

At the Margins



Common Ground can be found in overlooked places, where rich land and poor entangle. The farmers of Tempo looked across the valley, past the orderly estates of Brookeborough, to the wild and barren heights of Slieve Beagh and Mullaghfad. Tattenabuddah lies between, a hidden, intricate place, not well suited to large schemes or great plantations of either trees or people. The boundaries here are wide, and each a world in itself.



Photo by Rob Durston (www.durstonphoto.com)

A river forms the southern edge of Common Ground. It sparkles and gurgles under arching trees, dappled light reflecting from its surface and piercing clear through to its sandstone bed. The tree roots support the bank on which you thread, providing steps and footholds down to tiny gravel beaches and back up again. Little improvement has been made to a path once trodden by cattle. Little needs to be done: this is not a place to rush. This is a place to pause at every step, to smell the damp earth, to feel the filtered warmth, eyes alert for heron, trout and crayfish, or whatever other hidden wonders there may be.

Turn away now, through the lush green water-loving sedges that, despite the drought, flourish in the tree-shade, out to the flatness of the water-meadow and the open sky. As you step out into the open a pair of buzzards wheel and drift silently far above. Things happen at the margins.

Beyond rise little drumlin hills, left there by a glacier ten thousand years ago. Atop the nearest, just out of sight beyond the crest, is a standing stone. The Fort Hill was the old name of this mound, and lately, evidence has been found of Iron Age settlement there. In those days perhaps the whole valley was flooded, and the water reached across the meadow to its very foot. Even then, the true history of the stone was perhaps long forgotten.

We stand in the silence, and we watch. *Are there badgers here?* asks someone. Yes. Over to the right, in a tangle of trees, an equal tangle of burrows lies beneath the roots. Thirty badgers have been counted. This is ancient woodland, a tiny pocket left from the days when people lived next to the standing stone on the Fort Hill, the days when (so it was said) this island was so thick with forests that a squirrel could travel from one end to the other without ever touching the ground. Now Ireland, North and South, is the least-forested country in Europe, but here at least the ancient trees are coming back.

For generations, hay was cut in the meadow, raked and rucked and carted off. Then, for a while, and later here than elsewhere, silage cut earlier, still green, packed and fermented. But only for a while. Now the meadow is responding to the older rhythm of the hay field, and the flowers that once thrived there are returning. White butterflies swarm above the meadowsweet and meadow buttercup, rye-grass, bent and Yorkshire fog.

It survives because the farm was really too small to benefit from such modern improvements. No nitrates were spread, no subsidised concrete lane ever cut through the hills or crossed the river on a railway-sleeper bridge. What money there was to be made came from the country store where the locals of Cooneen came to swap stories.

Stories are being told there again, the out-offices of the farm busy once more with old and new uses. For this day only, the long-empty silage shed is an exhibition gallery, its sloping walls adorned with the paintings of Jeremy Henderson, while swallows fly through the corrugated iron arch above. The artists of Sliabh Beagh Arts have wrapped gates with coloured yarn, cut intricate patterns in scrap metal, and power-washed images on dirty walls.

It all needs money, of course, but not a lot – just enough to allow the love and attention that this particular place once had, and now has again, for in the end only that which is loved for itself will be preserved.

New connections are being made, new ideas planted, new minds engaged with ancient history, new traditions invented. Things are happening at the margins.

Jenny Brien

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