larger multiples, and so

he began direct-selling to consumers from the farm shop that he decided to establish; something that was revolutionary in Ireland in the 1970’s.

In addition he started the camping and caravan park as he thought the Tipperary area had great tourist potential, and loved the idea of bringing people onto the farm and into the area.

As time passed he had a bit more free time, and became involved in the local IFA, being secretary when the late Joe Rea was branch Chairman. He also became involved in St. Mary’s Choral Society in Clonmel, and was involved in setting up Cahir Choral Society, which he did by placing a notice in the local paper.

He also undertook evening classes to improve his education and to meet people. Although when he arrived in Ireland he spoke little English, he learned it quite quickly. In 1983 he decided to take his leaving certificate in English by night course, and loved the poetry especially.

As a consequence he started writing poetry and stories, having one published in *The Sunday Tribune*. He then set up the Clonmel Literary Society, for people to write and discuss what they wrote. He regularly attended Listowel Writers’ Week and Patrick Kavanagh’s festival in Inniskeen.

In the meantime the farm flourished as local people began to know it better, and it became part of people’s weekly routine to buy their fruit from “Traas’s”.

In 1989, tragedy struck, as my brother, Henri died in a motorbike accident on the farm. It took Willem time to come to terms with this, and affected his outlook for many years.

It was when he took up a pastime from his youth, namely cycling, that his outlook changed for the better again. He would train on an almost daily basis, and participate in tours and races of 100km or more, and continued with this pursuit until well into his seventies.

By this time he had retired from farming, but still took great interest in it, and the further diversification of what was available at “The Apple Farm”.

In late 2014 Willem was diagnosed with cancer, and once discharged from hospital spent the last few months of his life being cared for in the farmhouse at the farm, where he died peacefully on the evening of April 2nd last.

Suaimhneas síoraí dá anam.

Welcome to our winter newsletter. It is a bit different writing it this year, after the death earlier this year of my co-writer for so long, my dad Willem Traas.

Nonetheless, the newsletter will continue. On the back page I have a little reminder of Willem’s life for those who knew him.

I hope you enjoy the writings, and I hope to see you next year, after what I hope will be, a very happy Christmas for you all.

Manchán Magan and trees

For those who read the Irish Times, or watch TG4, or indeed visit the theatre, you may be familiar with the work of Manchán Magan. To say he is highly regarded by critics, and the public alike, is an understatement.

He built Ireland’s first straw bale house in 1997, and then in 2002, built a grass-roofed house, that he still lives in now. As part of that construction, he planted 6000 trees around the house, including 40 apple trees in an orchard. Trees are definitely an interest for Manchán.

So a new series on TG4, to be screened in 2016, is all about trees in Ireland. The ten part series will be called Na Crainn, and one of the episodes is about apple trees and orchards.

That’s why Manchán visited us this autumn, to see how apples are grown these days, and to make comparisons with traditional methods.

We had beautiful weather the day he called, and some very nice footage was taken. While I don’t know yet exactly when the orchard episode will be shown, I will be watching the entire series. Keep an eye on your TG4 schedules.

Global Sustainability Forum

As readers will be well aware, environmental sustainability is a topic of great interest here at The Apple Farm. In 2014, we entered the Origin Green certification process, and had our sustainability plan certified in 2015.

In early November, Bord Bia held an inaugural global sustainability forum in Dublin, to highlight the efforts that producers in Ireland are making to become less unsustainable, and to highlight the issues facing food producers and people in general, around the unsustainability of many existing processes and practices in agriculture and food production.

From my perspective, the most interesting speaker was Jason Clay of the World Wildlife Fund. He outlined how food production, on a global scale, is already the single biggest impact on the planet, and that today’s sustainability standards will not be good enough in a few years time.

Also very interesting was the environmental impact of food waste, especially wasted meat, which is due to the fact that its production has a greater negative impact than fruit or vegetables.

When asked by the meeting facilitator what people could do, apart from the obvious (like reducing waste etc), Jason Clay’s answer was surprising but yet simple. He said people should think seriously about who they vote for.

The Irish Farmers Association

On the topic of voting, many of us farmers will have the chance to vote in an IFA election soon, if we don’t cancel our memberships in disgust.

I have been an IFA member for many years, and have been chair of the apple committee for 10 or more of those years.

It is a job that requires a lot of dedication, trying to represent the views of Irish apple growers to politicians, supermarkets and the like, when it can feel like they would rather we would not bother them, so that they can concentrate on “important” sectors like dairy and meat.

Nonetheless the job must be done, so for instance, when Bord Bia were developing their new quality assurance scheme for fresh produce (basically fruit, vegetables and mushrooms) this summer, other IFA members and myself got stuck in for days, helping to make the scheme as relevant and up-to-date as possible.

And so it goes, sometimes doing things that will mean horticulture will continue to have a place in Ireland in future years, and sometimes trying to fix problems that have arisen because somebody did not think through the impact of a certain decision on a small sector like fruit growing.

