

Emerald Green

Emerald Green:
An Ecocritical Study of Irish Literature

By

Tim Wenzell

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P U B L I S H I N G

Emerald Green: An Ecocritical Study of Irish Literature, by Tim Wenzell

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For my Mother, Teresa Mae Cullinan Wenzell

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter One.....	7
Forest in Verse: Early Irish Nature Writing	
Early Birds in Irish poetry.....	14
Future Forests	19
Chapter Two	25
The Deforested Landscape: Nature as Periphery	
To Hell in Connaught: Maria Edgeworths's <i>Tour in Connemara</i>	30
Famine and the Literature of Ruined Landscape	38
Coping in a barren Burren: Lasting humanity in <i>Hurrish</i>	44
Chapter Three.....	49
Super-Nature: The Literary Revival and the Mysterious Landscape	
Reclaiming the Lost Land of Language.....	51
Yeats and the Celtic Twilight: Between the Worlds	56
Nature as the Soul of Ireland	62
Returning to a Pagan Past in Moore's <i>The Lake</i>	69
AE and the Religion of Nature.....	74
Chapter Four	79
Oileánachas: Literature and Landscape on Ireland's Islands	
Geography and Community on Achill	80
Nature and Storytelling on the Aran Islands.....	84
Out of the Sea: Exile in Nature on Skellig Michael	93
Man, Animal, and Myth on the Great Blasket	99
Chapter Five	109
Poets of the North, Nature of the West:	
Kavanagh, MacNeice, Heaney, and Longley	
Patrick Kavanagh.....	110
Louis MacNeice.....	116
Seamus Heaney.....	120
Michael Longley	126

Chapter Six	135
Architects of the Unbeautiful: Nature as Necessary Force in a Changing Ireland	
To Heaven in Connaught: Naturalists in Ireland's Wild West.....	141
Future Nature	151
Appendix	163
Works Cited.....	167

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INTRODUCTION

The soaring popularity of all things Irish, evidenced by the hundreds of books published since the 1990's, clearly indicates an interest in a country that, historically, has endured thousands of years of conquests. Much pride has been taken in the last decade in Ireland's rise from one of the poorest countries in Europe to one of its richest. Ireland's history of brutal conquests, from the Danish plundering of villages to Cromwell's atrocities on the Irish people to the long history of British imperialism, have been well documented as both artifact and analysis, and this dark period of Ireland's history, at the dawn of the 21st century, appears to be over. However, a new menace--the underbelly of this Celtic tiger-- has moved from the threat of British imperialism to the threat of world capitalism and globalization, rising across the Irish landscape in the form of urban sprawl. This new topography of pavement is threatening to undermine the rich natural history of Ireland and the rich legacy of nature literature from the beginning of Irish civilization. As Mark Lynas states in "The Concrete Isle," an article that appeared in *The Guardian* (London) at the end of 2004, "This land has been mauled by the Celtic Tiger, chewed up by double-digit economic growth—and what's left is barely recognizable."

Statistically, Ireland has been ranked near the bottom in Europe on the environment, and urban sprawl is growing faster in Ireland than anywhere else in Europe. This is mainly because people can no longer afford to live in the cities of Dublin or Cork, which has led to a huge increase in long distance commuting and a more congested network of roads, and the amount of urbanized land is expected to double in twenty years. As a result, Ireland has been transformed into one of the most car-dependent countries in the world. Irish drivers average 24,000 kilometers a year, far above Great Britain's 16,000 km a year and even surpassing the United States at 19,000 km, already reaching levels the Irish government had predicted for 2010. Tony Lowes, a co-founder of Friends of the Irish Environment, is spearheading a plan to tighten planning laws as a means of slowing down urban sprawl and whose aim, he declares is "to save Ireland from the Irish." Further, he states, "We've turned our back on everything. The environment, the past...There are no victories. Everything is being demolished around us" (Lynas). Or as Frank McDonald, *Irish Times* environmental editor puts it, "What is going on across the board in this country is immensely destructive. The level of house-building spells

catastrophe for scenic landscapes and the countryside in general if it continues...it's quite clear to me that by 2020 this country will be completely destroyed" (Lynas).

What's clear is that the advent of progress has manifested itself in a landscape that is quickly diminishing Ireland's natural world. This is implicit in places like the famously scenic road between Galway and Connemara, where the natural world is being wiped out through villages merging together like strip malls; the building boom in Killarney has impacted the once picturesque view there, and as Lynas points out, "Where once only the cathedral spire stood above the famous lakes, Killarney's skyline is now dominated by cranes."

These cranes symbolize the progress that a surging economy and onrushing globalization have brought to Ireland, replete with possibilities of future financial success for both businesses and Irish citizens; but these cranes also symbolize the ugliness that is replacing the lush natural beauty of this land; sadly, these changes are meeting with little or no resistance.

"I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear the water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements gray,
I hear it in the deep heart's core." (Yeats 39).

Yeats, in the last stanza of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," bemoans the loss of the nature of his youth within the confines of a paved civilization; the narrator's arising and going is an attempt to take action in a manner that will bring that nature back, though like Wordsworth's daffodils, this arising and going is more a tapping into memory and imagination of what was than an actual return to building a cabin on a lake and departing the paved way of life. In other words, the paved life will always be there, but it doesn't need to be. But Yeats' narrator is also conceding that those around him in his London landscape (and his Dublin landscape for that matter) are too removed from this type of existence to desire it. Indeed, the narrator's "deep heart's core" is, for most in these urban communities, unreachable. The very idea of a pastoral dream has been replaced by a very real preference for the practical, and those who have lost access to this deep heart's core are too integrated into a paved existence to notice what has been lost. The diminishing of desire to hold onto the pastoral dream becomes a lost landscape of childhood memories, and today this lost landscape has spread beyond Ireland's cities to cover the countryside. Places that existed beyond the pale of Dublin's paved roads and neighborhoods are being lost to memories and childhoods forever. Indeed, the lake to which Yeats' narrator wishes to return has become a

geographical footnote, a tourist destination, and the one thing that has kept it preserved from urban development. Nature, too, has become a footnote, a lost dream that fades with each subsequent reduction of the natural world. Yeats, in his autobiography, ruminates on this poem: "I grew suddenly oppressed," he said, "at the great weight of stone and thought, 'There are miles and miles of stone and brick all round me...if John the Baptist or his like were to come again, and had his mind set upon it, he would make all these people go out into some wilderness leaving their buildings empty'" (103).

