



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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What is Common Ground?

Once synonymous with the NI countryside, we only have one breeding pair of corncrakes left. Help shape an agricultural policy that helps bring them back by taking action here:

This is a call to petition, on Twitter, by [Nature Matters NI](#), that was tweeted just as I sat down to write for *Corncrake Magazine*.

Synchronicity or what?

Translating Common Ground was an event held here on the farm on 22 July. We were very happy to host the Fermanagh writers and to celebrate with them their 10th anniversary of creative activity. We were also honoured to host the paintings of Jeremy Henderson and to receive the illuminating talk by his widow Patricia Martinelli and also talks by Frankie McPhillips and Anja Rosler.

I spoke a little bit on the day about the important, catalytic role of art and artists at times of cultural and political change. *Common Ground N.I.* is part of an international movement that moves to change human being's relationship with the land where ever they live. We assert that this must be for the benefit of both humanity and nature.

Whilst working to change the cultural story we also acknowledge that there is a multiplicity of stories. Our role is less about forcing stories as we would with a crop of rhubarb or artichoke but more like harvesting stories that are emerging naturally, to catch their seed on the wind between the tree and the river or at the mouth of the badgers' set. There is an obvious human story here on the farm, the story of a family, of local community, of human history. This is an important way in for people. It is the stuff of the threshold – who is living/lived here? What have they been doing here? How long for?

The purpose of the stories about growing up on a farm near Tempo, as told by Frankie on the day, is less about nostalgia and more about remembering how it could be. This would not be a return to the past but rather a reintegration of those aspects useful in stepping forward into a new world.

Then there is the narrative of the ecologist and naturalist as translated by Anja – the story of a plant such as Yellow Rattle – of how it lives with the

other plants here – all of them kin. This is how we might support their community and find our rightful place within it.

There is a huge ecology of possible stories: the cultural memory of meadows, of haymaking, of the interweaving of human culture with plants and soil through song and dance, the significance of fairy tree and druids' stone. Further out we enter the universal story of hill and tree and river, of sky and earth. These stories interact at the edge of overlapping fractal patterns – a boy who grows up on a farm, learns the art of fly fishing for trout from his father, dreams teenage dreams of trout surviving in the same river in a post-nuclear war landscape and not again until mid-life when after dreaming many trout dreams he returns to the home place to be told for the first time that the name of the place *Tattenabuddagh* means *The place of the very large trout*.

We live in interesting times to be sure – interesting and challenging. We need to slow down and reconnect with nature, but there is also urgency. Time is running out for the corncrake, for the salmon, the trout and numerous other species – including humanity. There is much work to be done to avert catastrophe.

The work of the writer of prose or poetry is partly to raise the alarm, throbbing like the wren in the bush, to make a lot of noise even for a small bird. We can access aspects of ourselves that are beyond that which is weary, cynical, burnt out with the news. We can make sacred again the place and all its inhabitants, and re-inspire a sense of wonder.

It has been said many times that our cultural crisis is a crisis of spirit. At the heart of this crisis is the loss of meaningful connection. We have to rediscover our selves as wild, to enter into the fecund freedom of the imaginal wilderness. We need work that helps us through the darkening times ahead. Jeremy Henderson's painting has this quality – there are landscapes that seem broody, ominous and yet shining within them are silver hemmed clouds and spiralling light reflected in water. We need work that faces the imminent dark yet also guides us to new possibilities.

Whether utopian or dystopian, the work cannot be prescribed by the purely rational, it can only be scribed and scribbled from the wild land to the writing pad through a body with open eyes, ears, and heart. It happens when the ego is dissolved and everyday habitual responses are replaced by something more generative and courageous. In this dissolution the unexpected story emerges, the synchronous happens and the dreamer realizes she is being dreamt, the writer that he is being written with.

So the invitation stands; come again to Common Ground to be informed by the place by its nature its fields, trees, and river – to catch the whispers on the wind and translate them into the new story for the folk who live in Fermanagh and beyond. We need this if the corncrake and ourselves are not to become extinct and possibly mythical creatures in the imaginal realm, accessed by sentient creatures not yet evolved.

Robbie Breadon

The Silo Gallery





(inspired by [Jeremy Henderson](#)'s *I ran down the Hill of History*)

*I stood mesmerized by one painting
It's a landscape of hills and valleys, water and sky
that took me way back
to the Broadhaven Bay I knew.
There was something else that drew me in;
I stepped nearer to see what it might be.*

Closer up the image blurred,

*a kaleidoscope of paint
carefully applied
but apparently random.
When I stood back and then further back
the image cleared, my focus sharpened.*

*The artist wants me to stand back
if you want to clearly understand history and events,
you must stand well back
for the clearer sharper view.*

*Patricia's passion and commitment
to her late husband's work came through
in every word, every gesture, and every
piece of information she imparted.
We imbibed all this and looked at
the exhibition with renewed appreciation.
Thank you, Patricia.*

