Michael Casey

SCULPTOR

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SCULPTURES 1974-2004

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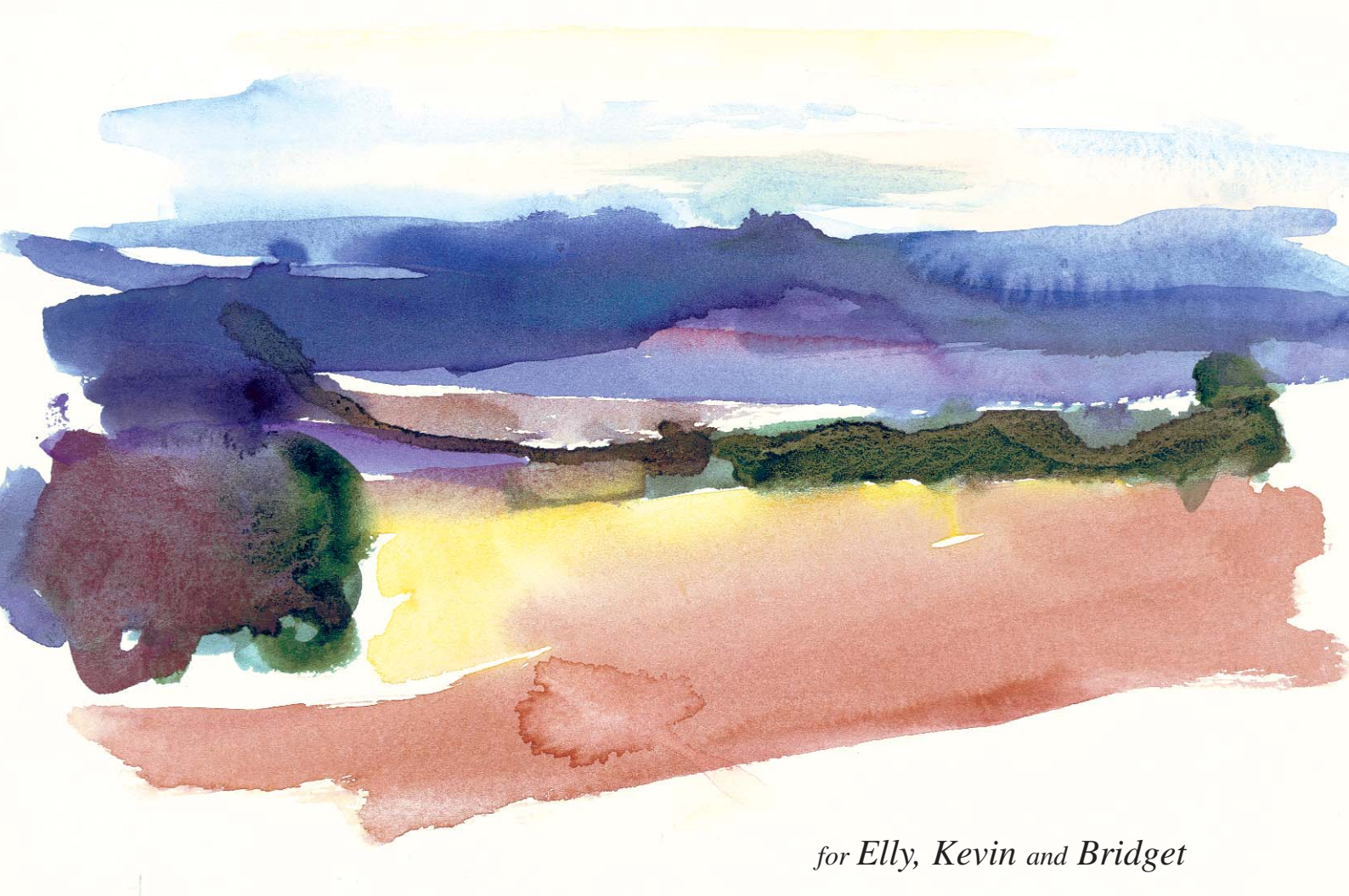


for ***Elly, Kevin*** *and* ***Bridget***

Foreword

John Feehan

THE SCULPTURES OF MICHAEL CASEY

The metals from which some of the most precious artifacts that adorn our human world are fashioned lie first for ages entombed in ordinary rock which meets many of the common needs of our lives: such as making the walls with which we organise and enclose our everyday living. In just this way the precious timbers from which Michael Casey fashions his wonderful sculptures have been entombed for millennia in the depths of the peat that has provided warmth for Irish homes since the dawn of history. But there is a great difference between Michael Casey and the sculptor in bronze or gold, who can mould his metal to any form he chooses. In the case of bog timber the artistic form is already there. What any piece of entombed wood can become as art is pre-determined by a uniqueness of form which is hidden within, and which has been shaped by the responses of the once living tree to the unique conditions in which it grew. The sculptor as he stands in contemplation before the silent timber must become like a shaman or druid, attuned to hidden meaning in a way that is increasingly rare, because the acquisition of such tuning takes time, and it takes interior silence and requires you to listen with those senses that hold the familiar five senses together, for what is beneath.

He is like the landscape architect in this: no landscape architect can impose something on landscape that is not a response to something that is already there. The sculptor in bog wood must be able to divine this hidden form, able to summon again the wind and sun of vanished summers so that he can respond and develop with his shaping tools the human metaphor in which this unique form can express itself. No sculptor in our time has done so with greater insight than Michael Casey. Should it be a swallow that emerges, its wings may be lifted by the winds of a summer four thousand years gone. If it is a hurler, the strength of his arm may come from the energy of a sun that warmed the Bronze Age. If it is an altar or lectern cut to carry the books in which the word of God is written, its revealed inherent beauty is all the more appropriate, for it is fitting the revealed word should rest upon the shoulders of so venerable a symbol of the natural world that is the first and most profound and fundamental revelation of the world's ultimate meaning.

Introduction

Tom Kenny

Michael Casey's reputation precedes him. I had heard a great deal about him and his work before I met him for the first time in his studio in Barley Harbour. It was obvious from the start that he was a renaissance man, with many gifts and talents.

Michael is a true craftsman who, having mastered his materials, began to express himself artistically, turning folk art into fine art. His technical skills and his unique vision transform the 'peasant material' into art works that range from the classical to the contemporary. He recognised early that bog wood was not simply a nuisance to the turfcutter, suitable only for burning, but rather a valuable medium for carvers and sculptors all over the country.

The first thing you notice on entering Michael's studio is the atmosphere, a heady seductive aroma of beeswax and wood, of antiquity and creativity. This is a magical place full of fantastical pieces of oak, yew and pine in various colours and textures. These strange wooden creatures exude a spiritual calm, and their tactile quality invites you to manually experience and caress them, even to hug them. They are all silently drip-drying internally, waiting for the master's touch, as he moves them around, while searching for shapes in the wood. These shapes are not always immediately evident. One piece stood in his studio for eleven years, before the thrilling moment when he saw Cuchulain emerging from the wood on horseback.

This is Casey's kingdom where he has built a platform high up on the roof of his studio. He goes up there very early on fine mornings, to eat his breakfast while watching nature weave its magic on his beloved hinterland. He is so finely tuned to his landscape that he can listen to the silence. Few people derive as much pleasure, inspiration and rich fruit from nature.

Within these covers is a collection of essays, photographs, reviews and quotations, which, like pieces of a jigsaw, come together to give us an overall portrait of the artist and the man. These evocative words and images are representative of 35 years of Michael's work, both public and domestic. They give us a rare insight into how the sculptor approaches his work; how he uses the grain of the wood, 'the logic of form' as he says himself; how his imagination connects with his natural materials to produce such sensuous tactile exquisite images. This book is a celebration of the vision and creativity of a unique talented man.

Kenny Galleries, Galway.

The Road Builder
Bog Yew h.204 (80")
Corlea Trackway Centre, Duchas, 1996

"His hands caress the gnarled stumps

of oak and yew,

now bleached bone-white in wind and sun,

in the bog's dark embrace.

And from those lifeless lumps

of stricken trees,

he coaxes a galaxy of living forms –

a soaring eagle, a leaping fish..."

P.J Walsh

Flight Form
Bog Yew h.41 (16")
Model for Sculpture, 2004, Shannon Aerospace

Ainmhí na Spéire
Bog Oak h.440 (14'6")
Dublin Airport, 1994

Plinth for Altar
Bog Yew h.92 (36")

"I would take the sculpture out on my trolley into the garden...and allow the winter sun to light it up, ... as the figures began to emerge in the fusion of sunlight and instinct, there were moments when it was no longer a piece of wood but a celebration of life...."

Michael in conversation with Sean MacRéamoinn

Shekina Sculpture Garden
Bog Yew h.168 (66")
Shekina Sculpture Garden, Wicklow, 1992

Slumbering in the shadows just beyond a slow-moving brook is a stunning piece of work by Michael Casey fashioned from 4,500-year-old bog yew. Catherine has titled this piece *Creation*. With its striking lines and flowing roots she feels the creation of 'order out of chaos' and the emergence of this work from the bowels of the earth show clear links with the creation story in general and the creation of man and woman in particular. There is also a strong sense of sexual symbolism about this piece, introducing yet another facet of the creation story.

Shekina Sculpture Garden[1]

Mother and Child
Bog Yew h.61 (24")
Private Collection

Mother and Child
Bog Yew h.143 (56")
St. John's Catholic Primary School, Gravesend, 2002

Céide Fields, Totem
Bog Pine h.545 (18')
Céide Fields Centre, 1992
with Celtic Roots

My furthest memory of our bog is not of turf or turf cutting but of the tree. It lay in the bottom of the bog, blocking the flow of the water and keeping the boghole permanently wet. It was almost impossible to get the bottom two "tops" dry, definitely impossible to get the ass and cart into the boghole to take out the turf. At first he tried to chop it in two with an axe not realising its full girth, still hidden in the bog. A year later after the meitheal of neighbours had finished cutting the turf he put a rope on the top of the trunk and tried to haul it upright with the help of the neighbours. Still without success.

Then a quarter of a century later, long after the bog and the tree had been abandoned, he persuaded an obliging neighbour with a Hymac to take his tracked machine onto the bog and the tree was lifted onto the turf bank from where it had lain for over forty centuries. Another quarter of a century later the Céide Fields Centre was about to be built and its main concourse needed a striking centrepiece. My father's tree, still showing the axe marks he had inflicted on it during his years of failure, again stands proudly erect four thousand years after it was blown down in what was to become our turf bank in Belderrig.

Seamas Caulfield
Celebrating Boglands[6]

"Drying and hardening in the air, bog-deal had uses unthought of today, from roof-beams to flaming torches for night salmon-spearing, from crude furniture to tree-fibre rope. The awe of resurrection can be felt at the pine trunk that soars in the heart of north Mayo's Céide Fields centre – a massive polished totem that all feel bound to caress."

Michael Viney
Irish Times

Exhibition Review

Alyce Mahon[2]

Before the Fall
Bog Yew h.84 (33")
Private Collection

Lost Dreams
Bog Yew h.28 (11")
Private Collection

"I would take it out on my trolley into the garden and allow the winter sun to light it up and as the figures began to emerge in the fusion of sunlight and instinct, there were moments when it was no longer a piece of wood but a celebration of life...."