Just as nature is being ignored in Ireland's rise to the top of the world's economies, so too has nature been ignored in the literature of Ireland's writers. Despite the large body of writing in Irish studies, particularly in the last fifteen years, very little of this writing has focused on Irish authors and their observations of the natural world. As John Wilson Foster notes, "Irish nature writing has been sadly neglected, and there is none represented in the three volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*." It is important to note here that this anthology, edited by Seamus Deane, has widely been regarded as the most comprehensive anthology of Irish writing ever published. The anthology examines, with appropriate introductions, biographies, and bibliographies, the various traditions of Irish writing in a chronology dating from early Christianity to the present, a thorough compendium of writing. Since Foster's observations about the dearth of nature writing, *The Field Day*, first published in 1991, has been expanded to include two volumes on Irish women's writing, a move that Deane felt was necessary after criticism that the anthology did not effectively represent Irish women writers. Despite the inclusion of these added volumes, however, the anthology has yet to address the plethora of Irish writers whose subject matter resides in the natural world.

A recent collection of essays edited by Helen Thompson, *The Current Debate About the Irish Literary Canon: Essays Reassessing The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, examines the Irish canon through previously ignored perspectives, including post-Colonial theory, women's writing, the importance of memoirs (especially with Beckett), modern Irish drama, music, and even eating disorders. Yet even this collection, which primarily questions the selections in Deane's compendium, fails to include even a mention of this vast inattention to Irish nature writing.

Neil Murphy, in an essay that is a part of *The Current Debate*, makes clear that "all texts are political" and "texts constructed in postcolonial nations must somehow reflect the post-coloniality of the subject..." (87). In the case of the natural world, however, the subject matter exists outside of the realm of traditional political discourse involving human and social

history, and so “the post-coloniality of the subject,” as Murphy puts it, becomes an irrelevant paradox. Indeed, Murphy concedes this narrow view that has come to embody modern Irish literary studies: “One of the primary consequences of the overwhelming appropriation of Irish studies by political and postcolonial reading strategies has been the marginalizing of a coherent and dominant tradition in Irish writing....and the elevation of marginal issues to positions of centrality” (78). Though Murphy’s essay was pointed at the rather obvious absence in the study of the creative process in Irish women’s writing, he nonetheless makes his point clear. This “coherent and dominant tradition” can certainly trace the importance of nature writing through Irish literary history as well. As he contends, “Politically-motivated analyses are frequently characterized by two specific conditions; fragile theoretical assumptions and selective reading practices”(66). For Murphy, these theoretical assumptions would also presume that any theoretical framework would necessitate a political make-up. That is, the subject matter would need to have some political reference point in order to merit its reading and thus its inclusion in the Irish canon. The “selective reading practices” here would be not only a way to read a specific text, but whether certain texts even merit consideration to be read in the first place.

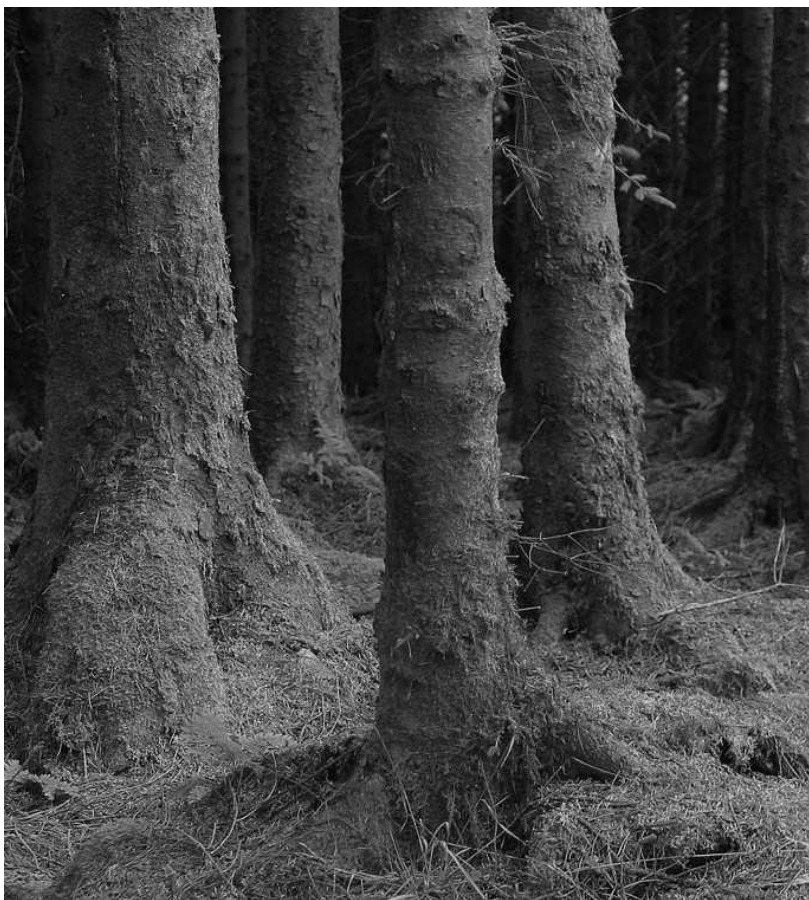
Certainly, any subject matter deemed *exo*-political, at least in the sense of literary analysis, would take into account subject matters outside of human interactions within human society. Rather, it would also consider *non*-human interactions and *non*-human societies. Nature writing falls squarely into this category. Even Irish women’s writing, a subject matter virtually ignored in Deane’s first three volumes of *The Field Day* anthology, falls within the parameters of politicized writing, marginalized though it had been (so too would post-colonial readings, a re-assessment of modern Irish drama and its importance to the canon, as well as the genre of memoirs and music that are defended in Thomson’s *The Current Debate*). Irish nature writing, in essence, is both *exo*-political and political in its own right. Analyzing nature writing, especially of early Irish nature poetry, would gather little literary value from a purely political perspective. Thus, most critics assume that nature writing as a body of literature in and of itself would not merit serious criticism, even within the expanding parameters of the canon. Ecocriticism, a quickly blossoming field of literary criticism, brings the natural world, particularly in a 21st century filled with environmental concerns, onto the Irish political stage.

