

## De Buitléar, Éamon

by Frank Cullen

De Buitléar, Éamon (1930–2013), filmmaker, environmentalist, author and musician, was born on 22 January 1930 in Renmore Barracks, Co. Galway, one of seven children of Colonel Éamon de Buitléar (1902–81), an army officer of Clanbrassil Street, Dublin, and his wife Nóra (née O'Brien), originally of Passage East, Co. Waterford. Both parents were Irish speakers. His father worked for a short time as a reporter with the *Freeman's Journal*, and taught Irish at various Gaelic League branches in Dublin before joining the National Army as a second lieutenant in 1922. Stationed in Galway (1929–32) as commanding officer of the Irish-speaking first battalion, he returned to Dublin in 1932 to undertake intelligence work, and served as aide-de-camp (1938–41) to President Douglas Hyde (qv). A gifted linguist and code-breaker, he spoke Irish, French and German. His career in military intelligence, which included interrogating German officers captured in Ireland during the second world war, continued until his retirement in 1963. Shortly after his return to Dublin he bought Hillsbrook, a small single-storey house in the Dargle Valley near Bray, Co. Wicklow. Situated next to a salmon pool and weir on the Dargle River, the idyllic setting of Hillsbrook provided ample opportunity for exploration for the young Éamon (or Éamon Óg, as he was known in the family), and from a very young age he began fishing on the river next to his home.

His mother and father had met in the Gaelic League and had decided to rear an Irish-speaking family. Aged five Éamon Óg began attending a small private school in Bray run by Miss Brayden, and afterwards went to the Blackrock preparatory school, Willow Park, before attending the senior college. He played rugby at Blackrock, but his real interests lay elsewhere. A book about wild birds received from his mother on his thirteenth birthday left a deep impression on him, and he was most happy when tending to his various pets at home and riding his bicycle with his pet jackdaw, Bill, on the handlebars. After leaving school, Éamon's first job was at Garnett & Keegan's, a fishing tackle shop in Parliament Street, Dublin. As a customer he had frequented the shop regularly and, owing to his expertise in making flies, was eventually offered a job there. He also worked briefly in Hely's, another of Dublin's famous fishing tackle shops, before starting his own shop selling tackle in Parnell Street. Out of necessity this eventually became a pet shop, specialising in singing birds. Around this time (the mid 1950s) he met Laillí, his future wife, who worked in the Royal Hibernian Hotel in Dawson Street and was a daughter of the artist, Charles Lamb (qv). In October 1957 they married in Oughterard, Co. Galway.

De Buitléar also had a great love for Irish traditional music and was an accomplished player of both the mouth organ and the button accordion. He was involved in the establishment of Irish traditional band, Ceoltóirí Cualann, in 1960, led by Seán Ó Riada (qv), who he admired greatly; the two developed a lasting friendship. The

band was active until 1969 and members included Seán Potts and Paddy Moloney who went on to found the Chieftains. It was de Buitléar's love of music that provided the gateway for his entry into the world of broadcasting. In his days behind the counter of Hely's, one of his regular customers was Fachtna Ó hAnnracháin (qv), director of music at Radio Éireann, who was aware of de Buitléar's interest in traditional music. Upon Ó hAnnracháin's invitation, de Buitléar produced a script for a series on traditional Irish musicians called *Ridirí na cheoil* which was first aired in January 1962. He also provided the voice of the leprechaun, Luidin Mac Lu, in the Irish-language comic strip *Daithi Lacha* (first broadcast in December 1962), working with Paddy Moloney who was responsible for the musical content.

De Buitléar displayed his keen interest in nature in a few brief broadcasts for Radio Éireann. In 1963 he teamed up with another former customer of his fishing shop, the Dutch wildlife illustrator, Gerrit van Gelderen (qv), to work on *Amuigh faoin spéir*, a series of Telefís Éireann programmes on nature and wildlife in Ireland. Broadcast in both Irish and English, it was filmed and produced by de Buitléar, and was the first of its type shown in Ireland, helping to awaken a nationwide awareness of the importance of conservation in protecting Ireland's wildlife. The programme became one of the new channel's most successful ventures and brought de Buitléar's name to the attention of the wider Irish public. Early episodes were filmed in studio, but as de Buitléar and van Gelderen became more skilled with the camera, they began filming on location. As the programme gained in popularity, people cheered at the sight of the *Amuigh faoin spéir* bus as it arrived in the towns and villages of rural Ireland.

Following the success of *Amuigh faoin spéir*, de Buitléar, assisted by van Gelderen, formed his own independent television company, Éamon de Buitléar Ltd. The two continued to work on numerous programmes related to nature and wildlife in both Ireland and the UK. These include *The natural world* and *The living isles* (BBC); *Nature watch* and *Wild islands* (RTÉ and STV); and *Exploring the landscape*, *Ireland's wild countryside* and *A life in the wild* (RTÉ). De Buitléar took to writing in the 1970s and over the next four decades produced a number of works including *Out and about, books 1 and 2* (1974–5), *Detective in the wild* (1982), *Wild Ireland* (1984), *Irish rivers* (1985), and *Ireland's wild countryside* (1995). His final book, *A life in the wild* (2004), was an autobiography which he wrote aged seventy-four.

In 1987 Taoiseach Charles Haughey (qv) nominated de Buitléar to the seanad, in an effort to bring cultural talents such as his into the wider political sphere. De Buitléar had just won a Jacob's Television Award the previous year for his programme, *Cois farraige leis an madra uisce*. As an independent senator, de Buitléar voiced criticism on issues such as the reintroduction of otter hunting and spoke mainly on matters of conservation. Ultimately though he found it disenchanting as too often politics got in the way of achieving his ambitions. His seanad term ended in 1989.

In 1991 de Buitléar was awarded an honorary science degree from the NUI and a Lifetime Environmental Achievement from UCD the following year. He remained outspoken in his criticism of how the government was managing environmental issues and in 1997 called for the revision of the 1976 wildlife act and for more co-operation in the areas of agriculture, forestry and fisheries. Particularly critical of the profit-driven policies of Coillte, the national forestry board, he maintained it should grow more native deciduous trees and generally pay more attention to environmental concerns. He was a passionate advocate for conservation, arguing that 'We aren't realising what we stand to lose ... our language, our culture, our countryside – it's all intertwined. It's us, it's what we are. If we don't look after it, who will?' (*Ir. Times*, 22 May 1997). In 2005 he was appointed to the Central Fisheries Board – his last public appointment. After a long battle with cancer, de Buitléar died on 27 January 2013 at his home in Delgany, Co. Wicklow, aged eighty-three, survived by his wife Lailí and five children, Aoife, Éanna, Róisín, Cian and Doireann. He was buried at Kilquade New Cemetery, Co. Wicklow.

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*Ballina Herald*, 20 Jan., 1962; Fergus O'Gorman (ed.), *The Irish wildlife book* (1979); Gerrit van Gelderen, *To the waters and the wild: adventures of a wildlife film maker* (1985); *Times* (London), 20 Sept. 1998; *Ir. Times*, 22 May 1997; 28, 29, 31 Jan. 2013; Éamon de Buitléar, *A life in the wild* (2004); *Ir. Independent*, 2 Feb. 2013; *Sunday Independent*, 3 Feb. 2013; *Independent* (London), 26 Apr. 2013