These are the words of Michael Casey, a wood sculptor who is pioneering in his near-spiritual approach to his art. He is an artist who allows his media to speak for themselves, and his forms to emerge by their own will. For not only does he leave his raw material to grow into its own destined shape amidst nature and time, but he also works with the natural grains and twists of his wood so as to arrive at a happy medium between created and found form, art and craft.

Casey's present exhibition in the Kenny Art Gallery is simply breathtaking. The Gallery space is totally transformed into a sort of gallery-without-walls, filled with sculptures of every organic shape and size. Combining Bog Oak, Yew and Deal, Casey manages to merge his raw materials with a superb variety of styles, capturing both a Henry Moore-like biomorphism and a German Expressionist rawness. In fact many of his works are reminiscent of medieval icons of Northern Europe, particularly his small figurative pieces which are both celebratory in subject and macabre in texture. I refer to such figurative pieces as *Before the Fall* or *Double Visions*, both done in that hard, black Bog Oak.

Many of Casey's figurative pieces are balletic in their fluidity, following the inherent form of the wood to emerge as simple yet intricate forms such as those in *Lost Dreams* or *Morning Thoughts* where small figurines ponder in the arms of wizened Bog Yew.

Fertility
Wych Elm h.107 (42")
Private Collection

Power Centre
Wych Elm h.76 (30")
Artists Collection, 1981

There is a strong sense of femininity about this show too, for many of the pieces are not just crying out to be stroked but seem complete and fertile in themselves, capturing a kind of abstract creativity. A large womb-like form aptly titled *Fertility* would be perfect for a maternity ward, while another large piece, rather like an eardrum in shape, entitled *Power Centre* would enhance any lobby space. That said, you could just as easily place Casey's work within a confined space, for this is where the unique quality of wood lies – it warms up space rather than dominates it as stone would.

Evidently there is a stoic philosophy about these art works, one which is in awe of nature and yet seeks to express very human emotions and objects through it. All of the titles of the works on exhibit belie Casey's modest statement of allowing the art to emerge on its own, for there is a Michelangelesque attitude within this notion: in the sense that the artist is removing the art from the hands of nature, lifting the form from the natural block, and in so doing adding that unique human element which allows these primordial shapes and movements to speak to the public.

The Lovers
Bog Yew h.145 (57")
Artists Collection, 1979

Works like *The Embrace,* two elongated shapes barely touching; or *The Lovers* a pair of hands onto a coupling piece of Yew, are a delight of the eye and terribly calming to experience. Like Paddy Kavanagh, Michael Casey has succeeded in lifting art out of the dark sods of the West and in so doing tastefully combines a Celtic and Catholic mysticism.

Eagle
Bog Oak h.102 (40")
Chesworth House, West Sussex, 2002

Sanctuary Art
Bog Yew 1997
St. John's Church, Gravesend, Kent
with Celtic Roots

Sanctuary Art
Bog Yew 1997
St. John's Church, Gravesend, Kent
with Celtic Roots

Saint and Scholar
Bog Oak h.198 (78")
Expo '90 Osaka Japan

At the Osaka Garden and Greenery Exposition 1990 in Japan, Ireland built two Gardens, one Outdoor and one Indoor. The Outdoor Garden was adjudicated the best Garden in the Festival and was awarded the Gold Medal. In the Indoor Garden Section, Ireland was awarded a Bronze Medal and third place. Seventy-nine Countries and 53 International Organisations participated in Expo '90. The International Panel of Judges, drawn from the five Continents, were appointed by B.I.E.

The Crown Prince of Japan opened the Garden Festival on April 1st. It will close on September 30th. The average daily attendance is 150,000 visitors. It is expected that up to 24 million people will visit Expo '90 before it closes. Afterwards the Irish Garden will be maintained in perpetuity by the Osaka Municipal Authorities as part of an Urban Park. Expo '90 covers 380 acres (153 hectares) and construction costs came to one billion pounds.

We admire Saints in Ireland for their achievements not only for their self-knowledge and self-realisation, but especially for the standards they lived by, their sense of integrity, inspiration to others, leadership and discipline. The craftsman needs many of these qualities too, to achieve the highest standards. These attributes are evidenced in the finely turned wood pieces in Elm, Ash, Oak and Cherry by Peter Sweetman, the elegant and sophisticated chairs and table by Knut Klimmek and the exquisitely detailed hand-cut lead crystal glassware of Waterford Crystal.

The central pieces of the exhibit are the two life-size figures in Bog Oak, *The Saint and the Scholar* by Michael Casey. The wood is carbon-dated at over 6,000 years old. The Oak is our National Tree. This wood is found in bogs throughout Ireland. The colour of the wood is changed to brown black by the solvents from the peat which impregnated the wood and preserved it in the bog for six thousand years until found and extracted by man. This unique wood is ideal for making valuable joinery, turnery and large-scale sculpture pieces.

Swan
Beech h.127 (50")
Private Collection

Tree Life
Bog Oak h.74 (29")
Artists Collection

Bald Eagle
Bog Yew h.92 (36")
Private Collection, 1997

"In bogs, I find great inspiration – not for my work and the visual aspect of it, but for courage and inspiration for this journey we are all making. Often on warm days I can sit there all day on a heathery stump and the mystery and magic of the place find corresponding echoes deep within me."
Celebrating Boglands.[6] *Michael Casey.*

Sean MacRéamoinn[3]

Whatever his support and however strong his sense of community, the artist is always, finally, alone. Alone with his material, and his private vision. Medium and vision may match easily, perhaps too easily, leading to a bland and predictable resolution. Or the materials, the medium, may be so much at odds with the maker's insight or imagining, so much *'le bloc résistant',* that all ends in frustration and sterility. Happily, the middle way where encounter passes through conflict and survives, perhaps explodes, into a new synthesis may and often does provide the resolution. But as there are many media – language, music, movement, metal, paint – there are as many times more modes of interplay, each presenting its own challenge.

Undoubtedly the material, and its inherent shape is what lends a piece like *The Bald Eagle* or *The Cloud* its remarkable given quality, so that one could not imagine it made in any other way. But what precisely makes his work unique, what gives it its specific power – often quite strongly emotional, even erotic – has to come from the creator, when he looks at his creation and sees it is good. And to me the supreme example of both given-ness and creative power is the deeply moving *Helping Hands,* which stands in the reception hall of Mullingar General Hospital. All who look on it – sick or whole – better, all who touch and feel it, must surely be touched in return by some outreach of that great loving strength.

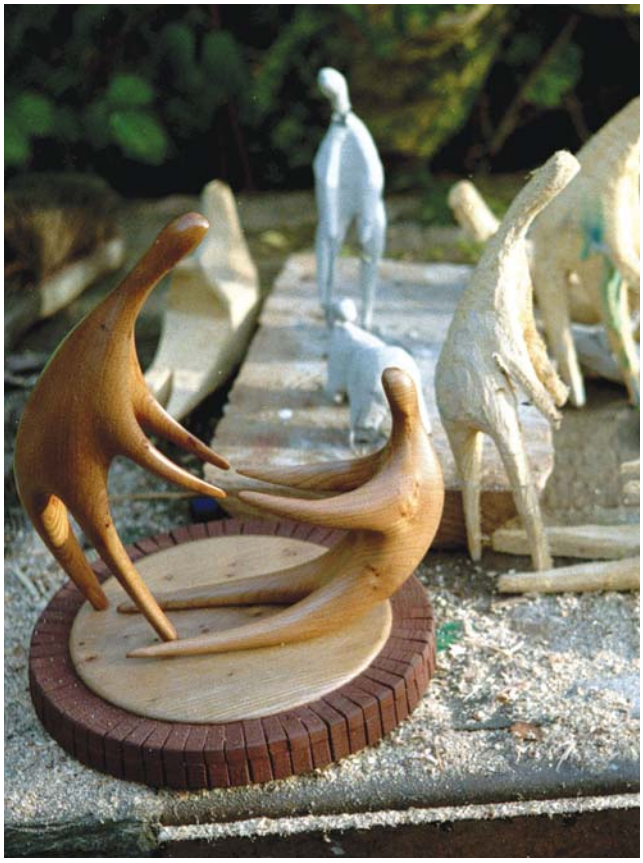
Helping Hands
Wych Elm h.214 (84")
Mullingar General Hospital, 1987

Mullingar General Hospital

Niall Delaney[4]

The sculpture depicts two life-sized figures, one helping the other off the ground. “The forms are not figurative and lack any facial expressions. When you look across a busy street you recognise a person’s total physical form and movements. Thus I am relying on the total expression to communicate to the viewer the concept of this sculpture.”

Even though the figures are frozen in wood, it is the movement and rhythm they suggest that the viewer looks for and takes pleasure in viewing. Art has that brief power, to free us out of our permanent egos and take us into the flux and movement of life. This is the great paradox within all of us; the one part demands permanence and the other longs for freedom to fly away. Artists have always known this; didn’t Freud say “wherever he went a poet had been there before him”



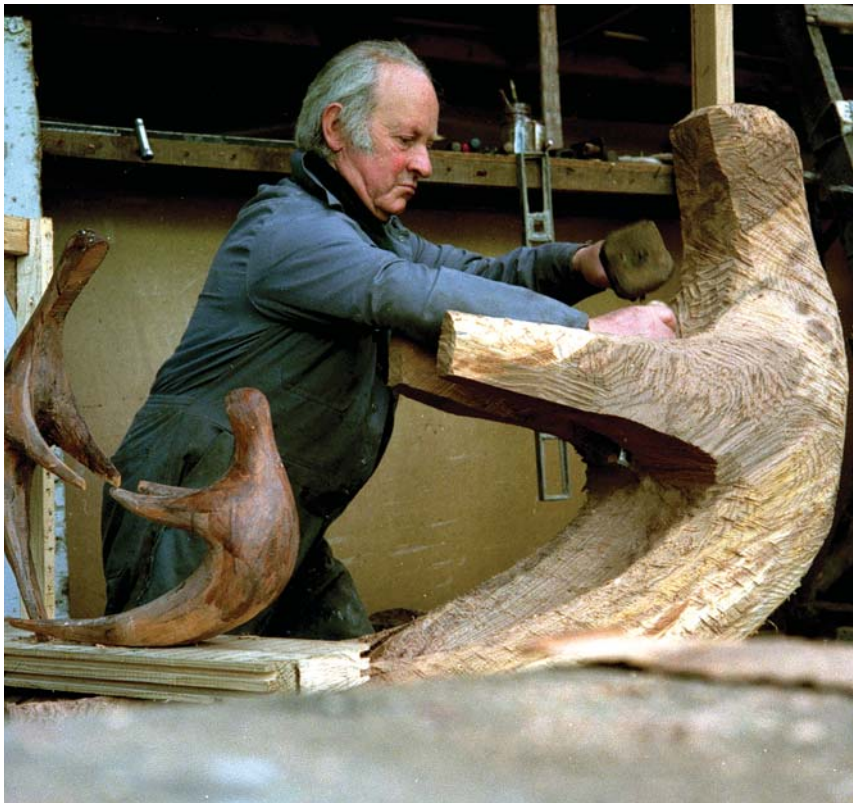
The first step involved drawing a sketch of the intended model, which was submitted to the Health Board for approval. They liked what they saw and gave Michael the go-ahead with the sculpture. Both the Health Board and Michael pride themselves on the fact that it’s a locally orientated project, with the timber used coming from forests in the Newtowncashel district.

The wood of the Wych Elm tree was chosen and Michael spent two weeks working on a model one-sixth the size of the end product, and began construction with this as a guide.

