

The poet, the sculptor and the forester – Sculpture in Woodland, the Devil's Glen Wood, Co. Wicklow

Introduction

Sculpture in Woodland was formed in 1994 to help establish a wood culture in Ireland, by creating a greater awareness of wood as an artistic and functional medium. The main aim of the project is to provide artists with a vibrant natural environment along with the resources and support needed to create and exhibit work of artistic excellence. Located in the Devil's Glen Wood near Ashford, Co. Wicklow, the project has attracted the best of contemporary Irish and overseas sculptors. Artists have been invited in the past to respond to the woods, as has happened in Castlewellan in Co. Down and Hazelwood, Co. Sligo. Sculpture in Woodland is, however, the first project structured in such a way as to build up a major collection of contemporary sculpture over a period of time.

Sculpture in Woodland began as a collaboration between artist and forester, and has since broadened to include educational bodies, arts organisations, state agencies, corporations, local authorities and the community. While the project is international in its approach to commissioning works, it places strong emphasis on community involvement. Sculpture in Woodland creates a strong sense of place within this important local amenity, with the artists' response respecting the *genius loci* the area evokes.

The committee is voluntary and includes a broad cross-section of people, companies and organisations from the arts, business and local communities. In 1995, Coillte generously presented the project with 600 acres of woodland in the Devil's Glen. Wicklow County Council provided the initial funding to establish the project, and was later joined by the Arts Council and a number of local and corporate organisations.

The Devil's Glen

The Devil's Glen was chosen as the location for Sculpture in Woodland because of its rich historic, natural and artistic heritage. Owned by Coillte, the area is densely wooded but fully accessible to the public. The company maintains an amenity area, forest roads and woodland walks. Although the Glen has some natural forest cover, most of the 250 ha woodland comprises plantation forest established mainly from 1939 onwards with both introduced and indigenous species. In keeping with the pioneering spirit of species selection and a groundswell in favour of exotics during this era in state afforestation, foresters drew from a broad menu of species. Exotics included western hemlock, Douglas fir, Norway spruce, Japanese and European larch, silver fir and Sitka spruce, as well as widespread species such as Scots pine, beech and sycamore. Native species of ash, oak, yew, holly and birch are also growing in the Glen. Across the River Vartry dividing the Glen is the private estate owned by the Tottenham family, which has a semi-natural sessile oak wood along with excellent coniferous plantations. Although an amenity wood, the Devil's Glen is first and foremost a working forest. The artists responded very positively to the commercial management of the wood. They looked on the felling and replanting cycle as a dynamic force, whereby the forester makes his or her own unique mark, but all within the framework of renewal and sustainability.

Geology

The geology of the Devil's Glen was a major influence in choosing the area as the site for the project. The Glen was cut out gradually by meltwater during the end of the last Ice Age. The river rushed from the melting Wicklow ice cap and carved the V-shaped profile. This is similar to the Glen of the Downs, but contrasts with typical U-shaped Wicklow valleys such as Glenmalur. The rocks of the Devil's Glen, which date back 520 million years, are among the oldest in Co. Wicklow. They are sedimentary in nature, formed from sand, silt and mud deposited in a marine environment during the Cambrian Period. Since then, there have been many changes as the sediments were gradually caught up in a collision of continents. As a result, the original beds of sediment are now tilted and folded layers of hard rock. The pressure of the crumpling caused a slaty parting or cleavage to form finer grained sedimentary rocks. Veins of white quartz, up to several centimetres wide, are present throughout.

The River Vartry

The River Vartry rises south-west of the Sugarloaf Mountain and makes a spectacular entrance into the Glen at the waterfall known locally as the Devil's Punchbowl. The river, now much smaller than when the meltwater sculpted the Glen during the last Ice Age, was by all accounts quite impressive up until the Vartry Reservoir was built near Roundwood in the 1860s. Up to then, the roar of the waterfall echoed around the valley and the mist could be seen for miles around. It was this "Satanic power announcing some great impending doom" which probably gave the Glen its popular name.

Historic and artistic significance

The Devil's Glen has a strong historic and artistic significance. It was used as a hiding place by Irish insurgents following the collapse of the 1798 Rising. After the abortive attempt to capture nearby Newtownmountkennedy in May of that year, it was reported that 60 of the attacking force who took refuge in the Glen were killed.