So, doing all this work, literally thousands of hours since I originally became involved in the IFA, and happily doing it without any payment at all, like so many other volunteers in so many other organisations in Ireland, right now I am way beyond disappointed.

Last time I heard, the IFA President did not get a salary, but got good expenses, and had a farm manager paid for by the IFA. When did the job change to a paid position, and more importantly, because I can see the merit in paying the president (and indeed deputy president), why were members not informed of the change in policy and why did they not get the chance to decide what the payment should be?

The case of the general secretary, and other executives is more of the same. It appears that their salaries, related to those of senior grades in the public service when public service benchmarking was in place, were neatly decoupled when benchmarking was reversed. And once again there appears to be no accountability. For too long the IFA appeared pre-occupied with the concerns and incomes of large farmers. Now

being pre-occupied with their own personal incomes can be added to that. None of this sits well with the motto of “Unity”.

That is why, for the moment, I will stay at my little job, representing apple growers, within and beyond the IFA. However, if our organisation does not become accountable and transparent, and soon, it will lose its remaining credibility, and that will be the end of the IFA.

New apple orchard

A few weeks ago I heard tell of a new orchard being planted in Ireland. In our tiny community of apple growers, a chance to visit could not be resisted. The orchard in question is in the East of the country, and is the largest single plantation ever made in Ireland. Almost 180 acres have been planted between last year and this, adding about 30% to Ireland’s eating apple orchard area, or more than 10% to our national acreage.

Though eating apples have been planted, their destination is juice, and the orchard is designed for maximum mechanisation, to get apples turned into juice as quickly as possible, rather than to sell as fresh fruit.

The bravery of the entrepreneurs setting up the venture is an inspiration, as is the sight of rows of apple trees as far as the eye can see.

The owners have not gone public on the existence of the orchards yet, and will be doing an official launch when the orchards are in production. Therefore I have had to be vague about its whereabouts and ownership.

But this much good news is just too much for me to say nothing about.

A limerick on making cider

There was a young woman from Hyde
Who ate a green apple and died,
Though her boyfriend lamented
The apple fermented
And made cider inside her inside.

Gearóid Fitzgibbon

As many of you will know, I act as Chair of our local Green Party Group on a voluntary basis. Now that is neither difficult nor too time-consuming, because in county Tipperary we have only a handful of members.

In 2015 we were lucky to get a new member, and even more fortunate when he agreed to be the candidate in the election that we know is coming in spring 2016.

Gearóid Fitzgibbon is from Nenagh, and has an impressive CV. He has a background as a community volunteer, and has worked as a community organiser in Tipperary since 2007. Gearóid is co-founder and director of Energy Communities Tipperary Cooperative, which has leveraged over €4 million investment in home insulation schemes in communities across Tipperary, saving energy and creating local employment. He is a co-founder of Tipperary Green Business Network, and currently works with North Tipperary LEADER Partnership. His hobbies include cycling, hill walking and writing. In 2009 Gearóid volunteered with the ecumenical accompaniment programme in Palestine and Israel as a human rights accompanier in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Gearóid holds a masters degree from UCC in Social Sciences and volunteers with Changing Ireland, the national magazine of community development in Ireland.

Gearóid has many interesting policy proposals which will make Tipperary a better county to live in.

I will only mention one, which is his commitment to give 30% of his TD’s salary to the Citizen’s Information Centres, which he says do excellent work for citizens, and are largely staffed by volunteers.

If you have time to give to assist in his campaign, or wish to find out more, contact him by email at fitzgibong@gmail.com or on twitter at @GearoidFitzG

In the farm shop:

Of course for Christmas we have our special hampers of juices, jams and fruit, as well as balsamic vinegar, cider and lemonade. These popular and practical Christmas gifts are always appreciated. As well as these we have gift bags of juices, jams and all bottled products for you to enjoy.

We have our lovely range of apples, including really beautiful Elstar, as well as that traditional favourite, Karmijn de Sonnaville. We are just about to begin with the famous Jonagored too. And of course the ever-popular Bramley cookers are also available. Remember they make a lovely sauce to go with the leftover ham!

We also have mulled apple or mulled apple & blackcurrant drinks. These are juices with spices, which make a lovely warm drink, but without the alcohol. Simply heat before serving, and warm yourself up on a cold winter’s evening. We have new branding on them too, which make them lovely as a gift too.

For a cool drink, our sparkling juices are going as quickly as we can make them, with people coming from all over Ireland to get them, as well as placing orders for home delivery.

Our juices are as popular as ever and really good value, with cases of 12 large bottles flying out both to people who call in and by courier as Christmas gifts. In fact, if you like you can even include a personal message when ordering online, and we will include it with the box when sending to your lucky friends. We just had an order from the North Pole, as Mrs Claus has a special recipe for her ham, which she cooks in our juice and uses our apple jelly to glaze. And for some reason she ordered some Con’s cider too. Possibly for the man himself, when he returns after a long night travelling the World. He probably asked for it, after drinking the one I left out for him last Christmas Eve.