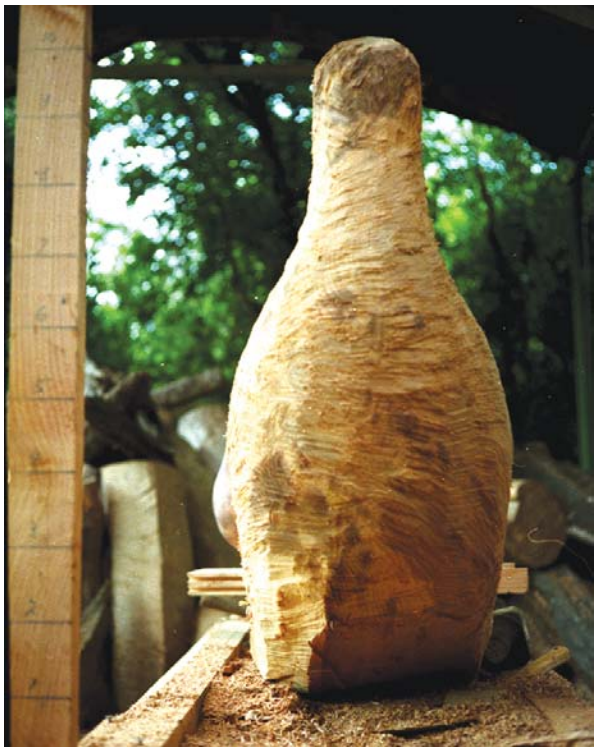
Unforeseen problems included the timber having a moisture content of 60% – for timber not to crack, its moisture content has to be no more than 10%, and the resulting process of doing that is both slow and tedious. Michael initially brought samples of wood to three commercial kilns, which proved unsuccessful. He was left with only one option – to build his own kiln.

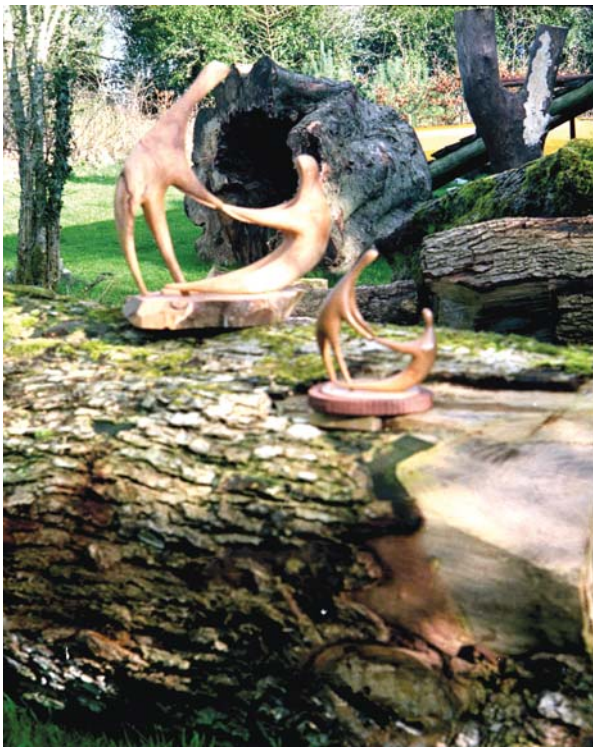
Using the measurement specifications of an English designer, it took Michael three weeks to build his kiln. It's totally insulated, with walls five inches thick and with a set temperature control. The moisture leaves the timber by means of a fan guiding it into a pipe. The wood was in the kiln for 8 months – at the start of the drying process 2 gallons of water per day left the wood.

Michael Casey starts work at 9 am every morning and says he has to try to live “a very disciplined life” when he is working on a sculpture. Summer time is his favourite time of year because he can work outdoors “until about 11 pm, and then fall into bed totally exhausted but very happy.” His favourite part of the day is evening time, and he says that he dislikes interruptions when he is working. A lover of classical music, he likes to listen to the radio when he is working, and says it is difficult to explain “the sheer joy of chiselling away at a sculpture with music in the background on a lovely summer’s evening.”



The rough figure cut out of the wood after being de-moisturised, there followed months of back-breaking work of chiselling, drilling, and sanding down, to attain the required shape and smoothness.





"In working on a sculpture like this it was necessary to impose a concept and forms onto the wood. The most dominant form in this sculpture is the oval. This was Elly's idea – it runs throughout the sculpture from the base to the head. The oval is a far more interesting shape than the circle."

The finished product will adorn the entrance to Mullingar Hospital, serving as a reminder to all of the dedication of those in the nursing profession, while at the same time being aesthetically pleasing to the human eye.

Chalice
Bog Oak h.30.5 (12")
Beatification of Edmund Rice Ceremony , 1996

Today the sacred vessels of this new bread and new wine add their own Celtic flavour to this altar in Rome. Buried for over 5,000 years in our fertile bogs, these roots of the fallen oak have been returned to the light of this special and Holy Day and given a new life, a new polish and purpose, by artist and priest, as John Paul II, our Pope, declares Edmund Rice, our countryman, to be Holy and Blessed and we empty vessels, are nourished afresh and made to rejoice anew by the Bread of Life and the Cup of Eternal Salvation.

This chalice, a sacred masterpiece of Celtic creativity and inspired craftsmanship, is unique in its evocative symbolism, yet as natural as the earth that first gave it life, fashioned it and preserved it. It is an ancient offering from the heart of Ireland to celebrate the timeless contribution to humanity of Edmund Rice.

“I got the commission in March, the Chalice was to be used at the Beatification Ceremony in Rome in October. Nothing “came to me” in the months of May or June and then late one evening in July I saw it – a hand holding the vessel “appeared” in the centre of a large bog oak root. I ran to get my chain saw before it was gone.

“It’s no way to work to order, but it’s very exciting and quite a relief when it happens. I suppose it’s a knowing not with the brain but with the body, a kind of instinctive wisdom. I wish my instincts could be so well tuned as that bee. If we could look into its psyche (if it has one) we would see a highly organised system for its survival. Instinct is not blind; if it was, how could a swallow find its way from Africa to my roof each year? I suppose as we progress towards more rational beings and depend only on our brains we will lose this great gift of the body. Sometimes it comes to me in a flash, just looking at a piece just out of the bog; other pieces are here several years waiting to reveal their potential.”

Bog Builder

Catherine O'Connell[6]

Without Sphagnum moss there would be no bogs in Ireland. As it grows Sphagnum moss slowly raises the surface of a bog, forming layers of peat below. Sphagnum mosses are natural sponges in the plant world, absorbing water through the surface of their leaves, which is stored in large cells. When alive, a clump of spongy Sphagnum can absorb up to twenty times its own weight in water. With such an appetite for water it is not surprising that Sphagnum mosses thrive in bogs where conditions are always damp and humid.

As many as fifteen different species make up a living multi-coloured Sphagnum carpet over the bog surface. Individual Sphagnum plants never really die, because they constantly grow upwards from a bud at the tip of their stems. Below the tip, dormant, but living buds occur among the branches on the moss stems to about twenty centimetres depth. Below this the old moss plant is dead, its structure has collapsed and it is accumulating as peat because there isn't enough oxygen to bring about rotting. As a result, layers of dead Sphagnum moss accumulate slowly, perhaps no more than one millimetre per year over thousands of years to make a bog in which the peat can be up to twelve meters deep.

The carpet of Sphagnum mosses is not flat. Some Sphagnum mosses grow tightly packed together to form hummocks or cushions. Scientists have counted 50,000 Sphagnum plants in a hummock covering one square metre. Leafy branches pressed to the stems help absorb water, keeping the hummock moist on the inside on the hottest days. Other Sphagnum mosses form loose mats or grow as single plants surrounded by water in pools. Wherever it grows, each Sphagnum moss has a vivid colour – cherry red, brilliant orange, gingery brown, day-glow green and yellow, and even salmon pink.

The Journey

Jeff O'Connell 1994[7]

It was only after I had been talking to Michael Casey for about half an hour that I suddenly realised what he reminded me of. He had been telling me about his love of wood – the feel of it, the smell of it – and how he used to silently let himself into a local carpenter's shop when nobody was around so he could plane it and sink his senses into its very texture.

As he spoke he tilted his chin slightly upwards, a smile spread across his face, his eyes crinkled and nearly closed, while his wispy hair, long on the sides and back but thin to balding on top, seemed to float around his head like some diaphanous halo.

For just a moment I forgot what he was saying and an image from an old forgotten storybook located itself on Michael Casey's face, an illustration by the artist Arthur Rackham from his edition of Grimm's *Fairy Tales.* Michael became a wood-elf.

The momentary vision must have passed away very quickly because I realised I hadn't missed anything of what he had been saying. But from that moment on I had a feeling I was not talking simply with a sculptor from Newtowncashel who was in town to get ready for his opening exhibition, but with a being who was in some mysterious way all of a piece with the wood he was telling me about.

Maybe it also had something to do with the kind of wood Michael Casey works with – bogwood. Bogwood – pine, oak, yew – is very old. Look now at a bog and you will see a flat, furze-covered, often marshy landscape. Close your eyes for a moment and open them again and you will see ancient forests that once covered Ireland. Close your eyes once again, open them, and now the forests are gone, the once mighty trees fallen and covered over, to be unearthed – a lovely word – thousands of years later.

This is Michael Casey's *materia prima,* his medium of the extraordinary works of bogwood art he has been creating now for the past twenty years or so, a representative selection of which is now on show at The Kenny Gallery here in Galway.

Some of these pieces, collected together for the first time in an exhibition, he has called *Lacht na Lathi,* or the swamp people, and there is a story around them which only serves to confirm my strange momentary vision of their maker.

Lacht na Lathi
Bog Yew h.58 (23")
Artists Collection

Michael Casey knew an old man by the name of Jimmy Feeley, whose death at the age of 90 years coincided with the artist's discovery of bogwood. "He was an old bachelor who lived along the Shannon. Jimmy told me of a swampy area along the shores of Lough Ree known as the Lismagawley Meadows and he said that there were creatures, half-human and half-frog, that lived in the meadows." Michael was struck by the old man's story and used bogwood to body forth his own vision of these strange inhabitants of the swampy meadows.

There is an altogether appropriate symmetry about Michael Casey taking pieces of the ancient wood and using it to shape the forms of mythological creatures glimpsed by an old man whose belief in things that seem to have no place in our technological, materialistic age linked him with the immemorial past of this ancient country of ours.

Sean MacRéamoinn has written of Michael Casey that "even as a child he loved wood". He was born in Lanesborough, County Longford, on the Shannon by Lough Ree. His father was a butcher and there was, he says, no connection with either art or, for that matter, wood at all.

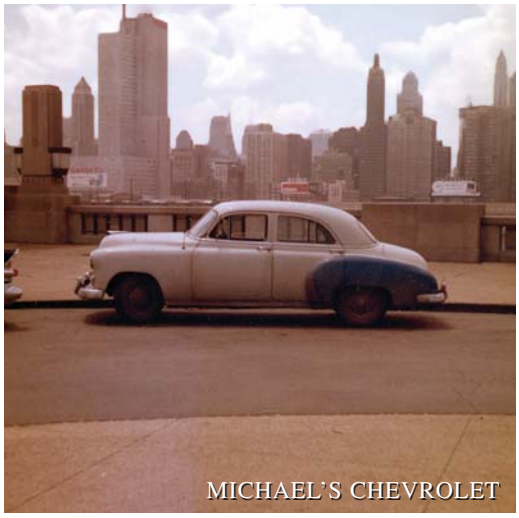
The smell of it, however, right from an early age entranced him like an exotic perfume. "There was a carpenter's shop close to where we lived, and on the weekends I discovered a secret way of getting into it. I used to enjoy smelling the wood and just touching it – the red deal and the white pine – and planing it. I had to go out by the door, and I'm sure he must have known that something was going on, but he never said anything."