The Glen was a popular area for artists during the 18th and 19th centuries. Paintings of the time clearly show the oak woods on the Ballycurry side of the Vartry. The area now owned by Coillte carried fewer trees. The most famous Irish artist to visit the Glen was James Arthur O'Connor, who captured its brooding qualities around 1828. His major oil painting, *A View of the Devil's Glen*, is, according to John Hutchinson, "one of the most impenetrable of O'Connor's romantic landscapes; the high horizon and gloomy clouds offer the viewer no easy escape from the painting's melancholy mood."

The Seamus Heaney connection

The literary connection is also strong. The renowned playwright, John Millington Synge, spent his summers in nearby Glanmore Castle. More recently, Seamus Heaney, Irish poet and recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, was influenced by "the strange loneliness" of the place shortly after he came to live in the area in 1972. It was therefore fitting that Heaney should perform the unveiling of the latest sculpture, *Antaeus* by Michael Warren.

It was in the Glen that Heaney says "I put my 10 pence in a box in the car park wall, took my Forest Service Nature Trail booklet and explored the woods. Here, I got used to the forest walks. Deep down, these walks survive in a special way. They are like fossil

fuel, a kind of a reserve tank that the spirit can switch over to when its resources are low. Today, Coillte keep the ecology as well as the economy of the woods in balance: to keep the rhythm of planting and felling in good order; to keep the green lungs of the country breathing and the dark roots drinking." His love of the place is reflected in his poems, in particular, the haunting *Glanmore Sonnets*:

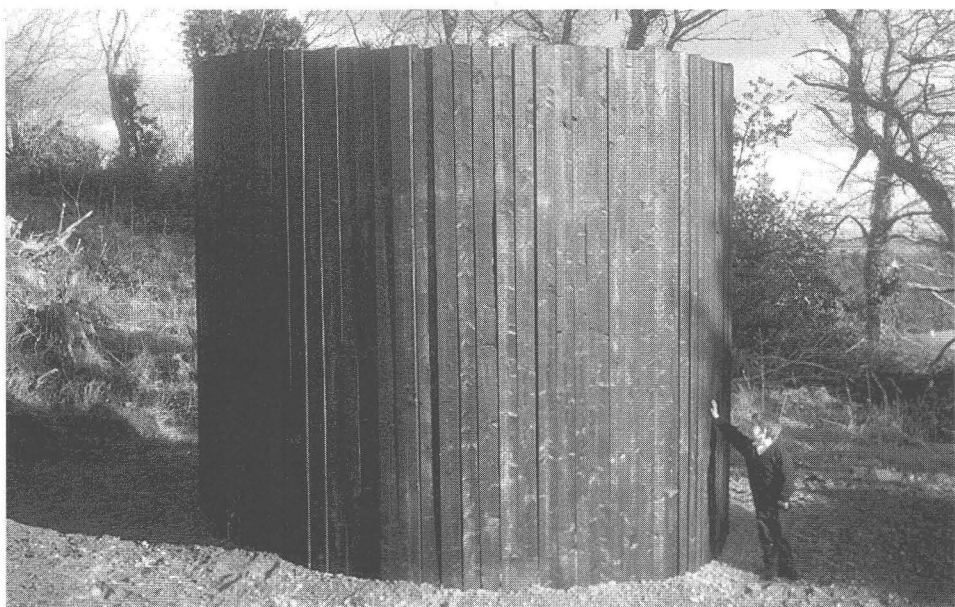
This evening the cuckoo and the corncrake
 (so much, too much) consorted at twilight.
 It was all crepuscular and iambic.
 Out on a field a baby rabbit
 Took his bearings, and I knew the deer
 (I've seen them too from the window of the house,
 Like connoisseurs, inquisitive of air)
 Were careful under larch and May-green spruce...

In choosing the Glen as the location for this project, it was impossible to ignore these powerful visual, historical and literary signposts. These have also been important to the artists who have responded imaginatively to this unique environment. While the Glen has been physically shaped first by nature and later by farmers, foresters and engineers, the project organisers felt that it was time for artists to make their mark on this landscape. To do this, they worked with local Coillte and FÁS staff. For raw material, they selected timber mainly from the same species range used by foresters of the 1930s to establish the wood: larch, Douglas fir and Sitka spruce.

