

## **Walking the Pfälzerwald – Erin Dunleavy, University of Galway**

It wasn't silence nor sonance as I entered the Forest. Instead, a soft sound that could so easily be heeded. A gentle motion like noise that is the rustle of the leaves. A sound so elegant and polite it could almost be hushed by the sounds of human presence. The leaves could be heard throughout the forest like conversations in a school hallway, whispering from one to the next. At first glance all the trees look the same. It is only when you take a moment to observe each one that you begin to realise that each tree differs from the next. Differing in so many aspects from type to size. The European beech tree towers above reaching out to its neighbouring common hazel tree. Their elegant dark branches swaying as one together, touching one another only slightly. Known to science as the *Fagus*, the beech tree stood ahead of me in a powerful stance. It intrigued me to stand under such a tree, knowing it could be found too in places I've never been, such as Asia and North Africa. To me an object to observe but to wildlife an important source of food. It fascinated me to think of all the ways mother nature provides food to her wildlife. Leading me to thoughts of all the ways we harm her in return for her work. Looking at the leaves of trees it was clear of the effects of the limited rain Germany has had in the last five weeks. The top branches stood bare and lonesome. Leaves that remained in the middle sections were a discoloured, dried out green. It was a sorrowful sight, a changing climate resulting in the reduction of biomass.

I walked the brown, leaf scattered paths carefully. Feeling the crunch of each leaf under the soles of my shoes. It permitted a feeling of comfort, so I made the decision to remove my shoes and feel the earth more closely. The earth was soft and cool, and the leaves felt like a blanket beneath me. The roots of trees intertwining along the ground created a bumpy journey to walk, hard crevices to gently make your way around. I was met with small stones not sharp enough to cause pain but enough to know each one was there. Some stones so minuscule could be felt between toes or gently pressing against the soles of my feet. Reminding me fondly of memories of standing in my stone driveway as a child. The forest beneath my bare feet felt like a gentle reminder of the way nature felt as a carefree child in contrast to how it feels now as a young adult who fears the changing climates and its impact on her future.

The smell of fresh air intertwined with the smell of bark and moss. A smell so comforting and fresh, it holds you in place like a warm embrace. It was strange to me that a smell could make me feel that way. As we trailed through the forest I found that the smell could differ depending on the surroundings. Parts of the forest linked with the humidity in the air, created a memory of Sport Day events as a child. It was a strange memory to be evoked, as Sports Days for me occurred in a small field in Ireland, yet here I was envisioning it before me in the Palatinate Forest in southwest Germany. The smell of heat and leaves blended so well together it felt homely, even almost nine hundred miles away from home.

On approaching the old castle known as Ruine Falkenberg, I found myself in front of an *Oregano* plant. It was bizarre to me to find such a plant on the top of the Ruine Falkenberg. How a plant so full of life grew from the cracks of the ruins of a castle that had not seen human inhabitants since the middle of the 19th century. It fascinated me to think that although a deadly fire could banish human life from the castle turning it to ruins, it failed to banish wildlife. How is it that the strength of wildlife and nature can persevere through such deadly events? Can they continue to persevere through the changing climates or the rising sea levels? I stood at the top of the castle ruins, surrounded by nature, filled with uncertainty.

## **Ruine Falkenburg – Iona Berube, University of Aberdeen**

Trees give way suddenly at the peak of the climb to a wall of red sandstone forced from the ground by tectonic movement 250 millennia ago. The outcrop is history in present time. My eye is drawn along the striations and cuts made by rivers that flowed on Pangea. Its oxygenated red warms the eye and the palette of the forest. Reaching out to the crag, fine sediment spills at the slightest touch until my fingers brush the soft layer of moss. The lush green of the moss is deceptively dry, nourished by the minimal water contained within the rock on this day without rain, the humidity of the forest almost negligible.

Midway along the stone is a wooden staircase promising access to Ruine Falkenburg. Some of the stairs bend slightly underfoot as I climb. I meet the canopies of the trees to my eyeline and already they are a different image. A randomly determined cross section of a tufted green landscape, the peaks and valleys beginning to present themselves above the nearest canopy. The colours of the trees shift and brighten to a verdant green previously disguised by the shadow dampening their hue as one looks skywards from their trunks. The spectrum of green opens brighter to near yellows and darker and cooler to almost-blues. This perspective of a forest I have walked but not seen in its entirety reshapes it completely. No longer is it the hive of activity and texture that one peers around trees to navigate, but a blanket of life spread to a horizon ended prematurely by hills who undulate calmly as though the ground had once breathed and shifted this way. As my gaze follows the skyline's gently sloping path, my breath finds an easy rhythm as though matching the land. If one gazes long enough, glimpses of the life below make themselves known, as birds, too far to identify, flit over treetops.

There is a shifting sensation, proprioceptive in nature, as I climb the sandstone. I seem to feel my place in relation the environment as though I were a limb of a much larger body, as though the earth and I were one. The height seems to tug somewhere in my gut as I look down at the forest floor, and, now I am no longer protected by the trees, a slight chill to the air is carried by wind blowing against my skin in a bracing fashion despite the sun's steady warmth.

The ruins of the 12<sup>th</sup> century castle consist of the remnants of towers, a cistern, a moat, and other indistinguishable elements levelled roughly by its 17<sup>th</sup> century destruction and later vandalism and stone robbery. It makes for an uneven path and a remarkable vantage point, situating the ruins place within the forest. Here is evidence underfoot that man has existed and fought and lived in this area for nearly one thousand years. The built stone tells a story of human history much like the outcrop tells a story of geological time. The timescales are drastically different, but the history is palpable.

At what point does a lying ruin become a part of nature? The trees in this area are forested, carefully guarded, and observed; they do not exist apart from human influence. Was this castle always as natural to the landscape as its surrounding wildlife?

As though the biosphere is staking its claim on the ruins, plant life springs from the rock unbidden. Between cracks in sandstone burst lone stems of flowering *oregano* boasting delicate blossoms of soft pink. I am compelled to reach out and pluck from its stem a fuzzy green leaf which emits a pleasant earthy aroma encapsulating the notes that rise from bark, soil and leaves following rainfall. *St John's Wort* springs brightly forth; its vivid yellow blooms bask in the warm beam of the sun, heralding Midsummer.