He spent two unhappy years at college and at last his parents agreed to let him attend Longford Vocational School where he could study woodworking. When he finished school he got an apprenticeship as a builder's carpenter.

Early in the 1950's Michael started to travel around, going first to England and then to Canada and the United States. "I spent some time working in the building trade in London, Leeds and Portsmouth, and then in the mid 1950's I left for Canada, sailing down the St Lawrence to Montreal where I spent a year and then on to Toronto."

He crossed the border into the United States and went to Chicago for the summer where he worked with an English builder who was renovating luxury apartments along Lake Michigan.

LAKE MICHIGAN, CHICAGO, 1958



MICHAEL'S CHEVROLET

The heat and humidity finally got too much for him. So he bought an old Chevrolet for one hundred dollars and set off in the direction of the Rocky Mountains.

Along the way his career nearly came to an abrupt end when his brakes failed going around a bend. He had to jump out while the Chevy was going at 60 mph and watch his car tumble over onto the rocks on the side of the road. Fortunately the damage to the car was not serious and with a little help he got it going again and made it to San Francisco.

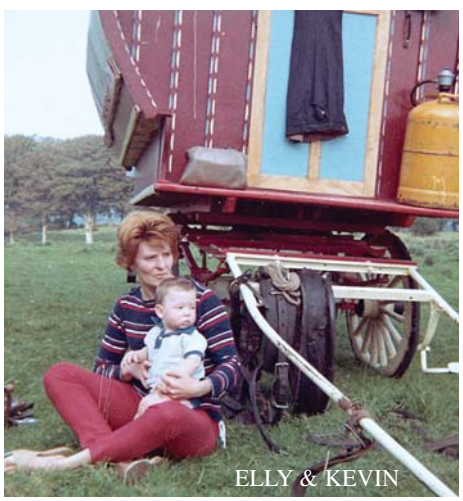
"I had to find work and the way a carpenter finds work is just to go along to a building site and ask if a carpenter is needed."

He found a site and asked for the carpenter-foreman. “I enquired if he had any work and he asked me if I had ever read Sean O’Casey. I told him I had and that I loved his work and that my own name was Casey. He said, “You’re hired!” It turned out the foreman was an aspiring playwright named Leonard Koel!

It was a good time for Michael. After working all week he would head up to Northern California on weekends, exploring and seeking out the Redwood forests. “Last year I went back there and it was still the same.”

MICHAEL IN YOSEMITE, CALIFORNIA, 1958

Michael finally returned to Ireland in 1960. “I always knew I’d come back. And I found a little site at Newtowncashel, overlooking the Shannon, which I was able to buy for the princely sum of £25.” Here he built a house and a carpenter workshop. “That’s where I’ve been ever since.”



ELLY & KEVIN

MICHAEL’S & ELLY’S HOME NEWTOWNCASHEL

In the years after returning to Ireland he did any kind of carpentry that came his way. He built a couple of gypsy caravans, including one for himself, which he used to take on excursions to Connemara.

It was through the caravan that he met his wife. He put an ad in *The Sunday Times* and a young woman from the Netherlands named Elly Hundshied answered it. “She came over and rented it and that’s how I met her!” They married in 1968 and their son Kevin was born in 1969.

It was about this time that, as Sean MacRéamoinn puts it, Michael Casey “felt the first stirrings of a creativity which sought expression beyond the decent limits of his trade.”

“Perhaps if someone had noticed my love of wood at an early age I would not have been so late getting started as a sculptor, but they didn’t. I gradually became fascinated with the huge pieces of bogwood that I saw around me, and the shapes started suggesting ideas to me.”

The craftsman in Michael Casey began to turn into the artist as he meditated on bog oak, bog yew and bog fir. Although very different from the kinds of wood he had been used to work with, these ancient, semi-fossilised timbers were still wood and, as MacRéamoinn explains so well, Michael was by this stage of his life a “true *saor adhmaid,* a master of woodcraft”.

His first real work of art came almost by accident. He had been working on a piece of bogwood when suddenly a form began to emerge from the shape of the wood itself. He was so excited he ran into the house and brought his wife back to see what had happened.

He called the piece *The Dancer,* and he says it was in some mysterious way a response to the work of the late Barbara Hepworth whose untimely death in a fire he had been reading about in *The Irish Times.* He still has this piece; it’s one he will never sell.

Michael admits that he had never really even looked at art books, but he felt a kinship with Hepworth and her remarkable wood sculptures. This was confirmed when he visited her home and workshops in St. Ives, Cornwall. A few years later he found another kinship when he found himself in Paris, visiting the Museum of Modern Art, and wandered into a room where the studio of the great Romanian wood-sculptor, Brancusi, had been reconstructed.

“I don’t think I was ever so excited in my whole life as I was seeing this studio. His soaring birds became an inspiration to me and I suppose my herons are a response to them.”

For the past twenty years Michael Casey has been carving bogwood, perfecting his vision and exploring the different potentialities of his medium. As visitors to “Guisach” his current exhibition at The Kenny Gallery, will see for themselves, his sculptures are truly remarkable.

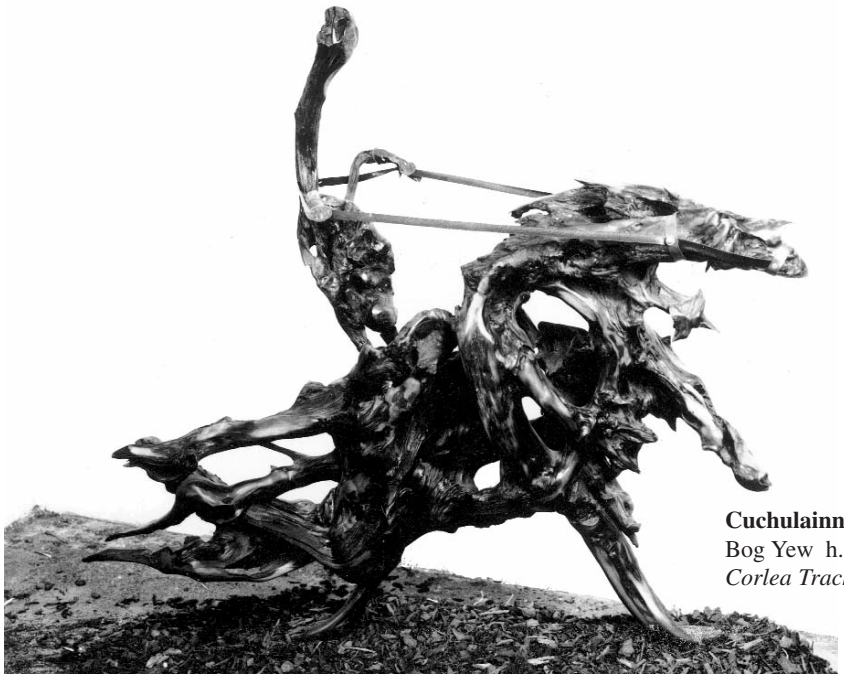
Sculpting is a very old art. Some of the earliest “art works”, if you can call them that, that we have, are the small stone figurines of female figures dating from the Stone Age.

It was during the Renaissance, however, that people like Alberti began thinking about just what the sculptor does when he or she is involved in the process of making. Alberti made an important distinction between modelling and sculpting. The modeller, he said, proceeds by “adding material or taking it away”, those who “take away and bring to light the ...potentially hidden...we call them sculptors.”

The Dancer
Bog Pine h.163 (64")
Artists Collection 1974

It was a distinction that found its most memorable expression in the magnificent work of Michelangelo, who said that when he worked on a block of marble he was simply freeing the form that was hidden inside.

Michael Casey's wood sculptures exemplify both approaches. In the powerful work like *Cuchulainn and the Horse* he has taken a piece of bog oak and perceived a form inherent in a gnarled and twisted shape.



Cuchulainn and the Horse
Bog Yew h.137 (54")
Corlea Trackway Centre, Longford, Duchas, 1997

On the other hand, in a piece like *The Cloud* he has shaped and polished the wood to create a form that is smooth, graceful and overwhelmingly sensuous.

But in both cases – and you will see many examples of what we might call the "rough and smooth" in his current exhibition – the defining force is the very individual vision of the artist, either shaping and adding and subtracting from the chosen material, or "coaxing" out from the particular piece of wood something that one might imagine had been waiting there, over several millennia, for the sculptor's liberating art.

Michael Casey still puts down "carpenter" in the section of whatever official forms he has to fill out, and this, too, is typical of the man. He has never forgotten that he began as a craftsman and made his living for many years as a tradesman.

Now, thanks to the assistance of Bord na Móna with whom he has a longstanding and fruitful relationship, he passes on his skills to a new generation of woodcarvers and potential sculptors through the Celtic Roots initiative.

At present three young men, selected for their abilities, are training under Michael's experienced and discerning eye in a new workshop, which is being managed by Helen Connelly, a Bord na Móna Engineer with a flair for art. In a sense things have come full circle for him. Many years ago now, he served his apprenticeship, and now his own apprentices, who will learn from this *saor adhmaid* of the beauty of wood and the secrets that lie within the ancient bogwood that Michael has spent much of his life discovering.

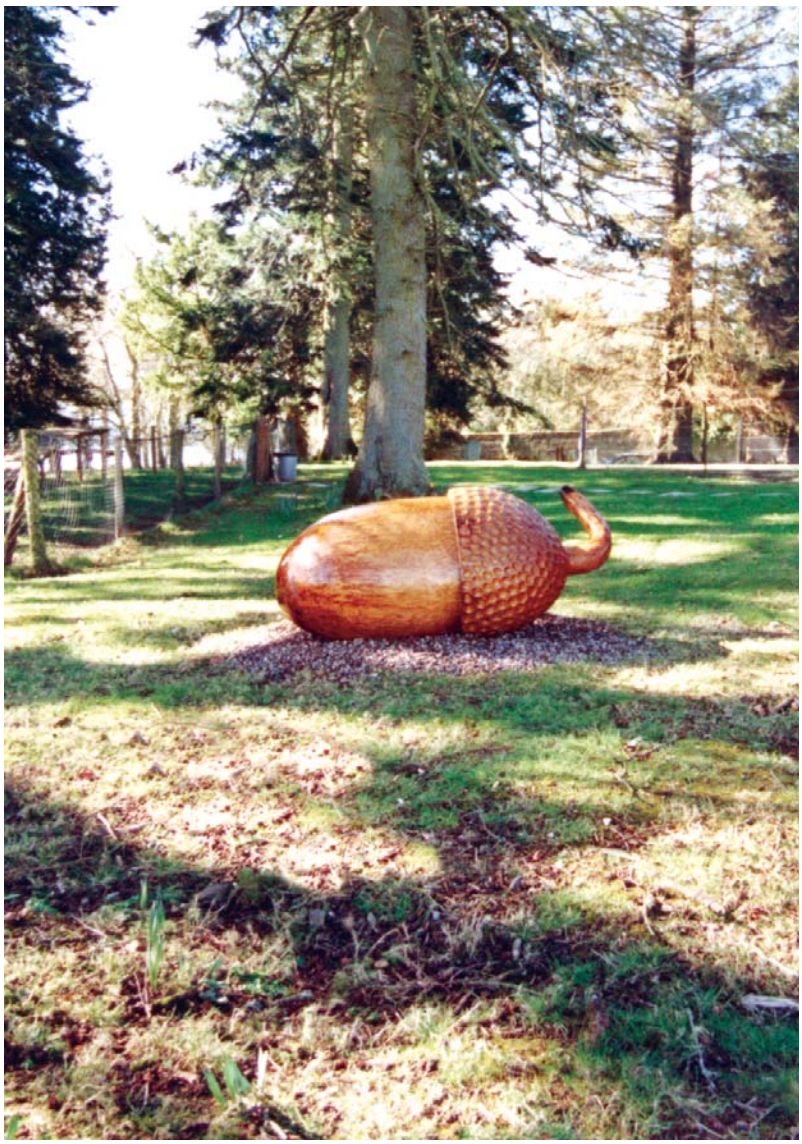
Don't miss this splendid exhibition. Take your time, though, as you go around the Gallery, and allow the special qualities of Michael's magical creation to work on your eyes and your imagination. And if, like Michael those many years ago, you feel like touching the wood go ahead. I'm sure he would understand.

