

OH Doc. No. 20
Rec from Michael O. Seighin
Date Recd. 24/4/07

SUBMISSION ON THE VISUAL BY MICHEÁL Ó SEIGHIN

To: recalled oral
hearing, Dec 2002.

This short submission is for the purpose of helping the hearing reach further clarity by explaining how we see the project impinging on us and on surrounding areas visually. Our principle concern is ourselves and our area – not the occasional tourist or casual visitor. Mr. Philips suggests that the aviation tower on Sean sa Cheo does not hinder tourists. This type of argument is largely circular. However, we do know that any tourist, either our own people coming home or real tourists, have one comment if any comment at all – “How in God’s name did that yoke get planning permission?”. The “yoke” in question has a clear view through the mountains on Mayo and through Galway. Visually it does impinge on the area and as a cog in the NATO navigation machine it does have the potential to attract explosive attention.

Mr. Philips rightly mentions how out of scale Corick originally was. It has been part of the wider landscape for so long that it has a visual effect similar to any permanent obstruction in the landscape – Neifin, Croagh Patrick, The Rock of Cashel. However, this hearing is dealing with the effect of the Terminal both on the area in which it is situated and on other special areas outside its immediate visual influence.

We would not see this area as being confined to that shown on the 1: 50,000 maps etc. produced for us by Enterprise Energy Ireland. To us it is the entire area of which the Terminal site is the centre of the saucer, with the Terminal itself as a marble in the middle. This saucer has a couple of edges and serrations as befits artefacts of antiquity (illustrated on map on display).

The difficulty of screening is possibly illustrated by the following :-

In the 1960s Professor De Valera (Archaeology) did a definitive study of the Neolithic tombs in the Gort Breac area, a particularly rich load. A short few years afterwards he returned to see how his babies were surviving. All were in good shape. As the sun went down he walked down the hill with his guide and turned for a last look and there on the brow was a fine specimen of a court cairn that he had never seen before. Horrified, he asked his guide where had the new Neolithic grave come from and was told quite reasonably “The ass ate the whins”.

Even checking the photographs against the physical reality, as Mr. Kelly says is necessary, obviously has its limitations. Another limitation is the constantly changing light that sometimes brings Achill very close to me (shown on map) and Corr Shliabh in the winter time when first snows appear as we look over the site of the proposed Terminal.

I would like at this stage to show some cross-sections on my own, not with the intention of proving or disproving anything, but intending to show the area in its bare unforested state as some of us have seen it. What the cross-sections show is the total dependence of the Terminal on the conifers; without them it would stand out in its conspicuous glory in the middle of the saucer (overheads and handouts)

It is obvious from the Brady Shipman report that the local community perspective was effectively ignored; the view of choice was that of a casual visitor or tourist not a local from Muing Ungain. But it is locals who are exposed to the entire physical, social and psychological effects. It is not possible to forget that the HAS recommended a 3 km. exclusion zone before changing its mind and that the terminal got planning permission on this basis. Suppose we didn’t appeal it?

The relevant visual effect for local people is quite different to that for tourists who are not a permanent feature on the landscape. For local people what I choose to call the Titanic Principle applies – call it the Iceberg Principle if you wish. Much or little that is seen on the surface, that is

above the trees, where there are trees, serves as a constant reminder that there is potential danger. The statistical chances are irrelevant on this level. The visual is the trigger reinforcing the fact that a permanent risk environment has been imposed where it had not existed previously. The poignance of the ballad of Redding Jail illustrates the triggered response where, for the inmates, a 'little patch of blue' is effectively the entire sky. Because how the lived environment is seen becomes totally changed – utterly – this is, I believe, a planning matter, as much as more commonly considered material concerns. The destruction of the utility of the lived environment for the local community is thus addressed.

Photograph from the north (shown on overhead) This is a photograph towards the site from Gortacragher, from the house of one of our group. I intended it to show side by side a forested and naked area. The significance of these is for the Board to decide. From this house, in high pressure, the smoke from the houses gathers in the centre of the saucer. We need to remind ourselves that this happens at night also. We equate this meteorological reality with the health issues discussed in previous submissions.

Trees

Personally I dislike conifers as they have been traditionally grown by Coillte and others. The dreary monotony of their greenness does not appeal to me. I know it need not be so. I now bring to the notice of the Board that authorisation of grant aid for trees in Ballinaboy has been refused, as not been likely to produce a commercial crop. This is the new reality that has replaced the socio-economic aspect of growing trees by the purely commercial terms of reference (letter in evidence).

On the same note, we could coyly ask why are there not more trees on the site. In 1995 or 1996 when planning permission for planting was first introduced Coillte put up the relevant notices towards the roadside (R314) seeking planning permission for planting on the Terminal site. They were refused because of objections from the Central Fisheries Board. I would ask the Inspector to verify this information as I did not have the time to document it. However, I can give the Inspector the name of the relevant member of the Central Fisheries Board who is also I believe a member of the Marine Licence Vetting Committee. No wonder Coillte wanted to get rid of the site which was by then useless to them. The significance of this is for the Inspector to decide. I feel however, obliged to question how the Central Fisheries Board, shortly after this objection being upheld, could find a industrial project acceptable on the same site. More than eyebrows must be raised or are we to believe that their objections are founded not on scientific data but on ad hoc decisions. I do not need to comment further.