With the rise of worldwide ecological concerns, it is important to note that the expanding parameters of the literary canon have, for some time, included ecocritical studies. In her introduction to the wonderful anthology

The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology, Cheryll Glotfelty makes this point: “In most literary theory ‘the world’ is synonymous with society—the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of ‘the world’ to include the entire ecosphere” (xix). The world includes much more than human society, and literary works have often addressed this place beyond human civilization, but literary criticism needs to see this connection more clearly. “As a critical stance, [ecocriticism] has one foot in literature and the other on land” (Glotfelty resides and acts out its political agenda.xiv). Through an ecocritical lens, nature takes center stage alongside humanity. In an ecocritical study of Irish literature, the political agendas that were so significant in forming Irish history and culture become subordinate to the larger influence of the natural world. Yet nature, from any other perspective, has too often been cast as a minor character in a drama whose fate is unfolding in Irish nature as a tragedy.

“The most important function of literature today,” Glen A. Love argues, “is to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world” (236). This re-direction should not suppose that man is dominant over nature, or that human society is more important than nature. As Sueellen Campbell makes clear, “the most important challenge to traditional hierarchies in ecology is the concept of biocentrism—the conviction that humans are neither better nor worse than other creatures but equal to everything else in the natural world” (128).

For the purposes of Irish literary studies, I would like to argue that the genre of nature writing should be examined within the context of Ireland’s literature and identity. This body of nature writing will be approached from the perspective of a balance of natural history and human consciousness, or a balance of exo-political (non-human systems) and political (human systems and their interaction with non-human systems). I will examine and analyze selections of Irish literature in chronological order as a means of understanding the works themselves and their connections to specific subjects within the natural world. Further, I would argue that the lack of nature writing represented in Deane’s *Field Day Anthology* and in Murphy’s rebuttal in *The Current Debate about The Irish Literary Canon* deflect the question of Irish identity both in and beyond literary circles. Thus, in order to establish the strong ground between Irish literature and Irish identity, the lines need to be re-drawn, as they are being re-drawn in the literature of many other countries from an ecocritical perspective.



CHAPTER ONE

FOREST IN VERSE: EARLY IRISH NATURE WRITING

“When you enter a grove peopled with ancient trees, higher than the ordinary and shutting out the sky with their thickly inter-twined branches, do not the stately shadows of the wood, the stillness of the place, and the awful gloom of this doomed cavern then strike you with the presence of a deity?”

—Seneca

Simon Schama, in *Landscape and Memory*, states that he wrote his critically acclaimed work “as a way of looking; of rediscovering what we already have, but which somehow eludes our recognition and our appreciation” and that “the cultural habits of humanity have always made room for the sacredness of nature” (18). From the perspective of Ireland and Irish writers, much room has certainly been made, particularly in early Irish writing, when the landscape was composed chiefly of forests.

One of the early names for Ireland was “The Isle of Woods.” In “Ireland’s Lost Glory,” published in *Birds and All Things* in 1900, the anonymous author makes the observation that many place names in Ireland were derived from the presence of forests, shrubs, groves, and species of trees, most notably the oak. The author’s concern stems from the loss of 45,000 acres of forest from 1841 to 1881, and that “every landlord cut down, scarcely anyone planted, so that at the present day there is hardly an eightieth part of Ireland’s surface under timber.” This commentary on loss of forests parallels modern nature writers lamenting the loss of land to urban sprawl, and that something important is being lost. As Eoin Neeson points out in “Woodland in History and Culture,” the forests remain only in surnames: MacCuill (son of hazel), MacCarthin (son of rowan), MacIbair (son of yew) and MacCuilin (son of holly), among others (135).

The loss of this forested existence really began in earnest with the rise of British imperialism and a quest for supremacy in Ireland, done chiefly to increase the amount of arable land (“Ireland’s Lost Glory”). In this context, “arable” is really the idea of maximizing land for profit, and of

course, this utilitarian approach to land as real estate has immediate relevance to globalization in present-day Ireland. As the author contends, “so anxious were the new landlords to destroy” and that, identifying all of the places these landlords did destroy, “if a wood were to spring up in every place bearing a name of this kind the country would become clothed with an almost uninterrupted succession of forests.” Despite some of the recent re-forestation of Ireland’s landscape, “Ireland’s Lost Landscape,” a text over one hundred years old, belies the loss of a country that retains only the memories of place names and the loss of an entire culture whose identity was achieved through this forested landscape.

