

## Trees, Woods and Literature - 35

The bushy leafy oak tree  
is highest in the wood,  
the forking shoots of hazel  
hide sweet hazel-nuts.

The alder is my darling,  
all thornless in the gap,  
some milk of human kindness  
coursing in its sap.

The blackthorn is a jaggy creel  
stippled with dark sloes;  
green watercress in thatch on wells  
where the drinking blackbird goes.

Sweetest of the leafy stalks,  
the vetches strew the pathway;  
the oyster-grass is my delight  
and the wild strawberry.

Low set-clumps of apple trees  
drum down fruit when shaken;  
scarlet berries clot like blood  
on mountain rowan.

Briars curl in sideways,  
arch a stickle back,  
draw blood and curl up innocent  
to sneak the next attack.

The yew tree in each churchyard  
wraps night in its dark hood.  
Ivy is a shadowy  
genius of the wood.

Holly rears its windbreak,  
a door in winter's face;  
life-blood on a spear-shaft  
darkens the grain of ash.

Birch tree, smooth and blessed,  
delicious to the breeze,

high twigs plait and crown it  
the queen of trees.

The aspen pales  
and whispers, hesitates:  
a thousand frightened scuts  
race in its leaves.

But what disturbs me most  
in the leafy wood  
is the to and fro and to and fro  
of an oak rod.

These lines are taken from *Sweeney Astray* by Seamus Heaney, which is based on *Buile Suibhne* (The Madness of Sweeney), a bilingual edition by James George O’Keeffe, first published in 1913. Extracts of O’Keeffe’s translation were featured in ‘Trees, woods and literature’ in *Irish Forestry* (1969). The basis for O’Keeffe’s version is a seventeenth century manuscript, composed between 1200 and 1500, but Heaney believes “the thing was already taking shape in the ninth century” (Heaney, 1983).

The Sweeney of the poem was the Ulster King of Dal Araidhe (anglicised to Dal-Arie by Heaney) and son of Colman Cuar. He appears in various guises in the work of writers as diverse as Brian O’Nolan (Flann O’Brien), Tom McIntyre, Austin Clarke, John Montague, T.S. Eliot and Joseph Heller. However, Heaney who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, is the first poet since O’Keeffe to embark on a major translation.

His interest in Sweeney, which began when he read extracts from Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson’s *A Celtic Miscellany*, prompted him to explore early Irish texts leading to the O’Keeffe’s translation (O’Driscoll, 2008): “My encounter first time round was more with the English on the right-hand page of O’Keeffe’s edition than with the original on the left.”

Heaney (1983) says his “fundamental relation with Sweeney ... is topographical”. Sweeney’s kingdom was located around south Co. Antrim and north Co. Down. For 30 years, Heaney “lived on the verges of that territory, in sight of some of Sweeney’s places and in earshot of others – Slemish, Rasharkin, Benevenagh, Dunseverick, the Bann, the Roe, the Mournes” (*ibid*).

He began the work when he set up home with his family in Glanmore near Ashford, Co. Wicklow in 1972. However, other literary commitments intervened and he parked the translation – “sixty pages in the drawer” (O’Driscoll, 2008).

Living close to the Devil’s Glen Wood may have influenced his decision to persevere with the translation. He describes his walks in the Devil’s Glen as “like fossil fuel, a kind of reserve tank that the spirit can switch over to when its resources are low” (Magner, 2004). During his break from Sweeney, the wood, which is clearly visible from his home, acted as a backdrop to his series ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ from *Field Work* (1979):

Out on a field a baby rabbit  
 Took his bearings, and I knew the deer  
 (I've seen them too from the window of the house,  
 Like connoisseurs, inquisitive of air)  
 Were careful under larch and May-green spruce ...

When Heaney moved to Wicklow he was living in “a country of woods and hills,” and on the verge of “Sweeney’s final resting ground at St Mullins” (Heaney, 1983) in the neighbouring county of Carlow so he always knew he would “come back to it” (O’Driscoll, 2008).

