

AT HOME IN HIS HILLS

Any preconception of Kerry is, of course, bound to contain elements of romance. The wilder landscapes and the resilience of those who endure there touch our imagination.

The Black Valley, though not many miles from Killarney, is physically remote, girdled by mountains and world-famous because it acquired electricity only in recent times.

In such places we like to find sportsmen of heroic proportions — and quite often we do.

With this in mind I had thoughts of scouring the mountains and islands for some wild man — running forty miles a day in his naked feet and existing, if necessary, on locusts and wild honey, or even puffins' eggs and seaweed — we are talking about the depletion phase, of course.

What I actually found was *John Lenihan*, not a wild man — indeed an eminently civilized one. But his running prowess, his true amateurism and the untamed nature of his environment are, to me, a hero's lot.

I visited John at his hill farm at Glounageenty, between the Stack's and Glanaruddery mountains. This is the country and the very glen, wild and inaccessible, where the Earl of Desmond holed up and eluded his mortal enemies for months.

The glen is a deep chasm, above which the narrow road teeters dizzily. The approach boreen to John's farm is a rough, upward-winding track, impossibly steep and rocky.

John gets up at seven a.m., milks the cows — and delivers the milk to the creamery.

He takes a break (if you could call it that) in mid-morning for his long run, then immediately resumes work and carries on, usually until at least seven p.m. — it can be later.

The fields on this farm are not something you walk through; you climb them, either up or down — preferably with rope and pulley.

They are pitched at such steep angles that the cows are beginning to look like sheep — woolly, perched on tiny ledges.

John, striding around the place with easy power, remarked to me that this



sort of terrain was grand for his hill-work.

Most of our elite runners now espouse an approach to the sport which involves almost complete immobility between training sessions.

How then can a man like Lenihan, who works such a rugged holding — from early morning till late evening compete on equal terms with the best?

And compete with the best he does.

For example, he actually led *Jerry Kiernan* into the final sprint of last year's Killarney 10k, was only beaten by Kiernan's 'dip', and was accredited with the same time.

His personal best for ten-miles is a magnificent 47.52. In fact he has done that identical time twice — at Bandon and Belgooly.

When you look at John Lenihan's life (I almost said 'lifestyle'), and what he has achieved so far, it is hard not to agree with his Riocht clubmates — that he is now only a shadow of his future self.

The boys in Castleisland are hoping to send him to the States in the Autumn. They expect that a break from the homestead and a few races over there could change the course of his running career. Some of them

foresee international greatness, possible residence in the States and big dollars to follow.

John himself is surprised at the suggestion. He might stay a month but he would not leave the farm.

Whether or not he will join the brawn-drain I don't know.

Such a move would involve important questions: who would take care of his three lovely farm-dogs? — *Brownie* is my own favourite.

John is a modest young man. I spent only a brief time with him — I sensed he was keen to get back to work. But his quiet hospitality and native ruggedness impressed me enormously.

I loved, too, the long mane of dark hair; it reminded me of *Jerry Kiernan's* — though the style is different.

I recalled the time I chanced upon Jerry running out of a mist on Leopardstown Racecourse, the great mat of hair shivering and flowing in the half-light — he clothed in white nylon, mystic, wonderful.

Since that fateful morning my Jim Fitzpatrick illustrations have seemed tame by comparison.

Now they are coming off the wall altogether to make way for John Lenihan's pictures.