Postscript 2004

A decade has passed since I first met Michael in Galway. Now we meet in the Burren once more where he comes for inspiration. When I talked to him ten years ago he had with the help of Bord na Móna, just laid the foundations for an initiative called Celtic Roots by which his skill and vision could be passed to another generation of wood sculptors. Today Celtic Roots is a successful enterprise, independent of Bord na Móna and Michael Casey. It is still under the guiding hand of Helen Connelly and her three young sculptors.

Michael still works in his workshop and studio at Barley Harbour beside Lough Ree, but now a new inspiration fills his days, that being the presence of his son Kevin, who is one of Ireland's most promising young sculptors. In these times when multinational companies have crushed the creative force from so much of life, it is heartening to meet people who follow a deep inner calling regardless of monetary gain.

Jeff O'Connell



KEVIN CASEY WORKING
ON AN ACORN

Buried Forests

John Feehan[8]

As the grip of the great cold on the northern hemisphere began to weaken 12,000 years ago, towards the end of the final cold stage of the succession of Ice Ages that had held the earth in its grip for two million years, life returned to the land. At first no more than the scant vegetation of tundra, because it was still very cold; permafrost held the land in a frozen grip for much of the year and harsh winds swept a landscape as yet devoid of trees, save for a scant ground-hugging cover of arctic willow here and there. In time however the first woods of pine and birch made their appearance, and before many centuries elapsed had spread over much of Ireland. By this time the first human beings had arrived, and within a few hundred years of the ending of the Ice Age were widely established on the margins of the constellation of lakes that dominated the landscape of the Irish midlands at this time, and along the coast. These people lived by hunting, fishing the prolific waters of early postglacial times, and by gathering edible wild plants. They were the first people to know the grain of wood, as they shaped it with their tools of stone to the modest needs of their everyday lives.

As the centuries grew to millennia the shallow lakes in the hollows of the postglacial landscape were replaced by reedswamp and eventually fen in the normal course of ecological succession, aided by a series of uplifts of the land that lowered the water table and drained off much of the surface water. By this time the pine and birchwoods were giving way to oak, elm, yew and other broadleaved trees except in the wetter areas close to the fens and around the bogs that had begun to overgrow the fens.

Climate had waxed and waned over the centuries since the Ice Age. During the centuries of wetter, cooler conditions bog growth accelerated, and in due course extended not only upwards as peat accumulated in the original lake basins but outwards, encroaching on the surrounding slopes of the undulating moraine left behind by the glaciers, swamping and engulfing the mixed forests that grew here. In many cases the advancing bog crept over even the summits of the moraine hills, entirely obscuring the postglacial landscape, which now lay hidden beneath the gently domed, ever-growing dome of the land-hungry raised bogs.

During times of drier climate, trees were able to invade and re-colonise the bog surface, and establish a temporary dominance, but these episodes of woodland were short-lived, and when the return of wetter conditions allowed the bog to re-advance these woods of pine died where they stood, their roots frozen in position and their overthrown trunks prostrate beside them.

The woods were generally dominated by pine (often referred to as fir or bog deal), oak and birch, but alder, willow, yew, hazel and ash all occur, and no doubt were locally dominant whenever conditions were particularly suitable; yew was so plentiful in Clontiglas Bog near Ballyfin, in County Laois, that it was used by local farmers as roof timbers and gate posts. The oak, alder and yew are found at what was the edge of the bogs when the trees were growing; only birch and pine are found further in as a rule. The same relationship holds for trees growing on the recurring surface underneath the younger sphagnum peat: oak and pine around the edges, pine and birch mainly towards the centre. Bog trees often attained a large size, and often grew rapidly, especially (in the case of pine) in the first 50 or 60 years. Trees with a breast height diameter of a metre or so are not uncommon and they vary in age from maybe thirty to over 300 years.

These pines which could grow on the bog itself are among the most frequently encountered bog timbers. However, the oak and yew found entombed in the bog are trees that grew not on the open bog, but rooted in the mineral soil along the edges, which were engulfed by this process of paludification as the bog swamped the higher ground in its campaign of expansion. And not only oak and yew, for there were extensive pinewoods on these slopes also. Because this process of colonisation was ongoing, these trees are of different ages, and vary in the extent to which they have been impregnated by preservative chemicals in the peat. However there came a time when much of the available edges had been overtaken by the coalescing bogs, and the people on their shores had other uses for the surviving woods, and for the land on which they grew.
Indeed, much of the timber in the forests which escaped the great invasion by the advancing bog was used in the construction of trackways across the wastes to maintain communication between settlements more and more

isolated by encroaching bog, or to facilitate contact between farmstead and distant pastures. Until the eighteenth century such tracks were just about the only way you could get across many of the bogs in many areas of the midlands. No fewer than sixty tracks have been found in the Corlea bogs alone, dating from late Stone Age to early modern. Most of these trackways were relatively impermanent brushwood structures catering for local traffic, but some were much more elaborate structures, able to carry animals and wheeled vehicles. With the passage of time these tracks were swallowed up by the inexorably upward-growing bog.

One of the most impressive of the larger trackways ran for a distance of some 2km across the bog west of Kenagh in County Longford. It was made of close-fitting oak sleepers 3-4m long supported on pairs of long, straight runners, and was constructed sometime in the middle of the second century BC, at a time when there was a lot of elaborate construction work going on in Ireland. The making of roadways such as this must have caused considerable ecological disturbance, not only to the bog itself but to adjacent forest because an entire wood was sometimes needed to build them. For the great Corlea road mentioned above thousands of heavy oak beams had to be hauled for several kilometres.

DATING TREES FROM THE BOG

The pattern of annual rings in a tree preserves a record of its growth from year to year. Wide rings represent years of more active growth, and narrow rings represent less productive years. Because these can be synchronised between different trees, the resulting pattern may be used as a calendar to date them. This tree calendar preserved in bog oak reveals many fascinating details about the past. The tree ring pattern has been examined in thousands of bog oaks, and because the oak-ring calendar is now so accurate, it is possible to say after careful analysis exactly when a particular bog oak was alive and growing.
Unlike radiocarbon measurements, tree ring chronologies provide absolute dates, and so can act as a standard for the calibration of the radiocarbon time scale. The tree ring time sequence based on analyses of oak trees, mainly from Northern Ireland and Germany, now spans a period of nearly 7,500 years. It provides an invaluable tool in archaeology, and for studies in palaeoecology and palaeoclimate.

A large number of trees needs to be counted and measured to compile the oak tree-ring calendar, because variation in growth is due to many factors, and in a particular area some trees may grow well in one year whereas others may not. So dendrochronology is based on variations in the high-frequency pattern of the rings. If all the trees examined have very narrow growth rings in one particular year, it suggests some sort of climatic influence. The tree calendar shows that at intervals there were runs of such years, when growth was very restricted everywhere. These episodes of exceptionally poor growth were formerly attributed to the environmental effects of large explosive volcanic eruptions, the dust from which is preserved in the peat in the form of tiny slivers of volcanic glass (tephra). They are however too widespread in their effects for this to be a satisfactory explanation. It is now believed these episodes are due to the profound environmental disturbance caused by close-pass comets or cosmic swarms of cometary dust and debris, or direct bombardment by dust from the trains of dead comets. Such chaotic climatic intervals have been recorded for six periods in particular over the past 5000 years or so: 2354-45 BC, 1628-23 BC, 1159-41 BC, 536-45 AD, and somewhat less dramatically 208-204 AD and 44 AD.

Apart from recording such exceptional catastrophic events, the pattern of tree rings provides an accurate record of short term climate fluctuation. These studies enable us to pinpoint the several major phases of alternating bog growth and tree growth. The major phases of growth are broadly contemporaneous everywhere, although local factors make for considerable overlap. Recent studies suggest that the two main periods of bog growth were around 3100 BC and 300 BC, with lesser peaks at 4900 BC, 3600 BC, 2200 BC, and 1700 BC.

FORESTS BENEATH THE BOG

It is not simply numbers of trees that were buried under the bog by the rising tide of peat, but functioning ecosystems. Little has survived of all the other plants and animals that grew in these vanished woods, but the age and disposition of the trees enables us to sketch an outline of what some of them may have been like. The roots of many buried pine forests have been laid bare over the years by Bord na Móna (three good examples still in situ can be seen at Drinagh, Blackwater and Derrinlough). One was carefully studied at Clonsast some years ago by Tony McNally. The average age of the several hundred trees studied was 132 years. Their diameters ranged

between 5 and 40cm; they were quite widely spaced, with around 500 trees to the hectare. Growth in this forest was slow by comparison with modern pines growing on peat. Birch grew as an understory to the pine, and there was a dense ground layer of heather, with clumps of hair moss (Polytrichum commune) similar to those seen on drier bogs today. The forest seems to have been very similar to the modern native pinewoods of western Scotland, and the pine bog forest of Fennoscandia. All the trees in the forest died at approximately the same time as the water table rose in response to increased precipitation, preventing germination and regeneration, and eventually leading to the death of the trees themselves, mainly because they were waterlogged, although disease may also have played a role. This occurred between around 2800 and 2500 B.C. when climatic conditions were becoming considerably wetter throughout northern Europe.

The deciduous woods that grew further back from the encroaching bogs, on the highest ground of the moraine, were much more mixed in composition, not dominated by a single species as was the case in the pinewoods – in the way truly native long-lived deciduous forest is in most situations. One of the most exciting prospects of the present time is that new forests like these, both pinewoods and mixed deciduous forest, may be allowed to grow to maturity on areas of the newly-available Bord na Móna cutaway.

In earlier millennia trees were able to grow at altitudes of up to 500m on mountain slopes; on Slieve Bloom for instance oak once extended to heights of 250m, and near the barren and now desolate summits of the Mourne Mountains, the remains of oaks over a metre in diameter have been found. From around the middle of the 3rd millennium BC there was widespread development of blanket bog growth at the expense of pine woodland, although drier climatic intervals allowed trees (pine especially) to invade habitats previously outside their ecological reach. The pinewoods which had flourished at sea level all along the west coast, where today no tree can survive the winds blowing in from the ocean, disappeared under a cover of peat which blanketed valley and hill alike.