John Monaghan

Rain Lough Sea

(after Jeremy Henderson)

*Layer on layer upon layer of lustrous paint
Creating striations of wondrous colours:
Indigo, red, green, yellow and Klein Blue
Intertwining with one another so playfully
On the vast virtual loom of the canvas.
The warp and weft of the silken oils create
A virile landscape of verisimilar aquatics
Following the serpentine course of the Lough.*

*As the viewer reads the canvas from the left
A fisherman perhaps – or the artist himself
Is reflected scarlet in swirling blue miasma
Capturing a fixed point in uncertain fluid state
A figurative gnomon standing beside the water.
The painting narrates the story of the figure;
Of their lonely vigil observing the febrile flow
For as long as there are seeing eyes to grace art.*

John Llewellyn James

The Art of Sliabh Beagh



Hello Crow

after a Sliabh Beagh Arts sculpture

*Hello Crow, how bright the light
That shines in your gimlet eye
Set amongst furls of fine plumage
Illustrated by the glittering voids
Made in the blackened metal plate
By the artist's sharp, cultured blade.*

*The plate sits upon an armature
Of concrete and oxidised iron
From the steel rods thrust
Into the new quickened concrete.
Now half-freed by carnage of time
To create a perch just for you, Crow.*

John Llewellyn James

Common Ground hosts a number of artworks by [Sliabh Beagh Arts](#)





IN THE FIELDS OF COMMON GROUND

Anja

*Out in the meadow in bright sunshine
She explained about "wilding," about rattle
and field buttercup, about late cutting of grasses
and the importance of time to flower and seed.*

*How hedgerows and margins encourage life:
how sometimes it is better to do nothing
and just let nature take its course.*

John Monaghan

Unborn poems are like seeds; each needs its particular conditions to grow and flourish, just like the wildflowers that Anja talked about. The poems [Seasons of Seeds](#), [The Hare](#), and [The Old Fort](#) were inspired by the plants, animals and placenames of *Common Ground*

[Bringing the Meadows Back to Life](#)



Viewed from above, the “Emerald Isle” is indeed very, very green. Unfortunately, from a conservation point of view, the lush, uniform grassland that dominates our 21st-century landscape is the wrong shade of green.

A traditional hay meadow, seen from a distance, has varying shades of brown, green and even grey. This mottled sward is created by a variety of grasses, sedges and rushes, all co-existing with one another. Mixed in are colourful wildflowers such as Lady’s Smock, Ragged Robin and Oxeye Daisy. Each of these species occupies a slightly different ecological niche that fulfils their varying requirements for light, soil moisture and acidity. These meadows are a haven for wildlife and, on a fine summer day, they are brimming with insects, birds and small mammals, all finding food, shelter and even a home here.

A traditional hay meadow was cut at the end of the summer when grasses, sedges and flowers had completed their annual life cycle and produced seeds, which were scattered during the haymaking. This laid the foundation for next year’s colourful carpet of flowers, grasses and sedges.

Once the hay was gathered farmyard manure was spread, which continuously improved the soil structure and replaced the nutrients that were removed with

the grass crop.

The key to this rich and diverse meadow plant life lies managing the nutrient levels of the soil. If these are kept relatively low a great number of plant species will co-exist in competition, and no single species becomes dominant. In our best hay meadows, up to 30 different plant species can be found per square metre. The sward never becomes too thick, allowing light to reach the ground, where moss thrives and ground-nesting birds make their home.

Compare this to an intensively managed silage field. A seed mix is sown which often contains a mere two types of highly productive grass varieties. Continuous application of chemical fertilisers creates extremely high nutrient levels in the soil, resulting in a uniform, lush and often very thick sward. Our more delicate native plants do not have a chance. As few as four plant species can be found in one square metre of highly productive agricultural grassland, and none are nectar-producing flowers.

These emerald green silage fields are replacing our meadows one by one. Unfortunately, they are largely devoid of life. Intensively managed grasslands have little value as habitats. Without flowering plants, there is no nectar or pollen for butterflies and bees.

As our meadows disappear, so does the wildlife that depends on them. Ground-nesting birds such as meadow pipit and skylark struggle in the overly thick, impenetrable grass sward. With up to three silage cuts per year, the likelihood of successfully raising their broods is low, even if they do attempt to nest there.

Only 2% of the species-rich meadows that existed in the 1930's remain today in the UK. They have been lost mostly to intensive agriculture. This is not just a loss to the rich biodiversity of our land, but also to our cultural heritage. Just think of how many poems, songs and paintings were inspired by butterflies, flowers, meadows and haymaking.

How do we get our meadows back? It can be done, but it is neither quick nor straightforward. Once nutrient levels are high in the soil, especially in clay soil, they tend to stay that way for a long time, even after the application of fertiliser has ceased. Simply planting 'plugs' or scattering seeds of wildflowers will not work in the long term, as the more vigorous grasses will out-compete and smother them.