Ireland, of course, is not unique to this environmental concern. From a world perspective, the loss of forests continues at an astonishing rate. Robert Pogue Harrison, writing in his preface to *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* in 1991, reflects the same motivations as Schama in *Landscape and Memory*: “What I hope to show is how many untold memories, ancient fears and dreams, popular traditions, and more recent myths and symbols are going up in the fires of deforestation.” Within the context of a deforested landscape and living in generations removed from the sight and memories of that landscape, it is sometimes difficult to assess what exactly has been lost. This is especially the case with Irish history, for this history begins with the loss of these forests and focuses instead on the politics that ensue as a result of this changed land. As Harrison contends, “Western civilization literally cleared its space in the midst of forests.” (ix). For Ireland, this cleared space became the divided and re-divided farmland that embodied a human landscape rather than a more natural one. Though Harrison does not reference Ireland in *Forests*, he nonetheless makes this relevant point: “The forest in mythology, religion, and literature appears at a place where the logic of distinction goes astray. Or where our subjective categories are confounded...” (x).

The early Irish poets, particularly the hermit poets, were working from such a canvas; the forest itself became a place, from a “deforested” perspective, from which literary analysis would in fact “go astray.” This early poetry had its roots in attitudes in a forested culture developed and nurtured within druidic traditions to which the natural world was so central. The subject matter of this poetry quite often focused on a particular element within the forest.

Early in Ireland’s history, forests covered nearly the entire island. To understand life in this topography, the relationship between the Celtic realm (including the forests of mainland Europe) and the trees requires a closer examination of the early colonizing of Ireland by Celtic tribes. Tacitus, a Roman historian, commented on druidic practices he had

witnessed firsthand within the realm of the forest. “The [forest] grove,” he wrote, “is the center of their whole religion. It is regarded as the cradle of the race and the dwelling place of the supreme god to whom all things are subject and obedient” (*The Sacred Grove*). For the Celtic peoples, the grove was the spiritual center of their existence. As Frazer notes in *The Golden Bough*, “For at the dawn of history Europe was covered with immense primaeval forests in which the scattered clearings must have appeared like islets in an ocean of green” (56). These islets served as vantage points from which to observe the forested landscape. Miranda Green references a passage by Lucan, from *Pharsalia III*, which supports this view: “The axe-man came on an ancient and sacred grove. Its interesting branches enclosed a cool central space into which the sun never shone but where an abundance of water sprouted from dark springs”(107). In this passage, the Celtic veneration of forests weaves the aesthetics of the landscape into a vantage point from which the worship of nature can begin, with abundant fresh water on which to survive. Green elaborates upon this in her citation of the *Dinnschenchas* (the “History of Places”), a pagan mythic text that traces the mythical geography of ancient Ireland. “Holy trees,” Green states, “were particularly associated with sacral kinship and the inauguration rites surrounding the election of a new king”(109).

The sheer size and longevity of these trees and their communal nature in the creation of thick forests were monuments of wisdom and stability for the ancient Celts. In fact, the worship in these groves attained a similar aesthetic experienced in Gothic cathedrals. The Gothic cathedral is a representation of the forest. As Harrison notes, the cathedral “visibly reproduces the ancient scenes of worship in its lofty interior, which rises vertically toward the sky and then curves into a vault from all sides, like so many tree crowns converging into a canopy overhead. Like breaks in the foliage, windows let in light from beyond the enclosure, reflecting an ancient correspondence between forests and the dwelling place of a god” (178). In the Gothic cathedral lie the remnants of a civilization that did not worship the Christian God, but instead fostered a spiritual connection to the natural world beneath a canopy of leaves.

This grove-worship focused not just on the particular location of breaks in the foliage, but on particular species of trees. This was especially the case for oak, yew, and ash trees. Ash trees, especially, were venerated by the Irish Celts; when the tribes began to arrive in Ireland about 800 B.C., they appear to have brought with them a new relationship with trees. When the ancient term *bille* was used, this was generally in reference to the veneration of the ash tree (Neeson 134). Certain tree species also

connected to specific human characteristics and emotions. The birch tree, for example, with its peeling bark and light features, became associated with love. This is evidenced by birch wreaths, which became a common love token (Neeson 134). The hazel tree was associated with wisdom, and it had a special connection to druids and seers. Finn, the hero of the Fenian cycle, received knowledge from contact with the flesh of the salmon of wisdom, and the salmon had gained its own powers of wisdom through consumption of the fruit of the nine sacred hazel trees growing beneath the sea beside a well (Green 109).

With the absence of written texts, of course, it is difficult to accurately analyze the value of the natural world to the early Celts. However, after the advent of Christianity, and with the production of written texts, this connection, or at least the legacy of this connection, becomes somewhat clearer. An early Celtic nature poet expresses this tree worship with the written word:

“I have a hut in the wood;
None knows it but my Lord,
An ash tree this side, a hazel beyond,
A great tree on the mound unfolds it...” (Jackson 5).

Trees have a significant presence in the poem, for they represent the two opposing yet conjoined forces of love/magic (the ash tree) and wisdom (the hazel tree). The line “none knows it but my Lord” indicates the need for seclusion from the world of men and civilized society, and the hut in the wood “unfolds” like a flower here in its perfect blend into the natural landscape, making it invisible, or unimportant, to other men.

