

A Townland Journey – Derrylea

Landscape – Memory – History

*Becomes a landscape heard and felt and seen
Sunshine and shade one harmonizing green*

John Clare

*The legend of the land endures, in men and clay,
In heart and marrowbone, in acre, perch and rood,
Offering and accepting always
A passion never spent,
A song of sacrifice, the hot testament
Of blood.*

Brendan Kennelly

It was called The-Gate-below-the-Car-house, then it became The-Red-Gate-below-the-Car-house; once wooden, now a rusty, red metal version of a local, vernacular 1960's type. It looks almost a period piece compared to the mass-produced galvanized version that is everywhere today – unpainted, non-integrated, but practical and efficient with the double-locking system. It was through the previous old wooden gate here that we stood and stared at an exhausted hare sitting behind a rush bush a few yards away, while the hounds bayed all around. We armed ourselves with sticks and defended the hare. Children have a natural sense of justice. We instinctively knew an underdog when we saw one, (if you will excuse the mixed metaphor). Hanging there on the gate, until the last hound had gone away, we knew we had done something worthwhile.

It was through this gate that the McAdam brothers from Drumlone – Peter, Pat or Eddie, would go to look at cattle on their outlying farm. It was a shortcut too for the man with his dog and gun, a way into the interior, as it were, along the dry double ditch that must have been a mearin ditch at one time, and down to the big drain where there used to be a small footstick. Many a time a cock pheasant would run the double ditch and escape into the interior – the 'cover' that was McAdam's land. Today you have as good a chance of disturbing sika deer sheltering in the double ditch as you have a pheasant. The big drain or McAdam's Drain as we called it then, now double-fenced with the ubiquitous barbed wire, was the natural boundary between two townlands back in medieval times. It runs from 'the island' (previously Derrylea Lough) to Cargin Lough some four hundred meters away – a natural boundary.

...On along Cargin Lough then, not quite its shore, because the willows are so dense here you can hardly see the surface of the water. In among the willows I can glimpse green shoots pushing up through the dead debris of winter and go on along the brown, boggy soil by the stumps of old trees, probably alder, that used to stand in the waters edge before the drainage

schemes lowered the lough...

With the willows behind me now, there is an open view of the wide expanse of the larger part of Cargin Lough curving round boomerang shape towards Ports townland. It is a long and sky-light sheet of silent water made look even whiter by the tall, sombre wooded trees all around. Straight ahead away behind Clingan's house and in sight of *beyond the lough*, is the ridge that is Ballyconnell Mountain, with its Quinn Towers and the windmills in the sky. It is the closest the modern industrial revolution has come to Derrylea – the legend that started in a field of gravel and made Sean Quinn the richest man in Ireland.

...I turn away from the lough and head into the overhanging trees and bushes of the wide, open hedge just up from the shore. We are still in Mohan's land. It is a mixed hedge of old, twisted blackthorn bending down to the ground, the deep green of prickly holly and thin, clustered hazel rods reaching up for the light and dominant ash above all, with clumps of briars around the fringes – a perfect hedge for approaching the lough by stealth when out duck shooting. The ground among the tree trunks is carpeted with dead leaves and on this sunny late March day covered with clusters of wood anemone declaring the freshness of spring. This scrub-hedge is kept open year on year by sheltering cattle, tramping and scratching and nibbling among the trees. It is one of my favourite spots. I used to come here seeking some sort of solace-escape from the stresses of teaching and living in troubled Belfast. Weaving my way among the trunks and twisted branches along the dry floor of this room-wide hedge I come to the triangular field. Everybody who grows up in the countryside has a favourite field. This is mine.

In this tiny triangular field, with its high ditch on two sides, there is a sense of enclosure, human scale, intimacy; the feeling that it *never felt the rage of blundering plough*. The views are through and up to *that little tent of blue*. It has something of an unspoilt primal place about it – of being cushioned by nature; that you could pitch tent and live here in tranquil isolation, go native and lose the madding world and escape the harassments of living. I have always imagined a mud cabin once stood here – a modest hut standing in less than a rood of ground – why else the mearin-like ditches? There are no signs of built stone, nothing to suggest substance or permanency, but its very shape has the stamp of human hand. Wood anemone lightens the shadows under ash and blackthorn in the lower hedge and the primroses decorate the dry, foggy ditches. But now, this little field is overrun with briars, and cattle have tramped down one of the ditches. Time and animals have taken their toll, disfigured its form and diminished its allure.

Dermot Maguire

An extract from his 2015 book *A Townland Miscellany*