THE USES OF BOG TIMBER

During the centuries when people lived entirely off the land, depending upon its resources to supply all their needs, the bog was a resource of the greatest importance. It provided fuel, and acted as a land bank that could sustain the disastrous growth in population that took place in the early 19th century. It also contained buried treasure. Occasionally this was real treasure, but such finds are rare sensations. A much more valuable treasure was the buried storehouse of timber sealed deep in the vaults of preservative peat, buried since the time the growing bog had engulfed the ancient forests which once covered the land. This ancient deposit had increased in quality and value over the long centuries since it was laid down, becoming seasoned and impregnated by the preservative alchemy of the bog. It was greatly prized for its durability and in some cases for its beauty, especially since it was often the only timber to which people had access in the early 19th century. An elaborate and specialised vocabulary grew up around bog timber, its many uses and the crafts associated with them.

Bog wood was being used throughout Ireland wherever bogs were extensive, certainly by the 17th century, especially as standing timber became scarce. Thomas Dineley wrote in 1681 how:

> *In Boggs here, as in most parts of Ireland, in digging for Turf, are found large firr Trees, and particularly in the Bishoprick of Cloyne, in the county of Corke, and Province of Munster; in the Boggs are found such quantities of Firr timber trees that they make benches, tables, wainscoat, and floor Roomes therewith; they use it also so much for fewell that the air smells of Turpentine.*

Bog wood was used all over Ireland to make ropes, a craft which goes back for thousands of years. The wood was shredded into 1-2mm thick slivers, which were then beaten to increase their flexibility, before being woven together either by hand or with a rope twister to produce two-ply ropes (usually) which were about 1.5 to 2cm thick. They were used mainly for cording wooden beds to support the tick or mattress. These bed cords sold in lengths of about 20 yards for 10d (in 1802). Deal ropes were also sometimes used in thatching and roof making, and to rope down thatch along the wild Atlantic coastal fringe where roped thatch was the practice. Less commonly, bog wood rope was used for burden ropes, halters and tethers, boat cables, ropes for tying hay and corn stacks, and for chair seats.

One of the most widespread uses of bog deal was for lighting and firing, for which its high resin content made it ideally suitable. The wood was cloven into splints usually between 1-1.5 ft. long. These were placed in a convenient crack in a wall or on the hob, though rushlight holders, or special iron holders of other kinds, were occasionally used for smaller splints. But if a clear and steady light were required they had to be held by hand and the charred wood tapped away as it built up – usually a job for the children. An old man of 90 living in Ballymacelligott Parish in County Kerry recalled in 1938 how, as a boy:

> *Tis often I lighted a splinter when my mother was darning socks or sewing a patch in clothes. While we were eating our supper, also, some one of the family should hold a splinter until they had finished, and it was the same everywhere.*

One of the most dramatic uses of bog deal torches was in salmon spearing by night, a practice which was widespread wherever salmon streams and bogs occurred together, especially in the 19th century, and perhaps most commonly in County Galway. The fish were lured and dazzled by the blazing light and then speared. We have a vivid description of the practice from Erris on County Mayo:

> *… by holding lights over the pools of the river [Owenmore] at night, the fish are attracted, and a handy spearsman soon deposits in his bag the bleeding spoil. These lights are torches made of dried bog-wood, split into small slices which produce a most brilliant blaze: and the act itself is called "burning the river". The hundreds of them scattered through the mountain region at night in the fishing season, to the uninformed traveller, might appear as so many fay lights or "Will o' the wisps", with all their accompanying horrors.*

LOCATING BOG WOOD

Bog timber, of course, usually lies buried deep in the bog, and the method everywhere used to locate it is of great interest, especially as nobody has yet come up with a satisfactory explanation of why it works. This method was described by many intrigued visitors to Ireland in the 18th and 19th centuries. A visit would be made to the bog early in the morning, when the dew still lay on the ground. A place where the dew evaporated quickly suggested buried timber, and once such a place was located the nature of the buried timber was explored with a long metal probe (bior); the experienced hand could tell not only whether the wood was sound or not, but its dimensions and orientation, and even what species of tree it was. Buried trees could also be detected by noting places where frost or snow quickly disappeared.

"In the early morning mist which covers the bogs, they would go in search of 'maide', for where no frost would lie, bog wood surely lay".

Village Fountain
Bog Yew – Bog Oak h.550 (18')
Ballinahown Village, near Athlone, 1999
with Celtic Roots

College Fountain
Bog Yew h.360 (11' 10")
Athlone Institute of Technology, Athlone

Sheep Run
Wych Elm h.109 (43")
Artists Collection

Dancers
Bog Yew h.66 (26")
Private Collection

Mother and Child
Wych Elm h.165 (65")
Longford County Library, 1988

Mother and Child
Wych Elm h.201 (79")
Mater Private Hospital, Dublin, 1996

WORKING ON MOTHER AND CHILD

Mother and Child
Bog Yew h.41 (16")
Private Collection

The Hound
Bog Yew h.50 (20")
Private Collection

Fountain
Bog Yew h.196 (77")
Bord na Móna Headquarters, Newbridge

Caladh na hAnghaile

Cashel

Jimmy Casey

Many things make Cashel special – its bogs and rivers, its hills and lanes, its byeways, shortcuts and stiles, its forts and ruins, its clubs and societies, its trades and crafts, its woodland, bogland, tillage and pasture, its cemeteries and its dead, its past, present and future – a parish and yet more than a parish since it makes up the greater part of the ancient Caladh na hAnghaile, embracing the greater part of Cashel and Rathcline, referred to in the Annals.

Cashel gets its name from an ancient ring-fort situated near the lakeshore in the townland of Cashel adjacent to the cemetery. The word itself conjures up different images for different people depending on whether you are a native or not. It can safely be said that once you have come to know the place and its people you will always have a yearning to return and enjoy its charm. I know people who describe the wonderful sense of belonging and wellbeing they feel, after being absent for a while, on returning to this lakeside haven of tranquillity called Cashel.

John Nankivell

JOHN CREED'S PUB

It can be said also that Cashel is very much off the beaten track on a peninsula jutting out into Lough Ree and having a lakeshore stretching from Ballinahinch to Drumnee and beyond. By road Cashel can be entered from many different points, all of which roads, if followed, will lead the traveller to eventually rethink his position, when he inevitably finds himself at such picturesque dead ends as Ballinahinch, Cashel, Elfeet, Barley Harbour, Pullagh, Portanure (Youghal) and Saints Island. Conversely these are also access points to the parish, as down the centuries, boats have come ashore on business or pleasure from such places as Portrunny, Knockcroghery and Lecarrow in Roscommon, Ballinacliffy in Westmeath and of course from the islands of Lough Ree as well.

While remoteness and accessibility would seem to be contradictory, both have been to Cashel's advantage, resulting in only those with a genuine and valid reason reaching it. The amount of bogland both within the parish and on its boundaries militated in earlier times against unwelcome visitors arriving. However, the amount of good land within the parish attracted the attention of the planters who succeeded in establishing themselves at such places as Newpark, Elfeet, Portanure, Claris, Cormaglove, Lismagawley and Cortoon while the native people were forced to the edges to struggle for an existence wherever and however they could.

The place names of the parish reflect the fact that in earlier times the parish was heavily wooded. Derryshanogue, Derryglosh, Derrygowna, Dernagran, Derrymany, Derrindiff, Dermacar, Derrycolm all come from the word 'doire' which means oakwood, while Portanure and Youghal indicate that there was a substantial amount of yew forests as well.

In early Christian times there were two famous monasteries in Cashel parish – Inis Clothrann (Quaker Island) and Oileán na Naomh (Saints Island). These were situated on islands, some of which are still inhabited. Saints Island, someone said, is a mile and a bit from the village. The 'bit' happens to be two miles... The monks living in these houses, it appears, took spiritual care of the people in medieval times. Close to the shore of Loch Ribh (Lough Ree) are the ruins of the first parish church built in the sixteenth century. There is a rugged, almost seaside-like atmosphere alongside the Shannon which the visitor notices and the natives are immune to.

INIS CLOTHRANN (QUAKER ISLAND)

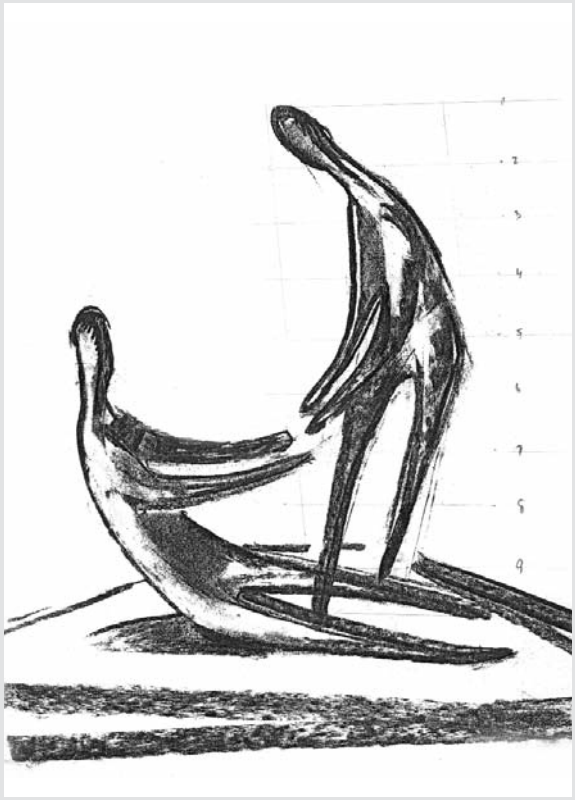
John Nankivell

OILEÁN NA NAOMH (SAINTS ISLAND)

Cashel is one place that has not suffered to any painful extent from the rural population decline. There is still a burning spirit among the people, young and old, which is rare in ordinary experience. Contentment and a sense of security are perhaps their most cherished virtues.... A community of its type can achieve almost anything.

