

DEVIL'S GLEN

sculpture in woodland



Editor Donal Magner
Photography Dan Collins
Foreword Seamus Heaney

FOREWORD

My first visit to the Devil's Glen was in the month of August 1972. My wife and I had just arrived in Co. Wicklow with two small children and one big hope, that we might manage to start a new life. We had come from Belfast at a time when life in that town was turning violent, but it was not so much the turmoil in the North as the promise of poetry in my own life that brought me to 'the hedge-school of Glanmore'.

The wood was already being managed by the Forest and Wildlife Service and up in the carpark you could drop in your 10p coin and take your guide-map to the nature trails and the numbered stops. We got used to the short walk round Granny's Teahouse and the viewpoint, and long walks to the waterfall, and the memory of those rambles survives in a very special way. It is like fossil fuel, a kind of reserve tank that the spirit can switch over to when its resources are low, and for that reason alone I am glad to be doing this foreword. But the Sculpture in Woodland project – established as a partnership between a voluntary group and Coillte – adds a whole new dimension to the appeal of this 'beloved vale'.

The universe we live in is both active and interactive, and as our awareness of the interdependence of all life increases, so does our awareness that a threat to any bit of it, however small, constitutes a threat to the whole thing. Coillte is an organisation that works to keep our natural environment healthy; to keep the ecology as well as the economy of the woods in balance. To keep the green lungs of the country breathing and the dark roots drinking. And in doing so, Coillte is also working to keep the lungs of the inhabitants breathing that bit more cleanly and freely as well.

No bit of the natural world is more valuable or more vulnerable than the tree bit. Nothing is more like ourselves, standing upright, caught between heaven and earth, frail at the extremities yet strong at the central trunk; and nothing is closer to us at the beginning and at the end, providing the timber boards that frame both the cradle and the coffin.

The fact that the tree is a symbol at the centre of so many religious stories should be enough to instruct us about its sacred place in the scheme of things. Tree of life, tree of knowledge, tree of the cross in the Judaeo-Christian tradition; *yggdrasil*, the world tree, in the Nordic cosmology; the bo tree at Buddh Gaya in India under which the Buddha received enlightenment; the Druids' oak tree; Athene's olive tree; the fairies thorn tree – merely to invoke examples is to be reminded that this ancient

The universe we live in is both active and interactive, and as our awareness of the interdependence of all life increases, so does our awareness that a threat to any bit of it, however small, constitutes a threat to the whole thing.

When you stand in the presence of those significant forms, you realise that first and foremost art is something that has been deliberately made. It comes home to us because we human beings are the ones who make things up.



covenant between ourselves and the wood or the grove needs constant renewal. So it is worth emphasising that Coillte is no more and no less than a manifestation of that ancient bond. It is the institution through which early twenty first century Ireland commits itself to the ongoing, indigenous work of tree knowledge and tree practice and tree care.

The magnificent assembly of sculptures which now stands in the Devil's Glen Wood is another way of signifying that commitment. The Forest Service, Wicklow County Council and the Arts Council also deserve praise for their support of this whole enterprise. In doing so, they are not only contributing to the economic welfare of the artists, but ratifying in a very significant way the value of art in our own lives, both as individuals and as a community.

When you stand in the presence of those significant forms, you realise that first and foremost art is something that has been deliberately made. It comes home to us because we human beings are the ones who make things up. Much that we live among is not, after all, nature, but, as they say, culture. And culture could be defined as everything that we as a species have managed to add to nature. Tools, tales, totem poles, tumuli, temples, topiary, sculptures in timber, and the meanings we lodge in them or derive from them – all this bears witness to the basic human urge to make something of ourselves, in every sense of the term. It is the thinginess of art, its madeness, that is essential to it. And no art form is thingier than sculpture.

Just take a look at the rich and strange works on display in this catalogue. Works like the one by Maurice Mac Donagh called *Round*, which seems to me like an embodiment of everything that the words 'holding action' stand for – it's like a silo, full of solidity and spirit; and then there's Derek Whitticases's *Pound* which feels like some kind of dream-stockade, a space staked out for the security of body and soul. And as you look at them and all the others, you realise that it is far easier to take sculpture in than to talk about it. It is easier to walk round it and look up at it and recognise it as bulk and texture and volume and blockage than it is to articulate what exactly it means to you. But while you may not be sure what it stands for, you cannot miss the fact that it stands its ground, and in doing so it helps us to consolidate something in ourselves.

This was certainly my feeling when I stood beside Michael Warren's *Antaeus* on the day it was officially unveiled in November 1998. The grain of it, like the grain in all the other pieces, speaks to certain elements ingrained

in your own physical being. If you stand in front of these works you are immediately at one with all that is out there in the timber but you are also at one with something alive and well inside yourself. The medium sends a message.

In the case of the Warren sculpture however, the title sends a message too. Antaeus was a giant who resembled a tree in that he was born out of mother earth, and was dependent upon contact with her for his ongoing strength. So you could say that the Antaeus syndrome is the opposite of the Oisín syndrome. The legend tells us that as soon as Oisín came back from Tír na n-Óg, his foot touched Irish earth and he immediately grew old and grey and decrepit; but with Antaeus, the effect was entirely the opposite. The longer he stood his ground, the stronger he stood it; and in this he is a wonderful image for the Sculpture in Woodland project. The longer this artwork stands, the stronger it will appear as a shrine to energy and endurance, and the greater will be the invitation to enter the wood. *Antaeus* is like the jambs of the door to a resource: it gives us a wonderful, mysterious sense of crossing a threshold and going through a gateway, getting deeper into where we are and what we are.

Sculpture in Woodland is a wholly admirable endeavour. This public art collection is not a tax dodge or a PR exercise by a corporate multinational company. It is neither a self-advertisement nor a property development. It is essentially a work of pure disinterestedness, an act of faith in the worth of art itself, an act of commitment to natural order, human creativity, and solitary contemplation, which is to say that it is an act of resistance to chaos and destructiveness and mindless living.

On the publication of this catalogue, I salute the creative vision of the Sculpture in Woodland Committee, Coillte, the Forest Service, Wicklow County Council and the Arts Council.

Bail ó Dhia ar an obair.

Seamus Heaney
Ashford, October 2004

*If you stand in front of
these works you are
immediately at one
with all that is out
there in the timber but
you are also at one
with something alive
and well inside yourself.
The medium sends a
message.*



MAX EASTLEY

England

I wanted to create a work that led into and out of the valley, so there are two main viewing points: from the crest of the descent, where the sculptures are seen as a structure of fine lines, and when ascending from the valley, when the sculptures appear above the viewer as pieces of suspended architecture. The three trees to which the sculptures are fixed are western hemlock - an introduced species which brings to the site and atmosphere of eerie and remote wilderness.

The sculptures have an open structure to allow the free movement of air to sound the percussion elements which are within, which need a moderate wind to sound. My idea was to make a work that would not only draw attention to itself, but would also complement and augment that which is there already: the sound of the river from the gorge, the occasional calls of crows, deer, wrens and the wind through the trees. In Japan it was the custom to go to pine forests to listen to the sound of wind through the pine needles, called in Japanese 'Matskaze'. My idea after my first visit to the site was to try to create a place where imagination and nature could meet together and dream of ghostly appearances.



Pine Ghosts

1999

Norway spruce, beech and steel, secured to three western hemlock trees

3600 x 500 x 300 mm

