

STEADFAST MAN OF THE CONNEMARA WORLD

By Nicholas O'Hare

Peadar O'Scannail is a steadfast man. He has been a veterinary surgeon in Connemara since 1945, giving decades of service to pony breeding and bringing his professional expertise to breeders and the CPBS alike.

He was first elected to the Council of the Society in 1947 and, over the years as a member of the inspection committee, has been present at inspections all over Ireland.

In recent time he has come to the attention of breeders as an unwilling member of the so-called "Famous Five", the group of council members which governed the Society during the period when, for legal reasons, there were no other eligible members.

Peadar O'Scannail has made no secret of his distaste for the interim period and, on more than one occasion, offered to resign his post if the other four would do likewise. Even though there is not a full council in place, he still believes that the five should re-submit themselves to the electorate.

When Peadar O'Scannail first joined the CPBS times were difficult. The Society was faced with the inevitability that there was no longer a demand for working ponies and that it would have to concentrate on producing riding ponies.

Exports began to grow with the formation of the English Connemara Pony Society and there was a demand for ponies from other countries as well.

Peadar O'Scannail made an important contribution to the genetic parity of the breed when he urged the Society to take action on the issue of blue-eyed creams. The blue eye and cream colour is due to a recessive gene.

Peadar O'Scannail, following a visit to the annual fair where he found 10 blue-eyed foals out of a complement of 50 mares and foals, sought a ruling that the progeny of blue-eyed creams should no be registered.

Now very few are born, generally from a mating of dun and dun. There are, of course, those who stand by the blue-eyed cream and there have been controversies down the years, particularly in Britain where Mr Polo was such a hit. By and large, however, it has been felt that the decision was correct.

Nowadays, under EU rules, papers have to be provided for blue-eyed creams but they are kept in a specially created section of the studbook which also caters for over height ponies.

As a member of the CPBS Council for over 50 years, Peadar O'Scannail has seen many changes. Many personalities, such as the Society's President Lord Killamin, have come and gone.

The pony has undeniably prospered, despite some fearful times in the 1970s when numbers dramatically fell. But now, though margins are small on many ponies and customers are hard to find, good ponies are in demand and make good prices.

The Connemara is an established worldwide breed, although the next phase of its development, the fostering of a true performance culture, is really only beginning.

Peadar O'Scannail has made no secret of his concern about the recent problems of the Society and his view that the five members who controlled its destiny in controversial times should now retire, and if they so wish, present themselves again for election.

He sent a long letter setting out his position to each member of the new council a few weeks ago. He has given chapter and verse of the problems which arose following the discovery that the society had lost its legal status, disclosing a personal mission that simply reveals his commitment.

O'Scannail confesses that at the beginning he did not really understand the complaints of the Concerned Group, but as time went on he began to feel that they were justified.

That dispute rumbled on for some time and O'Scannail, a legally elected vice-president of the society, for a brief period became its president. He was at odds with some of the decisions of his colleagues, and offered to resign if they went with him. This was not to happen. Now it seems that the five if they so wish can remain as Council members for life. While the rest stay, O'Scannail is not prepared to give ground.

He has his own vision for the future of the Connemara world. He wants to see the CPBS become a truly Ireland body and not as it is at present, a Connaught group. He points out that of the 24 members of the current council, only two are outsiders, one member from Ulster and one from Leinster. The election of more members from outside Connemara to the Council would still allow for a local majority.

He also says that he would like to see the president having little to do with the administration side, leaving this work to the council who would appoint a chairman to attend to important matters with the help of the different sub-committees.

The AGM, he says, should be held in Athlone and a quarterly meeting should be held in each of the four provinces. The society should ensure that its relationship with the Horse Board and the Department of Agriculture is a good one.

He is aware of the fact that the difficulties of recent years have given wide publicity and he wonders what is the view of the international societies. "It may not be wholesome," he suggests, "due to our strange behaviour in the recent past".

Peadar O'Scannail has spent his working life supporting the farmers and pony breeders of Connemara. He is truly a man who feels deeply about the dissensions within the world of Connemara pony breeding.

His many years of involvement have given him an understanding of how things are, and his personal willingness to go if the others will go with him says a lot about the calibre of the man.

He is not making a case that his four colleagues should abandon their positions entirely. He is just proposing that they would ask the society's members to vote them in again should they so wish.

One thing is clear about the Connemara pony world. The pony goes on in spite of the differences between its mentors. The time will surely come when the problems of the moment will be forgotten.

Peadar O'Scannail will long be remembered as a man whose service to the breed spanned a long era of progress and some degree of prosperity for pony breeders.

Reprinted from "The Irish Field" Saturday March 2, 2002