

Relics of Memory on an Irish Peninsula

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My fellow Irishman Seamus Heaney once wrote a poem entitled 'Relic of Memory'. In it he described how the presence of a simple 'oatmeal coloured' stone in the geography classroom rendered a simplistic understanding of the world and its creation obsolete.

I admit I have always admired this idea, although we bear witness to it through photography – a kind of 'visual poetry' perhaps. We see the 'relics of memory' through the lens of our cameras. Many consider the camera to be a time machine of sorts. We use it to capture time, freeze it in an instant and preserve the light and its infinite nuances forevermore in a two dimensional representation of the real world.

The act of photography transports the photographer (and hopefully the viewer) into another world. One in which time slows down. With the technical elements of our craft - composition, shutter speed and aperture considerations, the photographer must consider the subject in a more studious manner than the casual viewer. The issue of travelling to any location and the business of waiting around for the right light slows things down too. For those of us who deal in landscapes, we also usually have an enduring interest and unflinching passion for the subjects that we choose to photograph. Any personal exploration with a camera has to transport us to another place. Otherwise there'd be little to keep drawing us back.

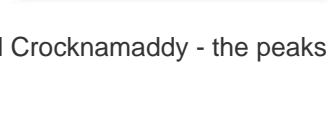
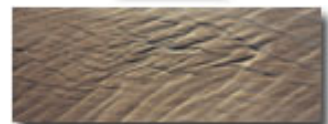
For me, I have been frequently drawn back to the north west of Ireland – County Donegal; the Inishowen peninsula, to be precise. From my base in Belfast, a two or three hour drive is required each time. This, combined with the infuriatingly imprecise nature and unpredictability of the Irish weather, especially in winter, can act as a bit of a disincentive, unless you devote your time to a long unbroken stay - something that I hope to do later in the year. However, I have come to enjoy the wider explorations of my surroundings that photography has sparked. This in turn has led me to question the deeper truths evidenced in the Irish landscape. For the Inishowen peninsula this is no different.

Due to its age, the landscape here is filled with clues. I believe that in slowing down our approach we can come to understand these clues better. And this, I believe, will ultimately assist in our own interpretation and presentation of the landscape through our photographs.

Inishowen is an old place. With the exception of the area around Londonderry, and the north-western border of Lough Foyle, it is made up of a very ancient series of rocks, known as the 'Dalradian Series'. These rocks stretch across the peninsula in broad bands, each one extending from the south-west to the north-east, sometimes as much as two to three miles in width. Consisting essentially of quartzites, schists and limestones, they represent a series of marine sediments - muds, sands and banks of shells - which have been compressed, and much altered in appearance, through the long and sustained action of immense heat and pressure. Added to this mix of ancient rocks are newer rocks poured in the form of hot liquid which later cooled. Examples of this are found in the strangely shaped granites along the coast south of Dunaff Head. The more weather resistant tougher quartzites have been responsible for shaping Slieve Snaght, Slieve Main and Crocknamaddy - the peaks of the highest mountains on the peninsula.

If you look at all of these rocks up close, or mountains from afar, you literally step back in time. You are witness to the effects of time over vast periods.

As I stood within an Inishowen cove one afternoon - struggling to find foothold amongst the many coloured pebbles, in awe of the shapes and colours, I realised that the continual tidal actions and subsequent wash of pebbles had slowly weathered out the shape of the dark green granite. I watched the tide creep slowly up into the cove and I wondered how long this smoothing action must



have been going on. It struck me as a long time whatever way you look at it.

Out to the west sits the Atlantic Ocean and the Fanad peninsula, also part of the northern Donegal coastline. A view likely unchanged in thousands of years - certainly at least since the end of the last Ice Age. I'm reliably informed that the curved stones here are hard dark green varieties of well exposed granite known as 'epidiorites'. Their shapes are an otherworldly addition to the dramatic coastline of western Inishowen. These close-up 'relics of memory' along with the surrounding wider landscapes in Donegal hold a fascination for me. These are the clocks, and the time machines – not just of the daily tidal ritual but ones that have tracked periods of thousands, or even millions of years.

Inishowen has undoubtedly paid witness to the timeless actions of nature and these actions are particularly evident in the intimate landscape. This winter, I found the strands and coves of Inishowen particularly deserted on the afternoons I visited them.

The wider vistas reminded me of another Heaney poem 'Peninsula', which was perhaps inspired by Inishowen, where Heaney writes of how, after driving around the peninsula all day, 'still with nothing to say', you now 'uncode' all landscapes. This is, after all, the crux of what we as photographers must do. We can take great pleasure in uncoding our own landscapes, and then in presenting our own vision of them to the wider public.

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Dylan McBurney lives just outside Belfast with his wife Caroline near to the Glens of Antrim and in close proximity to his family. From this base, Dylan tries to spend at least six months a year on the road, exploring and photographing new landscapes within Ireland.

Dylan's stock photography is represented online by the Alamy agency and his imagery has been published and exhibited internationally.

Dylan regularly leads small workshops across Ireland. His latest photographic adventure is an ongoing exploration of the Northern and Western coastline of Ireland, a landscape of incredible beauty, sparse population and changing light. You can view more of his work on his website www.standinginireland.com.

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