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Uplands in Times
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Image by Bryonie Reid



On the Up? North-of-Ireland Uplands in Times of Change

Gemma and I have worked together for a decade now, as **quarto**. Coming from the disciplines of visual art, heritage and cultural geography, we are keenly aware of place's troubled complexity in Northern Ireland, in rural as well as urban contexts. We have spent much of our 10 collaborative years exploring with organisations and communities across the province, the meanings of their places in past, present and future. Stemming in part from my independent practice as an artist and writer, and in part from our relationship with a Sperrins-based colleague, of late we have been thinking about uplands. Uplands communities are marked by historical impoverishment and largely neglected by those holding power in urban centres. That heritage presents challenges today. Nonetheless, uplands are poised in a moment of precarious potential. Current global and national insecurity is crystallised in Northern Ireland not only by the coronavirus pandemic, but also Brexit, which threaten rural livelihoods in tourism and farming. Sperrins uplands offer material resources – gold, wind, peat, spruce – over which there is little local control and plenty of corporate competition. Whether and how these resources are used is of crucial importance in the context of climate change and sustainability. Cultural traditions, including rituals, dialect and folklore, tend to be strong in the uplands, too. The intimate knowledge enshrined in these traditions, of peripheral landscapes and how to survive in them in unsettled times with little or no outside help, is a further rich resource. When we were asked by Northern Ireland Screen to curate a selection from its **digital film archive**, we took the chance to immerse ourselves in Northern Irish television and film made in and about uplands in the north-west.

I lived for some time in a remote glen in County Leitrim, in the Republic of Ireland, 200 or so metres above sea-level. The seven-acre plot was typical of an inland upland in the northern half of Ireland. It was wet and covered in rushes. There was a patch of degraded blanket bog. Alder and willow lined the drains, and beech trees clustered on a drier height above the stream. At



almost any point it was possible to get down to blue clay, locally called daub, simply by sticking a finger through the thin skim of topsoil. Yellow flag and watermint abounded where water lay. The old stone-walled field boundaries were thickly jacketed in moss, and constellations of nettles marked long-forgotten manure heaps. A few heaps of stones were all that remained of more than one household beneath the beeches. In the spring and summer lady's smock, red and white clovers, meadowsweet, eyebright and selfheal brightened the lane and verges, but the flowers and herbs we introduced struggled and wilted. We noticed that hawthorn, blackthorn and rowan blossomed and berried at a lag, adapting to the relative cold and near-constant exposure to prevailing south-westerly winds. To the west and east, tightly-packed ranks of Sitka spruce cast their shadow. To the north and south, two farmers grazed sheep, moving them from rough field to rough field as they exhausted the sparse nutrition available in each spot.

We bought our land from a German. He had bought it some 20 years previously, when the family who had once inhabited that clachan built on the least-wet spot had dwindled and disappeared. Our neighbour to the north lived alone, keeping the emptied family home and sweeping sheep droppings off the lane he walked weekly, on his way to meet a lift into town to collect his pension. Our neighbours to the south, a couple in their 80s, likewise held on in their immaculate pebble-dashed three-room house with its little clutch of outhouses. He managed the sheep with the help of their son. She found it difficult to go outside. Their daughter worked in another county. Dotted further afield were others, some more recent incomers, like us, some merely the latest generation of their families to live in this exacting place.

The landscape in which all of us found ourselves did not come about by accident, or all at once. Social, economic and political forces, at local, national and global levels, shaped it. Wandering among the conifer monocultures, I would come across a house and sheds, an old cart, a paved drain, sometimes photographs and bedding and crockery among the pine needles, nettles and docken leaves. When swathes of the forest were machine-cut, methodically and brutally, more houses emerged from the splintered ruins. Half-tumbled, they appeared dazed and blinking through glassless windows. Re-planting began the process of disappearing them again. Our neighbour told us of three or four households she had been used to visiting on her weekend walk over the hills to the local dancehall, all of which had been swallowed by forest. The transition from home and farm to the silent dark of spruce forest tended



to follow a pattern. In a poor part of a poor county in an impoverished state, needing and wanting to take work elsewhere, people abandoned the intensive labour of keeping rushes and ragwort down, mending walls, laying hedges, clearing drains, fertilising soil, sowing and weeding and harvesting crops and minding turkeys, hens, cows and pigs. Farming came to mean grazing hardy breeds of sheep, mostly done around paying work. Emigration took its toll, and frequently only ageing parents or one sibling remained at home. When the last family member died, a gap opened and the forest moved in.