From the early Christian perspective, the role of the hermit in his desire to retreat into the shrinking forests of Ireland was vital to an understanding of God. The Mesolithic people of Ireland, who were primarily fishers and gatherers, cut down trees for boats. Once the Neolithic farmers arrived 5,000 years ago, however, the cutting down of trees accelerated to make room for tillage and grazing (Neeson 134). So by the time the early Christians began to write their nature poetry as hermits, Ireland’s forests had already been significantly depleted. But the spiritual connection to these places subsisted and warranted a return by many of these Christian Celts. As John Feehan points out in “Threat and Conservation: Attitudes to Nature in Ireland,” a deep reverence for the forests was still maintained with the Christian Celts, where “they found separation from the world of men.” Here the Christian God co-existed with the ancient Celtic veneration of trees, a place of dense woods and groves where two religions merged into one spiritual encounter. “Living this life,” Feehan contends,

“[the early Celts] discovered God in his creation, the first revelation of his nature, and in harmony with it came closest, perhaps, to the union with God they sought” (578). Schama further elaborates on this desire to return alone to the forests’ depths, explaining that many early Christian monasteries were built in forests as a place to become unified with God through a spiritual encounter with nature. “Penitents fled from the temptations of the world,” Schama notes, “into the woodland depths. In solitude they would deliver themselves to mystical transports...” (227).

In *Duthracar a Maic De` bi`* (A Hermit’s Wish) the poem opens, “I wish, O Son of the living God,/Old eternal King,/a hidden hut in the wilderness/that it may be my dwelling.” (*Early Irish Verse*). Here the hermit wishes for something he perhaps already has; that is, a place embedded in the forest partaking in the elements around him, and hidden in this manner from the world of men. “A beautiful forest near by,/around it on every side,/for nourishment of many-voiced birds/as shelter to hide them” (*Early Irish Verse*). Here in the third stanza the poet articulates the nature of hiding; his nourishment is not derived from eating (the world of men and civilized society), but from the spiritual connection to the “many-voiced birds” that implies a hermit’s ability to distinguish between these sounds as ordinary civilized men could never do.

The spot in the forest where a hermit lived was often called by the Gaelic name *disert*, meaning an unfrequented or alienated place or hermitage. In fact, as P.W. Joyce points out in *A Social History of Ancient Ireland*, “So general was this custom [of hermits retreating to these places] that there are more than a score of places in Ireland still called, either wholly or partly, by this name Disert...and these represent only a small portion of the hermitages of those times” (349). Some of the place names that still exist include Disertmartin, Disert in Westmeath, Killadysert in Clare, and The Disert in Donegal. So the pattern of retreating alone into the forest was widespread, and many of these early Christian monks responded to their respective solitudes through the creation of poetry; the little evidence that remains is nonetheless a testament to the spiritual connection between these hermits and the natural world.

“How is it,” Harrison asks, “that forests can become dense with symbolism, understood as the reunification of that which ordinary perception obscures or differentiates?” His question is posed from the vantage point of one wholly removed from the forest experience, and he asks a question whose answer would require a total immersion into solitude in the forest. An early Irish hermit poet puts it thus: “The clear cuckoo sings to me,/lovely discourse;/in its grey cloak from the crest of the bushes;/truly—may the Lord protect me:—well do I write under the

forest wood.” Here, the hermit poet finds transcendence in his solitude, but a special connection to God and His creation can only made “under the forest wood.” For the poet, the cuckoo’s song only becomes “clear” in this state, and he is able to transmit his understanding of the bird through verse, for he is so engaged with his environment that the bird is singing specifically to him. Here, the “reunification” of which Harrison speaks becomes clear through an articulate communication between bird and man, and a clear inference that it could never be understood otherwise; for with the heightened perceptions of the hermit, an extraordinary perception is achieved through a departure from the world of men to a sanctuary “under the forest wood.”

Despite possible discrepancies that may be lost in translation to English in this early Irish verse, Ruth Lehman’s particular versions of the original Irish texts use words that emphasize a strong connection to the natural world. In *A Marba`in, a dithruhaig* (Guaire and Marban), for example, King Guaire and the hermit Marban are brothers who live in entirely different physical realms. The king governs an empire of men, and he is known for his generosity and his ability to allow his subjects to live in material comfort; in the poem, however, his brother Marban’s generosity to the wild creatures of the forest becomes an equal parallel to his brother the king:

“Mane with twists /Of the yew of gray trunk/(famous omen)/Beautiful the place./The great green oak/Besides that augury”

“An appletree, apples/(great the good fortune)/big fit for a hostel../a fine crop by fistfuls/ of the green branching hazel/with small nuts”

—*Early Irish Verse.*

In these verses, with the implied analysis of Lehman’s translation, Marban’s generosity becomes, like the hermit poet, an epiphany whose context cannot be comprehended by those outside the forest experience and the man-nature communal existence it presupposes: that “famous omen” and “great the good fortune” are locked into parenthetical parameters bears this out. The “famous omen” here references the inherent and mythical powers of the augury, understood through both early Celtic and Roman origins to mean a prognosticator of future events, as “one who understands the birds.” This knowledge outside of the company of men, then, takes on a vantage point of magical propensities, which infuses religious and god-like qualities into an individual displaced from the known world of man to the unknown void of nature. Like the hermit poet

who finds a special connection to the language of the cuckoo, Lehman's poet embraces the parenthesis as division from the rest of the linguistic world. Here, the "omen" is what one sees (the hermit) that no one else (man in community) possibly can. The beauty of the place, beside the "great green oak," is the divination point from which to access the language of the birds.

The ability to access nature in this very lingual sense is the ultimate challenge, then: how does the individual integrated into a society find a means to transcend language and humanity? The Irish hermit poet puts it, "The concealing tresses of a green-trunked /yew which upholds the sky;/Fair is the place; the green wall of an/ oak against the storm" (*Early Celtic Nature Poetry* 5). Lehman's poet recognizes the temptation of the outside world: the storm is out there, manifested with the lure of the material world and a landscape of civilization and progress. It is a place in disharmony with the natural world. In this verse, a wall is not just a wall: it is a natural wall of solid green oak, an impenetrable consciousness dividing man from non-man: in the "concealing tresses of the yew," the world of man has no chance, so the hermit becomes more than what he is.