The nutrient levels of the soil need to be permanently reduced for lasting success. One rather severe method is to mechanically remove the upper layer of topsoil, which is where the nutrients are concentrated. A far gentler way is to continuously remove the 'biomass' from the area. With extremely species-poor and uniform swards several cuts a year can be carried out initially. All cut material is removed and no fertiliser of any kind applied. Gradually, the plant life will naturally become more diverse. If necessary, it can be encouraged by planting 'plugs' of wildflowers or application of seeds. Make sure you use a trustworthy supplier of native material!

There is also an amazing 'helper plant' for the aspiring meadow restorer:

Yellow Rattle or Hay Rattle. It is a semi-parasitic species of native flower. Underground, it seeks out the roots of grass species and quite literally steals nutrients from them. Once weakened, the otherwise dominant grasses will lose some of their vigour, allowing a more species-diverse sward to develop once again.

Whether you are a farmer working on many hectares of land or only call a small front garden your own – restoring a piece of meadow to its former glory is a challenging, but worthwhile undertaking.

Anja Rosler

More information on how to restore meadows can be found at magnificentmeadows.org.uk

Seasons of Seeds



Seeds strewn on eager soil

*seem to die into dust
dissipate into air
over the meadows.*

*Seeds burst open
creeping green stems
stretch advancing out
covering the ground.*

*Time passes:
stems form stalks,
they sway in the breeze,
rainfall, and sunshine.*

*Time passes:
countless colours,
emerge as green carpet
covering the meadows.*

*Buds burst into flower,
grounded in roots,
fragile yet firm holding
they dance in the wind.*

*Meadow mown hay
In verdant swathes
lie in snaking wispy lines
new seeds will germinate
harboured until Spring.*

Tony Brady

Late April-early May: for green-winged orchids (pictured) and cowslips

Late May-mid June: for meadow buttercups, yellow rattle, red clover, sorrel and oxeye daisy

Late June & early July: for greater burnet, pepper saxifrage, wood cranesbill, bird's-foot trefoil, dropwort and many other species

2nd – 3rd week July: for the “purple” phase of common knapweed, also ladies bedstraw and meadowsweet, sneezewort and devil's-bit scabious

[The Hare](#)



The sky is clear tonight;

late frost sparkles the rushes, casting back
the light of distant suns
The moon, full as a silver thruppence,
shines the trackless grass pure white.
No shadow moves but one.

Lopsided loping leather-horn
crouch back, old-woman-wise, she comes.
This is her world, and yet
she does not sleep.

For she, of many forms and names,
long ears and head-top eyes,
always alert, living her life
beneath the churning sky,
never forgets the ancient rule –
when dangers come, keep watch;
you're fast enough to get away.
Lie still, for they may pass on by.

Last morning, with the dew still fresh
where once the plover made her nest;
she sat beneath the rising sun,
she heard the distant rumble come.
Then she lay flat disappeared
although she felt no danger there –
only a sudden mist of rain
that wet her fur and tasted strange
then passed on by.

All places are alike to her, the meadow-cat
who has no home. She dare not keep an ounce of fat –
she feeds by night,
chews through the winter's roots.

But now she has forgotten cold,
the heat of mad March days
the buck she never met till then
whose ears she boxed, but let him mate.
And in a week the four
strong kits she bore,
eyes open, fit to run,
no longer hidden, disappear

But now... she gazes at the moon,
the shadows there that form
long ears like hers,
for now, her dugs are full.
The kits are hidden well.
She sniffs. She cannot trace their smell.
She cries, and waits, and cries again

hoping that three, or two, or one
will answer then.

But they are lying still, for with the rain
they used their tongues – as children do:
They licked their paws
and washed their face, like her
They wiped their ears and licked their fur.

and licked again, until there was no trace
– no outward trace –
of herbicide.

Jenny Brien

This poem was inspired by a hare seen at Common Ground. The painting is by [Biddy Lee](#) For more information on the problems hares face from modern farming, see the [Hare Preservation Trust](#)

[The Old Fort](#)

How many men climbed up this field – and saw the land as we do now
How many families joined them – in the settlement upon the brow
A place of safety on a hill – with Druid stones above the rill
That marks the place where once there stood – a Celtic fort

To see the far horizon – shapes of valley, hill and fell
Three thousand years have passed and yet – we see those scenes as well
The sunset comes at end of day – they too would see the final ray
As darkness fell, the gates were locked, protecting those within

When danger knocked upon the door – The strong men faced the foe
And held at bay the hungry wolves who would not easily go
No threats allowed for rich or poor – All safe today and evermore
The Celtic fort stands firm and strong – upon the hill

And as we stand upon this land – thinking of those who lived here then
Put down the sword of strife as we take courage from a pen
And yet the families living here – lived comfortably free from fear
We think we are so different but we're very much the same
The hill remains – a constant – then and now.

Bob Baird