After the partition of Ireland, with industry in the North already beginning its slow decline and global flows of money, goods and people changing local and national economies, the Irish Free State had established a Forestry Division. Its national programme entailed buying up land cheaply and establishing forests that could be treated as commercial crops. Those uplands farms abandoned through emigration and death were ideal for Forestry Division purposes, but as the Bishop of Cork noted in the 1950s, ‘families whose holdings are truncated by the sale of rough grazing to the Forestry Division tend to emigrate on the proceeds’. Concerned that such practices encouraged emigratory haemorrhage, he suggested instead that the Forestry Division arrange long-term leases of land tied to the survival of a household, providing an income and enabling families to stay put. This scheme did not materialise, and in the soggy, acidic uplands soils, conifers soon overtook what native broadleaf trees there were, and fields, hedges and houses alike. Afforestation of uplands farms with quick-growing, commercially viable softwoods not only consumed forsaken farms but encouraged and enabled still-struggling families to go. It was an especially troubling policy on the part of the Irish Free State, whose constitution idolised home and family. In Northern Ireland, a similar practice emerged. The state purchased land for planting ‘piecemeal’, much of it from uplands farms.¹

In the early 2000s I worked on a project called **Irish Border/lands** for Ulster University, travelling the length of the border on both sides and talking to people about their lived experience of it. In the hilly reaches of west Tyrone, I noted the presence of conifer plantations, again suggesting poverty, hard-scrabble farming and depopulation. In the context of the Troubles, however, these forests meant more. One interviewee recalled that when he was lifted near the border by the police, he was told, ‘the trees have got eyes’.² Another grew up on a hill farm in what was called a ‘less favoured area’. The farm was ‘isolated’ and ‘in a situation that could be quite useful for other activities’, and she remembers driving:

1: Eoin Neeson, *A History of Irish Forestry*, Dublin, Lilliput Press in association with Department of Energy, 1991, p201.

2: Personal communication from Terence, 24th April 2006.



the absolutely horrible and frightening... 11-mile straight from Castlederg to Pettigo... up through the forest...I just put my foot to the floor, it was... dangerous driving but I would have put myself over the ditch before I would have wanted to see a red light or something.

She used to babysit for her aunt and uncle, who lived off the same stretch of road, in a house she describes as ‘lovely in itself, but in a very spooky location... and again a very useful location, right more or less in the forest’.³ Another interviewee explains that where he grew up, he ‘always felt there was bogeymen around’, and in fact there were; that remote, forested landscape was the site of ‘all kinds of operations’, leading to ‘this feeling that someone was looking at you all the bloody time’.⁴ These images of a forest peopled with armed men hold up a mirror to the 17th century. At that time, planters told of displaced Irish disappearing into the fastnesses of the then vast Ulster woodlands. Ancient forest Glenconkeyne was, according to Sir John Davies, ‘the seat of rebellion in the north’.⁵ In 20th century west Tyrone, old-growth oaks were transposed into commercial spruce, and rebels and soldiers transposed into IRA and SAS. But the role of forest in armed conflict remained the same.

Sitka spruce plantations are only one feature of uplands on the island of Ireland. Blanket bog is another. I have been thinking of the conifer forest as a kind of anti-archive, blotting out human and animal traces, from the house and barn and shed to the sunken lane and field boundaries. And if the conifer forest is an anti-archive, the bog could be its opposite. Bogs have long been thought of as repositories and preservers, of pollens, timbers, butter and bodies. Historically figured by planters and their sponsors as obstructive (to military manoeuvring, agriculture and progress), dangerous and worthless, bogs can be seen as landscapes of both resistance and vulnerability. Those people forced to make their homes and livings there struggled to survive, but where they were able to adapt to waterlogged, nutrient-poor soil and seasonal flooding, they developed pride in their resilience and difference. Bogs were, however, absorbed into the imperial-capitalist project of plantation, and granted by the Crown to churches, schools and private landowners to generate income from turbarry rights. After the rapid deforestation of Ireland, the principal resource of bogs, turf, became a mainstay of rural (and urban) households across the island. In the early years of the Free State, Bord na Móna was established to exploit it industrially (and, celebrating the prospect of independent energy production, with a nod to national/ist identity). Since then, bogs have been catastrophically depleted by the harvesting of turf for fuel, animal bedding and garden compost. Though

3: Personal communication from Ruthanne, 3rd April 2006.

4: Personal communication from Stephen, 24th May 2006.