As Simon Schama notes that "many of the shrewder [Christian] proselytizers grafted Christian theology onto pre-existing cults of nature." In Ireland, for example, Lisa Bitel has discovered that monastic cells and hermitages were established on the ancient woodland pagan altars called *bili*. The idea was to graft, rather than to uproot, so that in this way a melding occurs, rather than a colonizing. Pope Gregory, in fact, explicitly counseled Mellitus to establish churches on the site of pagan groves so that this melding could be more effectively (and symbolically) realized (216). This fusion is evident in ritual; as Frank James Mathew notes, "In after days [the diminishment of the Celts] Girardus Cambrensis related that when the Celts christened their sons they left the right arm unbaptized, so that it should be pagan" (190).

The early form of early Christianity founded by Saint Patrick relied on a strong connection to this early Celtic reverence for the natural world. As Oona Frawley notes in *Irish Pastoral*, "Irish literature was exposed to another form of pastoral through Christianity, which brought to Ireland its own image for the archetype of a perfect existence in nature in the story of Eden, and in the idea of God as the creator of the world" (8).

Consider St. Patrick's Breast Plate:

"I bind unto myself to-day
the virtues of the star-lit heaven
the glorious sun's light-giving ray,

the whiteness of the moon at even,
 the flashing of the lightning free
 the whirling winds, tempestuous shocks,
 the stable earth, the deep salt sea,
 around the old eternal rocks" (Roche 67).

The natural imagery of St. Patrick's poetry elicits his firm connection to the goodness of God's creation, and the poetry promises permanence with a checklist of the eternal. Here, Patrick's is not a theology of sin but a theology rooted passionately in the natural world: "The conversion of Ireland is the first example of the Christian faith thriving in a culture that celebrates rather than abnegates the natural, a culture in which there is a sense of the entire world as holy. In Celtic theology the whole created order is Book of God—filled with healing mystery, and fraught with divine messages" (All Saint's Parish).

Early Birds in Irish poetry

For the early Irish poets, bird songs became the carriers of these divine messages, for as John Feehan notes, "Birdsong in particular was the voice of nature, and Irish nature poetry is full of passages not only highly lyrical, but fresh in detail of observation, and vivid with the poets ability to use words whose very sound mirrors reality" (578).

Claude Levi Strauss, in *The Savage Mind*, makes an even more compelling case for the early Irish hermit poets and their relationship to birds. Strauss writes that birds have effectively formed communities separate from man, and drawing from Aristophanes' Greek comedic drama *The Birds*, this appears to an outsider as a separate and exclusive society, where, as Strauss puts it, "everything objective conspires to make us think of the bird world as a metaphorical society" (204).

In "Song of Oisín" (transl. O'Tuama and Kinsella, 1981), the poet speaks of Fionn and Fianna, the army of the high kings of Ireland who, in their deeply rooted reverence to the natural world, come to revere the society of birds over men: "When Fionn and the Fianna lived/they loved the hills, not hermit-cells,/ Blackbird speech is what they loved/not the sound, unlovely, of your bells" (Feehan 580). In legend, Fionn and the Fianna protected the king from invasion and from anyone who might want to kill him and take the throne. Fionn Mac Cumhaill, through his heroic exploits as leader of the Fianna, has taken his place in legend as Fianna's greatest leader, and in the text of the poem such a heroic figure of men prefers blackbird speech over human speech. It is as if this metaphorical society of birds endows Fionn and his army with some special power by

drawing secret strength from this mysterious natural world. Their loving of the hills and their dismissal of hermit cells becomes a means through which they can pass between the worlds of nature and man, a manner by which they can access and strengthen the society of men through their relationship with nature. What is more important, however, is their innate rejection of the call of civilization, “the bells” that call them home. The “blackbird speech” becomes their preference, their “loveliness.” Though they deny the solitude of the hermit, they have access to the divine inspiration of the hermit by listening to the speech of the blackbird and not simply birdsongs, which would imply an ignorant, civilized man’s observation of the more general sounds of all birds.

Oisín, a poet and warrior of the Fianna and the son of Fionn, narrates much of the Fenian Cycle of Irish mythology. Oisín returns to earth after three centuries without ageing and meets St. Patrick. He is listening to St. Patrick’s words about Christianity when the singing of a blackbird “ignites in his mind memories of the surviving primitive world in which Fionn and Fianna lived, who ‘loved the mountain better than the monastery’” (Sweeney 125). The common connection of the blackbird’s speech here is no accident, for it implies that the sacred language of the birds, and the ability to understand this language, still resonates with meaning for Oisín, even after centuries away from the forest and Ireland’s natural world.

Fionn and the Fianna draw strength from the birds by translating this speech into something they can understand and into something that no one else can. As P.W. Joyce notes, “divination by the voices of birds was very generally practiced, especially from the croaking of the raven and the chirping of the wren and the very syllables they utter...the wren in particular was considered so great a prophet...that one of its Irish names, *drean*, is derived from ‘*druí-en*’ meaning the ‘druid of birds.’ ” (231). This “general practice” has exclusivity in the poem, and the divination is the inspiration through which the poem itself is created.

Though translation from bird speech to human speech is a special power for Fionn and the Fianna, the translation of the original Irish text to an English text becomes problematic. Consider this English version of “The Blackbird by Belfast Loch,” translated by Maire MacNeill: “The small bird/lets a trill/from bright tip/of yellow bill./ The shrill chord/by Loch Lee/of blackbird/from yellow tree” (*Irish Literature* 19). Then the original Gaelic text: “Int én bec/ro léic feit/do rind guip/glanbuidi;/fo-cheird faíd/os Loch Laíg/lon do chraib/charnbuidi” Here the linguistic differences become diluted by retaining meaning (the point of accurate translation) and establishing meter, literary conventions that were not integral in the creation of the original Irish text. The sound of the poem,

though simplistic in its subject matter, is thrown off, thereby losing its essence and the lyrical movement as it applies to the blackbird; thus, the poem loses its entire point. As Feehan points out, “much of this [early Irish] poetry may seem ponderous in literal translation to English but in the original it scintillates with sympathy and love for the life of the wild” (578).