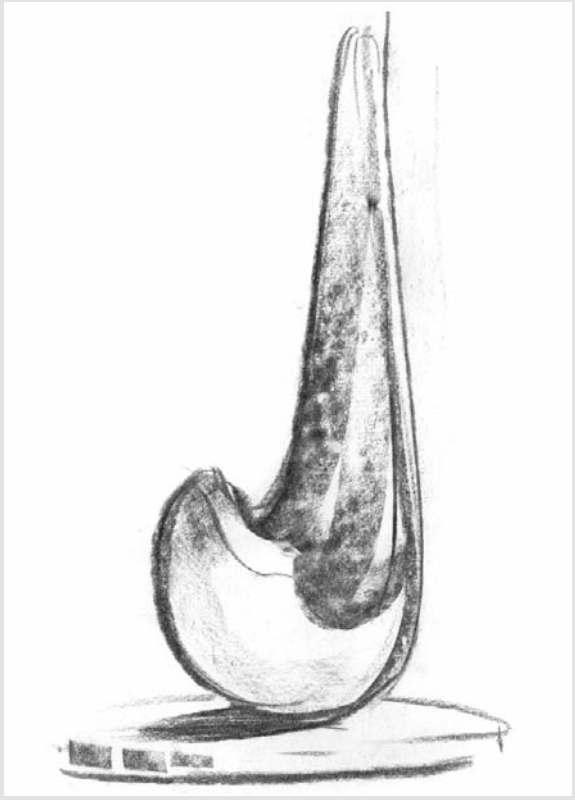
DRAWINGS BY JOHN NANKIVELL[10]

EMBRACING FORMS



THE HELPING HAND

FIGURE



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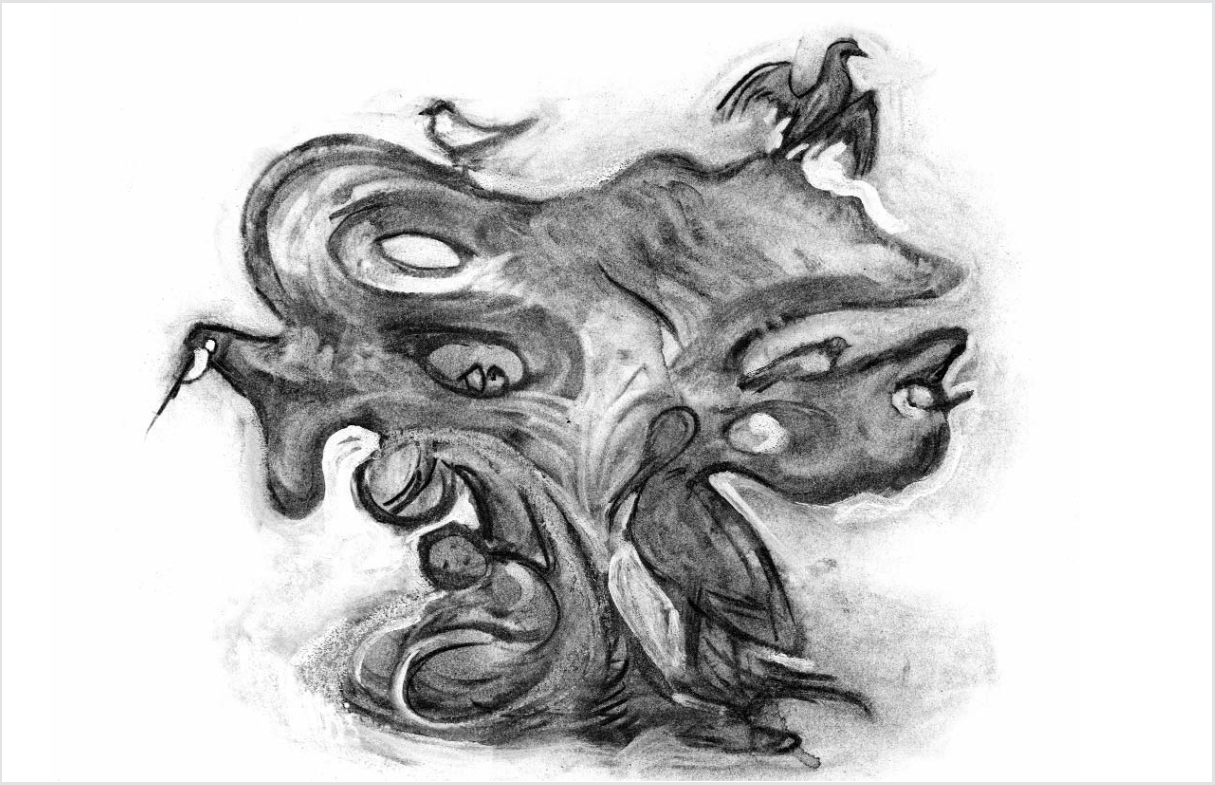
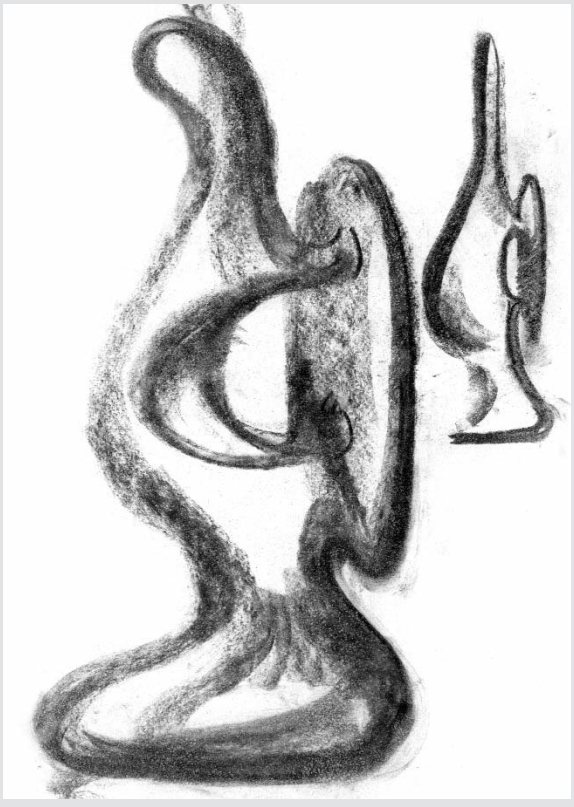


MATERNITY

BIRDS



THE DEFENDER

The Dance of Life
Bog Yew h.198 (78")
Selhurst, West Sussex, 2003

Cuchulainn and the Horse
Bog Yew h.137 (54")
Corlea Trackway Centre, Longford, Duchas, 1997

It is one thing to impose a shape – to cut or chisel or paint until the idea first born in the artist's imagination takes place on the semblance of reality in the medium chosen. It is another matter to allow an elemental form to dictate its own progress towards reality. Herein, I believe, lie the strength and uniqueness of Michael Casey's work. Though he undertakes commissioned work which often calls for a specific form to be imposed on a specific material, by and large he allows the material to speak for itself. What he calls "the logic of form" means permitting the original shape – whether in oak, yew or pine – to reveal its own intentions. Like a visionary or a prophet, Michael mediates and communicates with the material until the material itself speaks to him of the reality it wishes to become.

Joseph Walsh O.F.M.[11]
from The Franciscan, 1985

Double Vision

Thomas Carroll D.D.[11]

For double the vision my eyes do see,
And a double vision is always with me:
With my inward eye 'tis an old man grey;
With my outward a thistle across my way.

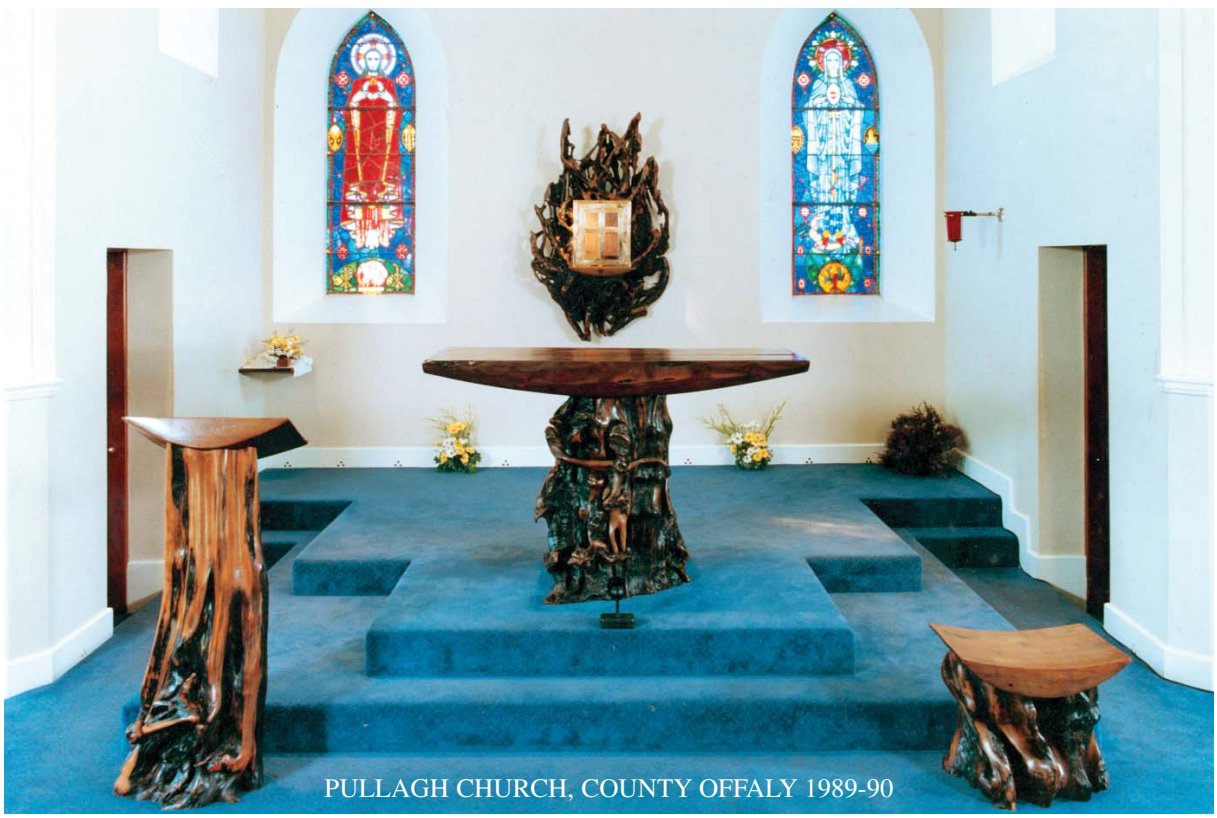
Lifeless representations of dead forms don't live or linger in the garden that is Michael Casey's workshop: my friend's wisdom is of the Jains, for he shares William Blake's double vision as he brings to light and life the archetypal forms of his surround. Cashel in Co. Longford, with its natural and Christian "stoniness", is his home ground or earth mother, that has scarcely changed since the ice-age buried her forest and gave her her deep and mysterious matter; an island of high and fertile fields, capped for a century and a half with a black stone Church and its Norman tower. Cashel from its sloping eminence looks westwards into Lough Ree and is surrounded on every other side by bogland and bog.

Casey's garden, man's most primordial image, on the shores of Lough Ree, is an artist's paradise. Here there is no distinction between sacred and profane, and nothing is... "seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil...nor wears man's smudge nor shares man's smell." Here, too, all is sacral and in scale – "grass and greenworld all together"[a] – like Inis Clothrann, the isle in the water, and its living tradition of Clothra and Maeve, of Diarmuid and his monks, and the Seven Churches of Rome and the Quaker Prayer House that keep Cashel rich and rare in cold stone and holy memory. In the peace and quiet of his Cashel garden, Michael Casey lives the simple and creative life of the artist or monk: here he preserves, as in a tabernacle, the oaks, yews and elms, observed with the mind's eye in the surrounding bog, where only time can bless and give the increase; here too, like a midwife, he offers the helping hand of the artist, while Cashel, his earth-mother, well endowed with Christian soul, fills his forms with her life. In this garden of sheer delight, nature, the sculptor of things, continues the work of creation in and through her artist and her bounty.

Today, artists like charismatics, are seldom found at the centre of our hierarchical institutions, and live their lives and do their work beyond the pale of Christendom. It was not ever thus: in the cathedral workshops of the Middle Ages, they found their inspiration, their butter and their bread, and, in Renaissance and Baroque times, a hierarchy of Renaissance men was their patron and protector. The most powerful currents of western art were never diverted from the well-spring of the Church. But the rapid dechristianisation of Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, and the subsequent decline in culture at every level of the hierarchy, led to a deadly separation of beauty and truth in Christian art and architecture: "one after another the great men were by-passed in favour of secondary talents, then of third rates, then of quacks, then of hucksters." Consequently, the great Masters became exclusively concerned with aesthetic values, and their problems of pure beauty had little interest for the people of God or the public at large. But now in our desiccated institutions, we miss their inspiration and their double vision: even the Vatican Gallery in its recent collection of Modern and Contemporary artists has few, if any, of the world's Masters.