5: Eileen McCracken, ‘The Woodlands of Ulster in the Early Seventeenth Century’, pp15-25 in *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, vol.10, 1947, p21.

few households depend on turf for heating and cooking now, the right to cut and burn turf is entangled with identity and Irishness, across the island. People think differently about hand-cutting as opposed to machine-cutting, but the end result is the same – the bog disappears. If it is an archive, it is a fragile and rapidly emptying one.

When Gemma and I began our search through Northern Ireland Screen’s rich film archive, we were thinking about forest and bog, poverty and depopulation, but also cultural and natural wealth, stewardship, connections and community. We were aware of some of the present challenges to Sperrins people and landscapes. The Northern Ireland Assembly, fractured over conflicts about corruption and language, remained in hiatus throughout much of the Brexit negotiations, and as a result, marginalised communities in this marginalised part of the United Kingdom had little or no voice in discussions of what Brexit would mean for them. We know now that Brexit’s ramifications, far-reaching and as-yet-undetermined, pose the economic, cultural and political threat of isolation from either the Republic of Ireland or Britain. Further, in a shrinking world of often-finite resources, two of those on offer in the Sperrins – wind and gold – are controversially subject to new and renewed interest. Another resource, peat, traditionally valued, is coming under increasing scrutiny as the reality of climate change bites ever deeper and we understand more about the crucial role of bogs as carbon sinks. Ideas about ownership and belonging, outsiders and insiders, power and powerlessness, livelihoods and profits, worth and worthlessness, industry and nature, are rearing up and causing not only disagreement, but breaking down relationships in communities and even in families.

Our curated selection of scenes and sounds from the archive, interspersed with our own recordings, made on a walk in the hills south of the Glenelly River in April 2021, is only the beginning of what we hope will become a lengthy and in-depth exploration of north-of-Ireland uplands.

We watched television made by Olly McGilloway, Joe Mahon, Michael Duffy and Brian Black in the 1980s and 1990s, episodes of ITV’s travel series ‘About Britain’, film from the 1960s commissioned by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. Much of the footage was mellow in tone, focusing on the natural beauty of flora, fauna, water and geology. Shots of the wealth of archaeological remains demonstrated ancient relationships between people and these places. Occasionally, the painful history of plantation was



referenced, and claims made about who belonged where and why. Less obviously fraught subjects were addressed too – the transformation of an uplands glen into a reservoir to supply Derry city with water, the seasonal flash floods plaguing people living along the Glenelly River, the replacement of townlands with house numbers, road names and postcodes in our addressing system, the preservation of habitats for bats and dippers. The controversies of peat extraction were addressed. Local people appeared, passing on their knowledge and their memories, musing on the landscapes in which they lived and worked, joking and reflecting and sometimes stating a case. Other people appeared, discussing their work in forestry, goldmining, road maintenance. The archive offered an instructively meandering journey, all told.

Some elements stood out. We noted more than once that conservationists urged their case for one uplands place or another in the always-already ‘outside’ accents of North America, England and Anglo-Ireland. In most of the counter-arguments, by contrast, voices and words had that ‘inside’ shape conferred on them by an immersive local upbringing. I wondered what effect on the debate the accents in which it was conducted had. Often we make judgements about who people are and what right they have to speak based on how they sound. So accent, that fluid and often deceitful indicator of identity, can be as important as the language it shapes. Is it possible that conservationist and peat extractor could be set against each other not only by their different approaches to bog as a resource, but by the histories of power imbalance, privilege and poverty encased in how they speak?

Moving from accent to language itself, I remembered the apocryphal story that our six counties’ last native Irish speaker hailed from Tyrone uplands, and pounced, then, on an episode of **McGilloway’s Way** in which Olly visits the long-empty home of Peadar Haughey. Olly names him as the last in those parts to have Irish as his mother-tongue. Filmed in 1992, the house was on its way to ruin. Olly notes, with tacit approval, the blackbirds and swallows making its abandoned rooms their own, the frogs colonising the puddled yard, and a few conifer saplings seeding nearby. He predicts that in 20 or 30 years’ time these young trees will ‘hide Peadar Haughey’s old home from everybody’s view’. For Olly, the trees point to ‘some hope for the future, or some link with the future’. For me, because they are conifers, their colonisation of a once-peopled place is unsettling. It seems to foretell the erasure of memory so evident in that Leitrim glen. Thinking about the