Translation, however, can offer a number of interpretations of an original text, and these interpretations, if written in an eloquent manner reflecting the original intentions of these mostly unknown authors, can reflect the essence of the original Irish text. One of the most interesting of these is *Sweeney Astray*, an ancient text translated in 1983 by Seamus Heaney. His title, *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish*, bears out a clear concession that his own translation is one translation among many. The original text, *Buile Suibhne*, as Heaney notes in his introduction, is a development of an oral tradition that dates back to 637 A.D. and the Battle of Moira, a battle during which Sweeney (a supposedly real king) went mad and was transformed, in fulfillment of St. Ronan’s curse, into a bird. Heaney contends that, despite the historical reference of this character, “What we have, then, is a literary creation” and “the literary imagination which fastened upon [Sweeney] as an image was clearly in the grip of a tension between the newly dominant Christian ethos and the older, recalcitrant Celtic temperament” (Introduction). Further, Heaney contends, the point of this original text, as he sees and translates it, is “to find poetry as piercingly exposed to the beauties and severities of the natural world.” In *Sweeney Astray*, a narrative poem represented in the Heaney translation/tradition is an eighty-two page epic: a Christian cleric named Ronan puts a curse on Sweeney on the battlefield because Sweeney has insulted him and humiliated him in front of his army. As a result, Sweeney is transformed by Ronan’s curse into a bird, a mad outcast consigned to the trees to live on the simplicities of water and watercress. From his birds-eye view, however, Sweeney is able to gaze down, and though despondent over his condition, he is “seeing the forest for the trees.” From this objective state, Sweeney is able to articulate this heightened state by creating poetry, balancing the sadness of his winged existence and the absence of his humanity with a celebration and reverence for the natural world of Ireland. Within the context of the narrative, Sweeney’s feelings conflict—a pull for a return to society from which he was cast out on one hand and a clear, unobstructed observation of the beauty and essence around him on the other. The “moral” of this lyrical narrative of man transformed to bird, or, more specifically, from human society to bird society, allows Sweeney’s creativity to become

“unleashed” as a poet, something he never could have done mired on battlefields in the world of men.

Sweeney is not eager to see this at first. Cast out for nearly a year into the wilderness, Sweeney laments on his condition: “The tide has come and gone/and spewed me up in Glen Bolcain,/disabled now, outcast/for the way I sold my Christ,/(stanza break) fallen almost through death’s door,/drained out, spiked and torn,/under a hard-twiggged bush,/the brown, jaggy hawthorn” (16). In these lines, Sweeney resents his place outside of humanity and nature is perceived as a formidable enemy that works only to block his desires. Nature is enemy, and it drives his madness: “I wish I lived safe/and sound in Rasharkin/and not here, heartbroken,/in my bare pelt,/at bay in the snow” (18). Here, the harsh natural elements conspire to haunt Sweeney; the tide has washed him ashore broken and battered, worn him down and reduced him to nothing in “hard-twiggged bush” filled with “jaggy hawthorn” and fighting for survival in a “bare pelt” in the snow, where he curses that he is cursed. Sweeney is still so removed from the natural world that his becoming a bird produces madness and an unwillingness to return to simplicity.

Is the transformation to bird really a curse? Has Sweeney really gone mad? For that matter, is he really “astray”? Note that “astray” in this context is defined from the perspective of a civilized society disconnected from the natural world. Sweeney is off the beaten path, off the right road; he is astray from civilization and cast into the wilderness by virtue of a curse to a place of sheer madness among the treetops. For Ronan, this is a horror and a just curse upon his enemy. As the historian Georges Duby notes, during the Medieval era in Europe (when the oral tradition of this narrative was put into writing), people were born in a village and were most likely to spend the rest of their lives there because the world outside the village was not safe. “Solitary wandering,” Duby states, “was a symptom of insanity. No one would run such a risk who was not deviant or mad” (McKibben 95). Ironically, this solitary wandering of the treetops is exactly where Sweeney recovers his sanity. Here, like the Celtic hermits in their forest huts, he communes with the birds, and he is no longer “heartbroken” in a “hard-twiggged bush” when he states, “I prefer the elusive/rhapsody of blackbirds/to the garrulous blather/of men and women”. Compare this to the previously referenced narrative of Fionn and Fianna: “When Fionn and the Fianna lived/they loved the hills, not hermit-cells,/ Blackbird speech is what they loved/not the sound, unlovely, of your bells” (Feehan 580). For Sweeney, the “unlovely” sound of bells has been replaced by “garrulous blather” and his preference for a rhapsody that is elusive to those below the treetops. He has achieved the natural

epiphany of the hermit by living in the trees, and now the dividend has paid off. After Sweeney has departed Ailsa Craig, he states: "I need woods/For consolation/Some grove in Meath—/Or the space of Ossory.... Or Ulster in harvest./Strangford shimmering./Or a summer visit/To green Tyrone" (55). Sweeney's affinity for places beautiful and simple is clear, and his madness is interpreted from the perspective of an ignorant human society. But this madness (if it is to be accurately called such) is infectious, as even his wife Eorann, upon her visit with Sweeney as bird, notices the beauty and simplicity of a life removed from civilization: "I tell you, Sweeney, if I were given/the pick of all in earth and Ireland/I'd rather go with you, live sinless/and sup on water and watercress" (27).

