

A botanist in Ireland during World War II

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ABSTRACT: On 29 January 1941, Charles Faris of Farrinseer, Co. Cavan, wrote to Mrs N. Chambré of Dungannon, Co. Tyrone about his war-time botanical activities, travel difficulties due to a petrol shortage and his solutions, a field trip with Robert Lloyd Praeger and the keeping and sharing of his extensive records – now lost or mislaid. The letter came into the possession of the late Doreen Lambert of Londonderry and was discovered amongst her papers by Ian McNeill of Cookstown, County Tyrone, who sent it to the author. It is now lodged in the archives of the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, Dublin.

BACKGROUND TO THE FARIS LETTER

The letter was written during the second year of the 1939-1945 World War. Charles Faris lived in the Republic of Ireland, a neutral state, separated by a land border from Northern Ireland. Mrs Chambré resided in Northern Ireland, which, as part of the United Kingdom was embroiled in the conflict. At this time, the war had reached a critical stage and the outcome was uncertain. It is remembered for the bombing Blitz of cities in mainland Britain, the threat of invasion from German-occupied France and submarine attacks in the Atlantic on convoys of food, oil and other essential goods (Churchill, 1950). In January 1941, German bombs fell on Dublin, and Belfast was bombed twice in April 1941 (Irish Times 1941). Botanists on both sides of the border communicated by post and met at organized field trips. The letter shows a remarkable degree of detachment by all parties from the cataclysmic events taking place nearby, a dedicated interest in field botany and an appreciation of its intrinsic value.

Charles Faris had a legal practice in Co. Cavan. He spent his spare time exploring the countryside with Jean Cole of Cloverhill Co, Cavan, who later became his wife. They were associates of the eminent Irish botanist, Robert Lloyd Praeger and contributed to supplements of his *Irish Topographical Botany* (1901), (Praeger, 1939 and 1946). They also published articles in the *Irish Naturalist* and the *Irish Naturalists' Journal* on the botany of Cavan, notably on rare ferns they discovered at Bruse Hill. They were highly regarded by Praeger who wrote that they 'added considerably to our knowledge of the distribution of flowering plants' and that Charles Faris 'was a valued observer in a region in which naturalists are and have been few' (Praeger, 1949).

In his letter, Faris refers to extensive field notes he made during 1932–1940, covering the *Cybele Hibernica* (Moore & More, 1866) botanical district number 10, which included counties Cavan, Monaghan, Fermanagh, Tyrone and Armagh. Mrs Chambré had evidently requested a copy, because in the letter he mentions that the notes were 'very bulky, about 1000 pages ...'. Members of the Cole and Faris families have no knowledge of the whereabouts of these notes or of copies he may have made.

In addition to his botanical contributions, Charles Faris was a distinguished entomologist, adding two species of dragonfly to the Irish list (Faris, 1943; Faris and O'Rourke, 1946). He donated his collection of Irish insects to the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, because at the time, the Irish National Museum did not have an entomologist on its staff. The Royal Scottish Museum later transferred duplicates of Faris' sawfly collection to the National Museum of Ireland (O'Connor 1989). Charles Faris died in 1984. Jean, his widow, went to live in Scotland with her daughter, Mrs Jennifer Milliken. She died in 1999 and was buried beside her husband at Kilmore, Co. Cavan.

TEXT OF CHARLES FARIS'S LETTER TO MRS. N. CHAMBRÉ

Farrinseer
Cornafean
Co. Cavan

29.1.'41

Dear Mrs. Chambré,

We¹ were very glad to see by your letter that you are all well, and working hard. I saw in a recent I.N.J.² that you were collecting Fairy Tales³, and feared that you were lost to the Naturalists !.

Parsley Fern. I was on Bruse Hill⁴ on Christmas Eve, but the grave of all our hopes has failed to produce any promise of a reincarnation, alas. We shall have to try to find another, I fear.

Camelina & Erysimum. Yes, there was a temporary confusion, the history of which is this. We were ahead and found one stray plant, new to us and brought it back to Dr Praeger, wondering if it could be a new sp. of Diploctaxus. He said "Now, what is that: it must be Camelina sativa, but I have not seen it for years". You said "Oh, Gold of Pleasure". (I began to wonder where either of you had heard of such things!!). Then Dr P. said "It must be Erysimum cheiranthoides". Further along we came on a good plot of it & he confirmed his conjecture – we looked it up in Bentham & Hooker⁵ at once to fix it in our minds. All this, by the way, did happen at Drumhawanagh Station⁶ Camelina we have not yet seen.

