

The Foinse Project

Margaret Fraser

In a session focusing on sustainability and respecting the Earth, we heard about a concern of a Cork Friend to develop the cross-border biological, ecological and geological *Foinse* Project, to which we agreed to give our support.

(From the Epistle of Ireland Yearly Meeting, 2015)

The Foinse Project arises from a leading of Robert Foulkes, a member of Cork Meeting. *Foinse* is Irish for source. The intention is to establish a scientific research station in the cross-border area of Fermanagh, Cavan and Leitrim. Imagine a field study centre at the university level, where scientists do long-term studies, collect data, store it on the Cloud, and share it freely.

Scientists and graduate students will come to the area. Lecturers will bring their students, and the students will learn experientially - through observation and by hands-on data collection and analysis. Scientific research stations are well-known in the U.S. and other parts of the world, but less so in Ireland. Yet Ireland is rich in material for research: air- and water quality, trees, plants, bogs, caves, rocks, dolmens; birds, animals, fish and insects - the possibilities are endless. The usual pattern is to conduct base-line studies and then measure changes over many years that are brought about by human activity or natural causes.

The area for the Foinse project includes that of the Marble Arch Caves Global Geopark, Cuilcagh Mountain and Lough Erne. It is a rural landscape with waterways, forests, fields and ancient structures made by humans.

The project's footprint on the area is light, as it makes good use of what already exists. It does not involve the construction of new buildings, as there are facilities that can potentially be used by visiting groups, such as Share Village, the Derrygonnelly Field Studies Centre and Gortatole Outdoor Education Centre, all in County Fermanagh, and the Allen Centre in County Leitrim.

There is unemployment and under-employment in this border area. Many of the "solutions" to stimulate the economy, such as industrial parks and shopping centres, can damage the landscape and ecology. By using existing buildings, Foinse can generate economic activity without side effects. Tourism, while it creates jobs, tends to be seasonal, while educational and research activity can be carried out at different times of the year, and fill beds in the centres away from peak usage by other groups. Higher education is known to have a 'multiplier' effect. Each student creates a need for accommodation, food and transport and spends money locally.

Recognizing these benefits, representatives of public bodies on both sides of the border have shown an interest in Foinse. They include Waterways Ireland; the Northern Ireland Forest Service and Coillte; the Marble Arch Caves Global Geopark and the economic development offices of Cavan and Leitrim county councils. Robert Foulkes is in conversation with scientists in universities on both sides of the border.

There are other benefits. Some public sector organisations are expected, as part of their remit, to conduct research, yet with budgetary pressures they often do not have the capacity to do this. Visiting scientists and students might be able to do some of that work. On the other hand, some data already exists, and could be built upon. Waterways Ireland has extensive data going back to the 18th century, but, as yet, it is not easily accessible.

Foinse may offer practical ways in which local authorities and communities on each side of the border to engage more closely with each other. It will be of benefit to scientists and students from different countries to meet others in Ireland and for local people to meet visitors and learn more about their research interests.

It's a simple concept, but it is an enterprise involving three countries. While researchers could come from anywhere in the world, including Ireland, it is likely that most of them, at least at first, will be from the USA. Foinse is already incorporated in the state of Michigan, and Robert is working on what will be needed for it to be registered in Northern Ireland and the Republic. Universities will pay to use the facilities, but there will be a need for start-up capital to pay for an administrator and expertise in data management.

The yearly meeting indicated its support at the yearly meeting sessions, though details are still to be worked out. The organization will make its decisions through the Quaker sense of the meeting, rather than by voting. The Quaker reputation for integrity and putting our religious values into practice, and our work connecting different communities. We also have experience in combining excellence and practicality in education.

There will be a need for people who can give support for it in terms of business and academic skills - and some may be in a position to make a financial investment. Others may be feeling called to be part of a support or interest group. While an individual may be given a leading, and may carry it for a while, for the effort to be sustained, it must be taken up by the broader faith community.

Margaret Fraser is a member of Friends of the Light, in northern Michigan, a meeting in The New Association of Friends