In actuality, this manner of living becomes a removal from not just society, but of the human body as well. Sweeney, though transformed into a bird, is reduced to the human component of his own soul. The bird becomes a vehicle, like the human body is a vehicle, except that this particular vehicle can fly and exist outside of human constructs. This ideal of bird as carrier of the soul is nothing new. The "external soul" is a common international tale-motif from disparate world geographies. O' Ruadhain, in fact, points out in "Birds in Irish Folklore," that in these motifs "one finds a bird or bird's egg is often the medium of this external soul" (674).

So the medium is the message and, in *Sweeney Astray*, the epic narrative concludes when Sweeney is killed by his swineherd Mongan. In his death swoon, and in the closing stanzas of the poem, he remembers his life as both man and bird: "You are welcome to your salt meet/and fresh meat in feasting houses;/I will live content elsewhere/on tufts of green watercress" (82). The "elsewhere" is the resting place of his eternal soul and the place which houses the pastoral dream. "Of all the innocent lairs I made/the length and breadth of Ireland/I remember bedding down/above the wood in Glen Bolcain," (83) he laments as death nears. And this state, between life and death, between conscious and unconscious, resides the place to which Sweeney wishes to return. His final nest here forms the content resting place of his soul. More impressive here is the response by Moling, a longtime friend and cleric whom Sweeney visits and who is present at the time of his death: "Because Sweeney loved Glen Bolcain/I learned to love it, too. He'll miss/the fresh streams tumbling down, the green beds of watercress" (84). Implicit in these lines is what he will not miss: the civilized society from which he had been banished. "I ask a blessing, by Sweeney's grave./His memory flutters in my breast./His soul roosts in the tree of love./His body sinks in its clay nest" (85). Sweeney's potential blessing becomes a request to have a deep affection for nature to be *in*

him. This is not a request for the memory of Sweeney; rather, what Moling asks for is that unconscious union to the natural world that Sweeney possessed in his life as a bird. He wants to be “cursed” just like Sweeney.

This unconscious union is the core of the pastoral dream, and Moling wishes to inherit it here through Sweeney’s departure. Though Moling will never know what it is like to become a bird or to live exclusively in nature, he becomes much like St. Patrick and the early Christian Celts, whose reverence and respect for the natural world became an important path for them to seek God. The resting place of Sweeney’s body and soul in the nest and tree becomes the apex of a place in the trees, in the forest. Outside of human existence and wholly natural in its scope, it warrants a return.

The early Christian hermits who retreated to the forests chose to build their cells on ground that was once revered in pagan lore, and for good reason. Saint Patrick’s conversion of Ireland to Christianity arrived with a God firmly ground in the earth in a place where an unfettered communication with the birds begins. For later Irish writers, a retreat to the past is paramount to understanding the lives and subject matter of these hermits. Seamus Heaney’s translation is indeed a testament to this.

Future Forests

“Once every people in the world believed that trees were divine, and could take a human or grotesque shape, and dance among the shadows; and that deer, and ravens and foxes, and wolves and bears, and clouds and pools, almost all things under the sun and moon, and the sun and the moon, were not less divine and changeable”

—Yeats, from *Early Essays* (128).

It is clear through these literary texts that man and nature had formed a union that was not tied to history, politics, or human society; rather, man wrote from the perspective that everything was connected to everything else, and every tree and bird carried a special significance. As Lynn White Jr. notes, “In antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own *genus loci*, its guardian spirit” (10). Once the cutting of the forests began in Ireland, these guardian spirits were vanquished, along with any connection they had to man and the pagan ideals they carried with them. “By destroying pagan animism,” White states, “Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects” (10). These natural objects, for Ireland, meant the trees, the birds who lived in those trees, the rocks, the earth itself.

The last of Ireland's great forests were cut down at the end of what is historically called the Gaelic period (900 to 1200 A.D.) at a time when the pre-Christian manner of life still held sway. That the forests and this way of life ended simultaneously is no coincidence. As Feehan puts it, "war was waged against the last woods." Society moved in and took away the last great outposts, primarily to remove bastions for outlaws, to obtain profits from the sale of timber, but mostly, as Nin emphasizes, "for short-term economic gain in the form of fuel for the ironworks and other industrial enterprises of entrepreneurs" (580). Many of these interests came as a prelude to Cromwell's method of providing grantees cash in the wake of his colonial campaign (580). Sadly, as Neeson observes, "In spite of the vastness of the woodlands....man did not conceive ideas of possession and title until he had cut most of them down and converted the land to other uses. And it was this question of possession and title that was to become of fundamental importance in Ireland and that is vital to any appreciation of the conflict between native and imported cultures over many centuries." (136).

Christianity moved with the times, and land acquisition became a more important staple to the church than a reverence for nature. As a result, the connection between the early Irish hermits and the forests disappeared, and for hundreds of years thereafter, the forests themselves disappeared.

"To a Christian a tree can be no more than physical fact," Lynn White Jr. writes. "The whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the West. For nearly two millennia Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves, which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature" (12). No longer is God in union with nature: the untamed wilderness is alien to the church and a non-pagan Christian way of life, its spirit divided from society by church and politics. Nature, in its inferiority, would become subservient to man, which Christopher Manes believes has become, in the last five hundred years, a hierarchy with man at the top, which has "created a fictionalized, or more accurately put, fraudulent version of the species *Homo Sapiens*" (21). Moreover, Manes contends, "this 'Man' has become the sole subject, speaker, and rational sovereign of the natural order in the story told by humanism since the Renaissance" (21).

Although most of these stories told from the perspective of man removed from nature, remnants of this ancient union still remain in Ireland. One of the last places to this connection between the ancient Irish and the forests resides in a local ritual at Doon Well, located in County Donegal north of Letterkenny. This sacred well is covered by a small, low shelter and protected by small doors. Two thorn trees rise from the well,