The name ‘Sweeney’ also resonated with his childhood memories of “a family of tinkers, also called Sweeney, who used to camp in the ditchbacks along the road to the first school I attended” (Heaney, 1983). The name lingered with him for many years even after the translation. In his interview with Dennis O’Driscoll (2008) he discussed how it appears in his “group of poems in *Station Island* called ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ where ‘Sweeney’ is rhymed with ‘Heaney’, autobiographically as well as phonetically”. It was inevitable therefore that he would return to Sweeney (Heaney, 1983): “One way or another, he seemed to have been with me from the start.”

The work which is a mixture of poetry and prose begins with the paranoid Sweeney throwing the psalter – belonging to the cleric Ronan Finn – into a lake. He also prevents Ronan from marking out the site of his new church and kills his psalmist. The humiliated Ronan curses him and Sweeney is turned into a birdlike creature. His crazed adventure begins as he flees the Battle of Magh Rath or Moira and spends most of his remaining years living “among dark trees/between the flood and ebb-tide/going cold and naked”.



**Figure 1:** Sweeney at Drimcong (detail) by Brian Bourke from Brian Bourke: Five decades 1960s-2000s (courtesy of The Lilliput Press).

The extract featured here is a hymn-like roll call of trees and other flora, as the demented Sweeney “made a poem in which he praised aloud all the trees of Ireland”. Trees recur throughout the work especially oak, hazel, yew and apple. The originator of *Buile Suibhne* not only knew his trees but also their characteristics, their uses and their place in the landscape.

A few native trees are missing including Scots pine, which may have died out by early Christian times although it featured alongside other ‘nobles of the wood’ or *Airig Fedo* in the law text on farming and woodlands *Bretha Comaithchesa*, originally composed in the eighth century (Kelly, 1997). Elm is also absent. It went into decline 5,000 years ago (Mitchell and Ryan, 1993) although it too appears in *Bretha Comaithchesa* but alongside ‘commoners of the wood’ or *Aithig Fedo* (Kelly, 1997).

The landscape that Sweeney was cursed to wander must have been well wooded so it is a major tree and nature poem. In this regard it stands out in the canon of Irish poetry. Trees and woodlands make only sporadic appearances in Irish poetry especially since the seventeenth century, probably understandable given the decline of Irish forests during this period. Poets have looked elsewhere for their inspiration especially over the past century apart from William Butler Yeats in the ‘Coole Park’ series and Heaney’s own work.

The wider historical and literary significance of *Buile Suibhne* is acknowledged by Heaney as the work dates to an actual event, the Battle of Moira fought in 637 A.D. (Heaney, 1983): “What we have, then, is a literary creation; unlike Finn McCool or Cuchulain, Sweeney is not a given fixture of myth or legend but an historically situated character, although the question of whether he is based on an historical king called Sweeney has to remain an open one.”

We are fortunate that a poet of Heaney’s stature took the time to engage with *Buile Suibhne* and that he creates a poem of beauty about Sweeney in all his misery and madness. This is acknowledged by fellow poet Brendan Kennelly (1984): “... it takes a superb poet to capture, in translation from the Irish, the full range of pain and beauty in Sweeney’s poetry”.

We can but surmise on the influence of the Devil’s Glen Wood on Heaney especially in his references to trees and forests. But there is little doubt that he understands their role in our lives and how an outcast such as Sweeney would find comfort in the woods (“Glen Bolcain, my pillow and heart’s ease / my Eden thick with apple trees.”) or pain (“Tonight, in torment, in Glasgally / I am crucified in the fork of a tree.”)

In 1998 Heaney launched the Michael Warren sculpture, *Antaeus*, made from wood and installed in the Devil’s Glen Wood (Magner, 2004). His description that day of the role of the tree in mythology and art, made it easier to understand why he prevailed with Sweeney: “Nothing is more like ourselves, standing upright, caught between heaven and earth, frail at the extremities yet strong at the central trunk, susceptible like ourselves to the weather, companionable, a shelter, a thing you can put your back to or lay your body down in at the end.”

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