I will read into the record the following piece from The Erris District Plan, report of a survey 1992, page 34.

There has been considerable largescale afforestation in Erris particularly on the blanket bogs. While Coillte (the state forestry agency) will not be acquiring any more bog land in Erris the rate of private afforestation appears to be increasing. Large scale afforestation has a severely detrimental effect on the natural environment in terms of visual impact, acidification of loughs, rivers and feeder streams as well as silting of salmon spawning redds.

The separation of trees required by The Health and Safety Authority concerns of safety are a major influence on the screening ability. The Inspector has shown that he is very aware of this most important matter. So I remind him just to comfort myself.

Erris District Plan Report 1992 (handout)

The oral hearing in February was told by the relevant planning authority that the draft plan for Erris was not incorporated in the County Development Plan 1992 because other matters considered more important were prioritised. The plan, if such it was, therefore has no legal status unless the principle of intentionality is appealed to, as has been done by the Department of the Marine earlier this year to overcome the unavailability of a Minister's signature. I accept without reservation that in this planning matter it is a decision the Inspectors must make. I introduce this extract from the plan as a question rather than an answer to the constant repetition by the first party that there are no designated areas either within the site or coming under the influence of the site. It is a planning and a legal matter and not for me to decide. It is evident, however, that it was the intention of Mayo County Council in 1992 to recognise the value and potential of the area and I am sure today's planners in Mayo County Council would agree. The map of scenic amenities shows the scenic routes as they were then recognised by Mayo County Council and also the viewing points that they considered to be of significance. We also note that these viewing points are looking down directly on the site and no conifers can provide screening. In this instance the "king is in his altogether". I will leave the designation matter where it lies except to point out sites of scientific interest as specified in the same report – Sruth Mhada Conn, Garter Hill, most of the cliffs, Ceathrú Mór, Sliabh Fiach, Muing na Bó, Barr Altaí, Glenamoy, Sraith a' tSeagail etc. As a matter of interest the Muing na Bó site of scientific interest throws up a strange phenomenon that again illustrates the difficulty of photography that is not based on a simple light bending lens. The road behind Guala doesn't exist nor does a pathway. It does not appear on the surveyed maps but does on the modern computer generated ones (shown on map). One can only speculate why but it is not relevant.

I would like to comment shortly on specific issues. The gas pipe corridor through the trees was presented by the forestry expert as running north east – south west and thus facilitating the prevailing wind. I have little patience with gobbledygook (north west shown on map and handout windrows). I question that 8 kms. is sufficient to accommodate working machinery, stored spoil, working area, pipes etc. How this corridor will reduce the visual protection is a matter for the judgement of the Inspectors. The proposed right-angled turn of the Bord Gais pipe within the Terminal site is, for me, a legoland concept. I want to be convinced.

The screening R comes down to two rows of poles. The photographer says the rest is irrelevant. I would suspect that R is irrelevant as a screening factor.

In the case of stand A I am totally at a loss to understand the formula or the process used to determine the height. The use of averages is, for me, difficult to justify.

The regulations governing the harvesting age and size of trees will come into force once they are in private ownership – or will they?

The slow rate of growth of these trees in general and the differential growth rates within the screening environment need to be questioned as to health, growing conditions and viability.

As Mr. Philips saw a relevance in Corick may I point out that the effort, substantially funded, to establish a tourist project based on guided railway tours of the bog failed after two years, in spite of the national advertising etc. by the ESB or Bord na Mona.

The Lighting

The lighting is a safety issue as well as one of visual influence. Surely the electronic fence must be illuminated and not necessarily to provide traffic lights for the badgers, the otters and various birds including migrating species (cearca fraoigh). Surely the stacks must carry aviation lighting ; the

Aviation Authority has objected, I believe, to windmills in Barr Uscai (shown on map). Surely this Terminal would be equally a danger and not in the Twin Tower sense.

Where peat has been cut by the sausage machine, as we call it, water gathers in the weakened surface layers. When the sun is low these areas show as reflective surfaces, as I can personally attest. I have no doubt but that the peat depositories would equally be a reflective surface.

Cross – Sections

I had some difficulties with the cross-sections in Appendix C1. I had difficulty with the vertical scale and so not to waste time I compared the height of the trees most immediately used for screening in each cross-section with the Terminal height. There were some discrepancies both ways but I would ask the Inspector to satisfy himself that cross-sections 107, 110 and 115 in particular are not misleading in any material way. In section 1.22 comparison with different trees gives a different reading but not, to my mind, significant as the issue is the line of sight.

This is my submission, dealing with the potential visual effect of the Terminal on the area and from the area. This area to mean the view from and to all points on the saucer.

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