Work by seven sculptors

The first sculptures were commissioned in May 1996 and four artists - Naomi Seki of Japan, Jorge du Bon of Mexico, Maurice Mac Donagh of Ireland, and Kat O'Brien, Canada - completed the first works in the Devil's Glen the following September. These were followed by Derek Whitticase of England and Jacques Bosser of France. Each artist responded to the forest environment not only with expected creativity, but also with a profound understanding of the rich heritage of the area. In a message to the artists and organisers, President Mary Robinson summed up the mood of Sculpture in Woodland: "The sculptures will help stimulate fresh interest in wood as a creative medium and establish a wood culture in Ireland."

The project has received positive media reaction and has been featured on both RTE radio and television, and in the national press. The following briefly describes three of the first six works completed.



Round by Maurice Mac Donagh, Ireland (Sitka spruce)

Mac Donagh's piece comprises Sitka spruce logs from forest thinnings arranged as a vast cylinder. To Heaney, *Round* seems "like an embodiment of everything that the words 'holding action' stand for – it's like a silo full of solidity and spirit." When asked to make a statement about his piece, Mac Donagh said in 1996 "*Round* takes the form of a large charred minimal cylinder constructed from concentric circles of Sitka spruce. This follows the process by which the tree itself forms wood and underlines the theme of the work; exploring the nature and substance of trees and how we experience them. My concerns are not therefore the historical or socio-economic relevance of woods, but sculptural issues such as mass, density and gravity which trees evoke. My aim in this process is the distillation of these properties of trees to imbue a silent presence in my piece."

Mac Donagh received the Oireachtas Sculpture Award, 1993, and an Arts Council Bursary, 1996. He has had major solo exhibitions at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Project Arts Centre, RHA Gallery and the Eigse Arts Festival, Carlow. He was the Irish representative at Expo 92, Seville.



Pound by Derek Whitticase, England (Douglas fir, painted)

Whitticase uses wood in many of his works, usually carved and painted in a way which allows the wood grain and texture to be seen through the paint. In this piece, he carved Douglas fir logs in his studio over a 4-week period, and then spent several weeks in the Glen erecting the piece with FÁS workers. Seamus Heaney said that *Pound* feels “like a kind of a dream-stockade, a space staked out for the security of body and soul.” Of his work, the artist says “The word ‘pound’ has connotations of weight, monetary value, a secure enclosure and force, all of which are important to this piece. Pound is about space being valuable and about valuing our environment. The piece creates an enclosure that can be entered and experienced within as well as without. The natural organic forms of the 16 columns reflect the environment of the forest, while also invoking images of bars or caging. This dual existence of internal and external space creates tension within the piece, presenting the viewer with a simultaneous experience of internal/external, personal/shared space.”

Liverpool-born, Whitticase has been working in Old Leighlin, Co. Carlow, for 8 years. He has exhibited in solo and group shows in Ireland and Europe, and lectures in the College of Art, Dun Laoghaire.



The Seven Shrines by Kat O'Brien, Canada (various timbers including Douglas fir, sycamore, maple, silver fir and Sitka spruce; seven sculptures in total)

Kat O'Brien used wood found in the forest, except for a piece of maple brought from Canada where she now lives. Her pieces commemorate seven generations born since the Great Famine. Her work is in sympathy with the forest and her own heritage - both sides of her family are rooted in emigration forced by the Famine. The artist says of her work "The seven shrines commemorate the seven generations born since the beginning of the Irish Famine. (Just as a tree grows by adding a concentric layer each year around the heartwood at its centre, so water pulses out from a central disturbance and a sound travels outward from its origin.) Though we speak of our mother tongue and our mother country, it is rarely the women among us who are commemorated in our histories and public monuments. By contrast, there are many women cursed as demons. The shrines invoke the intimacy of the forest to redirect the power of those legends towards recon-

sideration of the lives of seven generations of people who have no fame on the battlefield, no special days to honour, no mention in song or no places celebrating their contributions. As you walk the circular path, you are invited to discover the environment around each shrine and to consider your own path through the concentric pilgrimage of the last 150 years."

O'Brien has exhibited in Ireland, USA, China and Canada, including the United Nations World Conference on Women, Beijing, and Eau de Passion series in Chicago and New York.

