

Trees Woods and Literature – 40

Poplar Memory

I walked under the autumned poplars that my father planted
 On a day in April when I was a child
 Running beside the heap of suckers
 From which he picked the straightest, most promising.

My father dreamt forests, he is dead –
 And there are poplar forests in the waste places
 And on the banks of drains.

When I look up
 I see my father
 Peering through the branched sky.

This poem was first published in 1972 (Kavanagh) and is now widely available in the Modern Classics series published by Penguin (Quinn, 2005). Patrick Kavanagh was born in 1904, the eldest son of Bridget and James who combined shoe making and repair with farming in Mucker in the parish of Inniskeane, Co. Monaghan.

Kavanagh reluctantly followed in father's footsteps but, diverted by literature, proved unsuccessful both as a cobbler and farmer. He eventually left the family farm and after some early publishing success in London, he took up permanent residence in Dublin in 1939.

This poem dates from the period prior to 1939 when Kavanagh's farming work restricted him to "reading and writing poetry after hours, usually by candlelight in an upstairs room, away from the hurly-burly of the family kitchen" (*ibid*). The eldest son of 10 siblings he was expected to stay at home on the family farm, even though it was apparent from an early age that he was clearly gifted as a poet. He left school at 13 years of age and received no further formal education.

Kavanagh struggled as a poet for much of his life due to poverty, poor health and addiction to gambling and alcoholism. Moreover, his cantankerous nature didn't endear him to fellow poets and writers. However, his stature as a major Irish poet has been acknowledged among critics and fellow poets, in particular Seamus Heaney, who wrote (O'Driscoll, 2008): "Kavanagh gave you permission to dwell without cultural anxiety among the usual landmarks of your life."

Trees feature sporadically in Kavanagh’s early work, not unsurprisingly as the surrounding landscape was largely tree-less and even today Monaghan ranks as one of the least forested counties in Ireland. However, there are a number of beautiful insights to small-farm life and at least the possibility of trees and forests. He even tried his hand at planting himself, which he recounts in “Beech Tree” (Quinn, 2005):

I planted in February
A bronze-leafed beech
In the chill brown soil
I spread out its silken fibres.

But like his farming endeavours, the end result is failure, as he admits.

It is August now, I have hoped
But hope no more –
My beech tree will never hide sparrows
From hungry hawks.

The moist soils around Inniskeane proved more conducive to poplar growing and Kavanagh was aware of this, poetically, if not silviculturally. In an early poem “To a Late Poplar” he compares the tree to “Not yet half drest, / O tardy bride”

Although, unlike Heaney and Frost, he had no nearby forests to inspire woodland or tree poems, he connects eloquently with an imagined forest in “Poplar Memory”. Kavanagh’s poplars act as a metaphor in recreating the memory of his father. His father, a more practical man than his son, saw the worth of planting quality suckers “From which he picked the straightest, most promising”. He also knew that trees had a role to play in farming at least “in the waste places / And on the banks of drains”.

Unlike the poet’s beech, many of James Kavanagh’s poplars still survive around Mucker. The poet keeps them alive in memory and while references to trees fade from his later poems, he revisits this landscape in works such as “Wet Evening in April” where “The birds sang in the wet trees / And as I listened to them it was a hundred years from now...”. A hundred years on, it is pretty certain that people will still be listening.

Patrick Kavanagh died on 30th November 1967 in a Dublin nursing home, 12 years after he was diagnosed with lung cancer.

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References

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- Quinn, A. (Ed.) 2004. *Patrick Kavanagh: Collected Poems*. Penguin Modern Classics, London.
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