Cavan flora. Last Autumn I finish a 2 yr. task of going thro' my Field Notes since 1932 (as I write this Mr De Valera⁷ is announcing that Private Car owners are to get no petrol at all, henceforth!!!!). Those notes included all plant records for Miss Cole & myself to end of '39 & all '40, subject to conformation of a few new Co. records, specimens accompanying the notes. We left them with Dr. Praeger last autumn, but have not heard from him since.

Even when we do hear from him and have the notes returned, they would be very bulky to transmit to you – about 1000 pages on paper the same size as this sheet [20.5mm x 25mm] mostly blank, of course!

In any event, I do not think that the Censoring Authorities [favour?] the sending to and fro of lists of detailed localities. Miss Cole has a marked list of all plants recorded in each of the 5 counties (CV, MO, FE, TY, AR) 8 constituting the "Dist[ri]ct X" of Cybele⁹ save the '40 plants. Would it do if she marked up a copy of the CV portion for you? My copy is battered and is marked up to show the authority (i.e. place of publication) of every plant claimed for Dist X and I hesitate to risk it in the post in these unsettled times, as I well remember the weeks of work going thro' paper after paper tracing the records. Let me know if you would like this list and I shall hunt up a copy of the Museum hand list 10. Miss Cole will tick of the Cavan plants. Failing that, what about coming down and see the full lists when returned from Dr. Praeger?

We have not seen the "Populus Solitude"¹¹ (as I think he should have called it) but it is good to know that you find it so very fascinating.

I am very glad that you are still collecting records of the Tyrone plants, and hope you had a successful season in 1940. So much work has been pointless because the workers would not go to the trouble of cataloguing their results. At the moment there is

every reason why these things should be collected, copied, deposited in different places etc as it is impossible to conjecture what form of record will survive this war.

Thursday morning

Cavan still possesses the second smallest flora of all the 40 counties and vice counties, Monaghan being the only county possessing fewer recorded plants. There is little hope of Monaghan losing its booby prize, as its area is so small, its surface so unvaried and its mountains nonexistent.

This petrol business will affect everything. How on earth are we to get to [law] courts I do not know? I shall get to Cavan only from Tuesday morning till Thursday afternoon, doing the sub-offices on Friday and Monday by bicycle from Farrinseer. Since the restriction of a month ago I have been almost permanently in Cavan. Many a good man has lost his life while bringing in petrol so we have nothing to squeal about. I have just now opened negotiations for the purchase of a boat here (Belturbet¹², where I am completing this letter) as it offers one way of getting about without petrol, and Lough Oughter,¹³ Killykeen¹⁴ and all those lovely spots are still largely unexplored – tho' I do not expect to add more than 2 plants to the CV list from that area.

Let me know if the ticked-off list will fulfil your requirements, and Miss Cole will get busy. If you want something more elaborate we can arrange an "inspection" of the fuller list when it is returned.

But, remember; if you want an answer to your next letter do NOT enclose stamps !!! Promise? Thank you.

With best wishes to Mr Chambré and yourself from us both, and hoping all the family are well.

Yours sincerely

R. C. Faris

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NOTES

- 1 'We': Charles Faris and his fiancée, Jean Cole. They married in 1941.
- 2 INJ: Irish Naturalists' Journal.
- 3 INJ September, 7:360, 1940. 'Collecting fairy tales' Review of *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 3rd series, Vol. 3: 1, January 1940 ' T.G.F. Paterson in collaboration with Mrs Chambré, contributed a number of fairy tales taken down from the lips of Peter M' Mullan, of Candia, Co. Tyrone'.

- 4 Bruse Hill: Location, east of Arvagh at N 98-32: height 858 ft.
- 5 Bentham and Hooker: '*Handbook of the British Flora*' (1858).
- 6 Drumhawnagh Station: Location, south of Bellanagh at N 3592. A local railway station now closed.
- 7 Mr. De Valera: War-time Prime Minister of the Irish Free State. It was declared the Republic of Ireland in 1948.
- 8 CV, MO, FE, TY,AR: Counties Cavan, Monaghan, Fermanagh, Tyrone and Armagh.
- 9 *Cybele Hibernica* (1866) by David Moore and Alexander Goodman More. In *Cybele* Ireland was divided into twelve districts to show plant distribution. Cavan is in district 10.
- 10 *Liosta de phlann dai na hEireann*, Hand-list of Irish plants, published by the National Museum of Ireland (Natural History Division) .The third edition was issued in 1934.
- 11 A pun, referring to R.Ll. Praeger's '*A Populous Solitude*' (Dublin: Hodges & Figgis 1941).
- 12 Belturbet: Location, west of Redhills at H3616.
- 13 Lough Oughter: The body of lakes that forms the basin of the River Erne between Crossdoney (H 3700) and Bakers Bridge (H 3712).
- 14 Killykeen (H 3405). Now a national park on Lough Oughter, classified as an area of scientific interest of international importance.

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