Heaney on Warren

The final sculpture commissioned for the project was *Antaeus* by Michael Warren (see front cover). This is essentially three large inverted arches made from European larch and poplar, and placed at the entrance to the Devil's Glen Wood. Warren is now recognised as a major international sculptor and has been working predominantly in wood for over quarter of a century. He is one of the few artists in Ireland who fully understands the aesthetic and functional possibilities of wood, and the challenges in using it.

When Seamus Heaney unveiled the sculpture, he spoke warmly and convincingly about contemporary sculpture and Warren's piece, which, as he put it, "gives us a wonderful, mysterious sense of crossing a threshold...getting deeper into where we are and what we

are.” He said that he had a deep personal connection with the work, not least because he had written two poems in which he identified “with this ancient Antaeus figure”: “The Antaeus syndrome is the opposite to what we might call in Ireland the Oisín syndrome. You remember that when Oisín returned from Tír na nÓg, he immediately grew old as soon as he touched the ground. Well, with Antaeus, it was entirely the opposite. Every time he touched the ground, he got access to new powers. If he was thrown on the earth in a wrestling match, he came back mightier than ever. The longer he stood his ground, the stronger he stood it. In this, he is a wonderful image for the status of art work and, in particular, sculpture. The longer the work stands here, the stronger it will appear as a shrine to energy and endurance, and the greater will be the invitation to enter the wood.”

Heaney said he identified with the work because he locates his “own artistic energy in the ground of County Derry.”

The unveiling of Warren’s sculpture marked the completion of the first phase of Sculpture in Woodland. There are now a significant number of pieces in the Glen, which Coillte maintains and keeps open to the public throughout the year. The medium to long term objectives of Sculpture in Woodland are: to continue to support artists in creating work in the Devil’s Glen; to maintain a significant collection of contemporary work; to provide for a phased development of a visitor’s centre; and to enter into partnerships with arts, educational and administrative bodies in promoting the project. The committee wishes to continue the partnership with existing supporters, in particular, Coillte and Wicklow County Council. These have shown vision and courage in supporting a project which, at first glance, might not sit easily with conventional corporate sponsorship.

The emphasis on wood is central to Sculpture in Woodland. Many of our overseas artists are at ease with wood. Irish artists have been slower to respond, but increasing numbers of Irish sculptors are now exploring wood as a creative medium. Sculpture in Woodland provides the artists with the space and environment to maximise the medium.



At the unveiling of Michael Warren’s *Antaeus* in the Devil’s Glen Wood, Ashford. Left to right: Michael Warren, Seamus Heaney, Donal Magner (Chairman, Sculpture in Woodland), Maria Warren, Martin Sheridan (Secretary), Cristina Warren and Nuala Aherne MEP.

Taking the long view

As with the forest in which they are located, the sculptures need to be fully explored to be fully understood. While we encourage everybody to believe that an effortless understanding of art is open to all, there is a visual language to be learnt, and artists and art administrators need to share their own experience of the work. The same theory can be applied to the forest and the practice of sustainable forest management. Forests like the Devil's Glen are more than a commercial crop. They are now an intrinsic and natural part of the Irish landscape. While most of them didn't even exist 60 years ago, they have already been accepted as an aesthetic, commercial and social asset by the community. The sculptures in the Devil's Glen add to our understanding of woodlands because they enrich our lives. They do not compete with the trees but are an intrinsic part of the forest. As Seamus Heaney said of Michael Warren's sculptures, "The grain of the wood in them speaks to certain elements ingrained in your own self. If you stand in front of them, you are immediately at one with all that is solid and set up in the actual fabric of the timber he has worked, and yet, you are simultaneously at one with something more palpable yet vitally true inside yourself."

In Ireland, we have commenced the work of restoring our lost forest resource. Sculpture in Woodland aims to restore an aspect of our lost woodland heritage which included many traditional skills and crafts which have been developed and refined in other countries. This will not be achieved in the short term. Foresters, who traditionally take the long view, fully understand that creating a wood culture will need perseverance and hard work. A quiet revolution is, however, well underway, with an increasing number of furniture designers, engineers and architects now using wood as an aesthetic and functional medium. In the Devil's Glen, it is the artist's turn to respond to the forest in new and exciting ways. The result is stimulating and challenging, but is only the beginning of the first chapter of Sculpture in Woodland.

Donal Magner
21 November, 1998
Chairman, Sculpture in Woodland

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