still precarious foothold of Irish on the island, the idea of conifer woods over-creeping and concealing the home of one of the last native speakers in the North conjures diminution, dying-out. I had been struck by repeated references in different programmes to place-names pinpointing the historical presence of gold. Seskinore, it is suggested, means ‘bog of gold’; Slieveanorra, ‘mountain of gold’. In fact, a little further research turns up other meanings entirely for these names – ‘brownish bog’, and ‘mountain of the tail, or ridge’.⁶ Irish is no longer transparent and at hand for most of us, as a means of understanding the nature of our landscapes. We have lost something we cannot fully recover. Maybe Olly’s peaceable acceptance of a quiet counter-colonisation of domesticity by nature, where humans have relinquished their hold, is a less despairing response. The notion of loss arises again in the same episode, though, when I listen to local farmer Packie Haughey muse on his university-educated sons’ likely abandonment of the family land. He seems stoic as he speaks, though it is impossible not to feel a willing sadness beneath the matter-of-fact words. Olly listens without comment.

Continuing to consider the voices, words and language we were hearing in the archive material, we noticed how few women spoke for or about their places. The presenters of the programmes we watched were male, and the gentle and seemingly effortless rapport Olly McGilloway and Joe Mahon in particular had with the men to whom they spoke, perhaps arose in part from the solidarity of a shared gender. Working among communities in different parts of Northern Ireland today, decades after these programmes were made, we are conscious that still we more often come into contact with men than with women, unless we are seeking out a women’s group. As women ourselves, we wonder what stories the women of the uplands would have told in those times, had they been asked, or indeed had they put themselves forward to speak. We wonder what they would say now. One woman in the archive stood out, though silent and seen only fleetingly, minding her child and carrying out everyday tasks of home and farm. Philomena Kelly lived in the mid-1990s with her husband Brendan and their daughter Kathleen in a lonely house above Banagher Dam. As Joe Mahon points out, when the house was built, neither the dam nor the enormous conifer forest planted around it existed. By the time Joe visited, though, all the neighbours had died or gone, replaced by dark water, blackish spruce and empty hillside, bleached in a hot and dry summer. The Kellys drew their water from a well and had no electricity. Brendan is filmed speaking softly to Joe, in vivid images, of their lives there, imagining that should they leave the house,



6: Patrick McKay, *A Dictionary of Ulster Place-Names*, Belfast, The Institute of Irish Studies, Queen’s University Belfast, 1999, pp130 and 133.



he would feel 'like something – died... belonging to me'. He explains that while Kathleen is 'not used, I suppose... to lowland places', Philomena grew up 'along the road', and 'she'd be more ready to go'. Philomena is filmed in perpetual motion. Dark hair pinned high with a white clip, white blouse sitting loosely over a dark skirt, she moves briskly through the dappled garden, alone and with Kathleen, here dipping water, there carrying an aluminium kettle, there a bucket of feed. We do not hear her voice.

Our own recordings reflect one sunny, windy day's walking in a few spots around the Glenelly River. We wandered the road and lane circling Craignamaddy, poked about in Glenlark forest and loitered on the riverbank in Plumbridge. We encountered four people. One was walking her dog. Two, travelling in a car, stopped to ask us directions, though judging from their accents they were nearer to local than we are. The fourth was a farmer, whom we alerted to a stray lamb we had inadvertently driven before us, away from its field and flock. Each of these exchanges was courteous and pleasant. No one queried our camera and tripod. We know that the presence of strangers with equipment in out-of-the-way places is not always welcome. Looking at place through a camera, visibly capturing images of house and farm and field and forest and bog to distribute among unknown networks, is a much more challenging activity than looking at place through eye alone. I know from my time in Leitrim, too, that walkers on rural roads and boreens are not common, and draw attention. With wounding disputes over the pursuit of Tyrone gold alive again, our ramblings and recordings could have been a cause for challenge, suspicion and even hostility. We were grateful that in the end they were not. We chose not to arrange interviews. Conscious of our limited time, we did not want to contribute to a culture of hit-and-run extraction established by researchers, journalists and industries. Throughout this process, we aimed not to judge, nor to preach, but merely to look and listen and notice, remain aware of the boundaries of our understanding, and share what roused our curiosity. Time spent in place, experiencing it through the senses, deepened those insights gleaned from reading, watching and listening to the research of others. We hope there will be more of both. We ended our day in the garden of the colleague I mentioned, drinking tea and eating barmbrack, exchanging news, discussing our day's routes, hearing more of this spot or that local, enjoying lofty views of the sunlit hills.

Text by Bryonie Reid

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