At our local and national levels, artists like Michael Casey, in the tradition of genuine sculpture – be it classical or archetypal – can do much to the "banners" of recent havoc in our sanctuaries. The sculptor's double vision, like that of the architect, and more perhaps than that of the poet or painter, can enable us to see the beauty of form as form, and that purity of form that is independent of subject or intention. Pure forms, by being before our eyes to see, can tune us to their beauty as the piano is tuned to its tone; like music, such forms secretly impose their measure and rhythm upon us, and, like numbers, they take away from matter its weight and density: "whoever contemplates the Parthenon from a little distance hears nothing but the chant of numbers beneath the sky; the simple meeting of two planes, the soaring of a column springing from the ground itself, have for whomsoever knows how to see, a purifying virtue."

This emphasis on the primacy of form in the experience of the beautiful in no way belittles what Moore calls the "stoniness" of sculpture, and by which he means "its truth to material" with its astonishing fertility and variety of hidden forms: indeed, the material which Michael Casey brings to light in our bogs, and to life in his garden, may be his greatest contribution to our impoverished sanctuaries. In art, there can be no distinction between the sacred and profane, but that which is truly artistic can receive from Christian revelation a deeper inspiration and significance. Something of this blend of nature and grace can be felt in the Church at Pullagh, near Ferbane, Co. Offaly, where Michael has furnished the sanctuary with altar, tabernacle, ambo and chair, from his bog and garden. Popularly called "the britches Church" on account of its unique shape, the original structure of this Church was unfortunately destroyed in an earlier renovation: presumably for those pastoral and practical reasons that often dull the imagination, its physically separate aisles, converging V-like at the sanctuary point, were joined with the intervening space and made into one of those fan-like naves that have come, like the ubiquitous bungalow, to blight the landscape. Now, one can only imagine the effect on altar and tabernacle of morning light funnelled from the east through the double-barrelled nave, and at evening-time "the dim religious light" in the sanctuary of Harry Clarke's newly-discovered windows, filtering the rays of the western sun – "oh! if we but knew what we do / When we delve or hew / Hack and rack the growing green... After-comers cannot guess the beauty been." [b]



PULLAGH CHURCH, COUNTY OFFALY 1989-90

In our secular world, where no deities are worshipped and where the abstract sculptures of artists like Brancusi and Arp are more at home, Henry Moore has constantly sought to create an archetypal art that is essentially sacral. The 11th-century carvings he had seen in his youth on Yorkshire Churches, like the Mexican sculptures he would later admire as an artist, filled him with that divine sense that is a presence and power in his every work. Cashel is no less sacral and its material no less mysterious, but in the sanctuary of Christian worship at Pullagh, the sculptures of Michael Casey make an added statement: rooted in the immemorial past, and formed and polished in time as memorials of our redemption, they bring us beyond the confines of time into our origins and destiny at a time when Christian art, like Christian preaching, says little about either Genesis or Apocalypse. Furthermore, at this time of questionable renewal in Church architecture, when the Christian apse and mosaic of protological and eschatological insight and image is down, and the double vision of faith is dimmed, Casey's material is mysterious and speaks in the here and now of that which is eternal: in altar and tabernacle alike, as indeed in ambo and chair, "there lives the dearest freshness deep down things," that can revive our drooping spirits and inspire new songs and new hymns on our Universe.

Furthermore, at the table in Pullagh of bog yew and its mysteries the Christian priest daily invokes on matter the Spirit of God, and speaks the word of benediction that consecrates afresh the bread and wine that earth has given and human hands have made: in Pullagh too, the tabernacle of these heavenly gifts has roots that demonstrate, like the Monstrance of Light, the material dimensions of the New Creation, and its continuity with the Old.

Finally, in this sanctuary of rural life and Christian liturgy, the mysteries of changing light and dark matter, of stained glass and bog oak, are fortuitously, but fortunately, wedded and made one in the art of Harry Clarke and Michael Casey: like Patrick Kavanagh in Inniskeen – "turning the lea-green down, and painting the meadow brown with his plough" – Clarke and Casey in Pullagh also found a "star-lovely art in a dark sod...[c]

Joy that is timeless! O heart, that knows God!" – *Thomas Carroll D.D.*

In the modern renaissance of bog-timber craft, the name of Michael Casey has been synonymous with yew, his dramatic altar, gleaming with ebony-dark muscular forms, has drawn thousands to a little church at Pullagh at the heart of Bord na Mona's oldest bogland.

Michael Viney
Irish Times

Baptismal Font
Bog Yew h.221 (87")
Ferbane Parish Church

"Of all his pieces, this form in bog yew captures best the whole principle of Michael Casey's work. From the natural tangle of nature the artist draws forth a form which is unmistakably a bird."

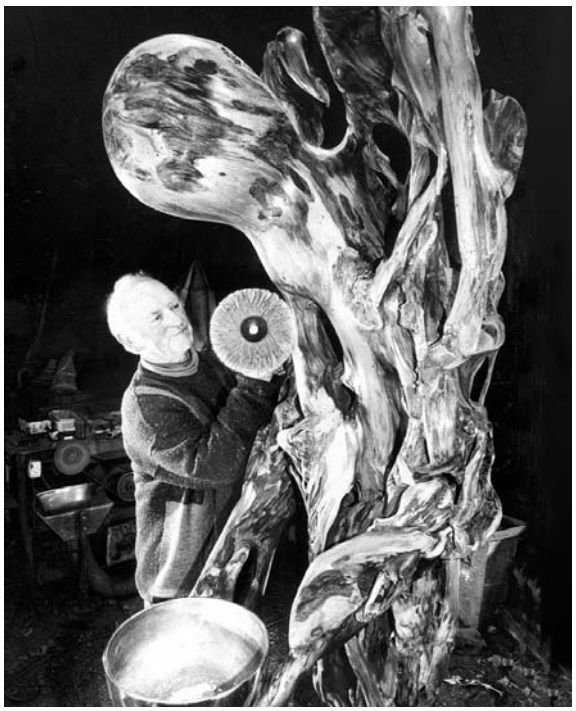
Joseph Walsh O.F.M.
The Franciscan, 1985

Bird Form
Bog Yew h.236 (93")
Newtowncashel Village, 1981

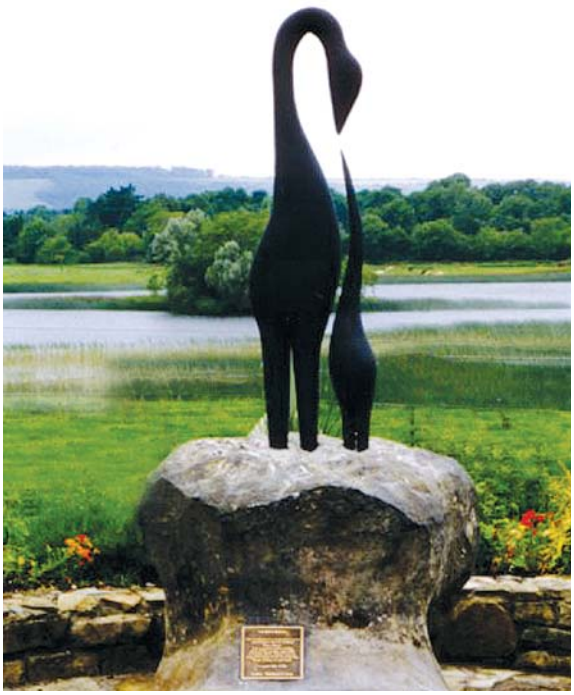
In the Forest
Laurel and Yew h.56 (22")
Artists Collection

The Dolmen Builders
Bog Yew and Bog Oak h.23 (9")
Artists Collection

Mother and Child
Bog Oak h.36 (14")
Private Collection, 1979



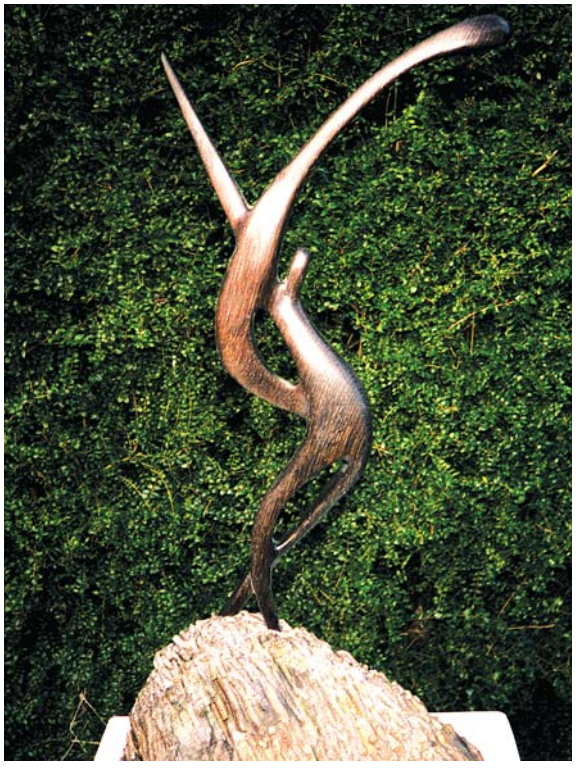
Baptismal Font
Bog Yew h.221 (87")
Ferbane Parish Church



Famine Memorial
Steel and Concrete h.259 (102")
Kilglass Cemetery, Roscommon, 1999

Snow Birds

Head
Bog Oak h.158 (62")
Artists Collection, 1978



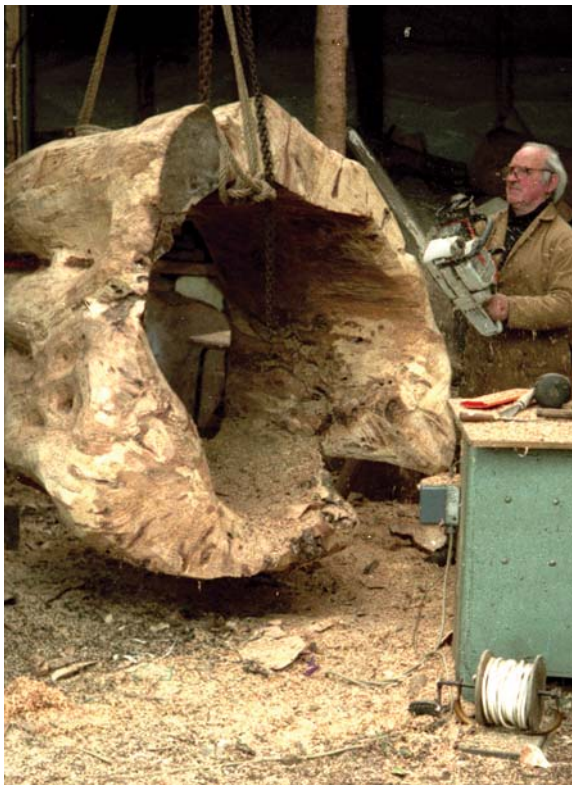
Ecstasy on the Mountain
Bog Oak h.46 (18")
Private Collection

Rock Breaker
Concrete and Glassfibre h.366 (12')
Newtowncashel Village with Brian Ganly

Artists Studio

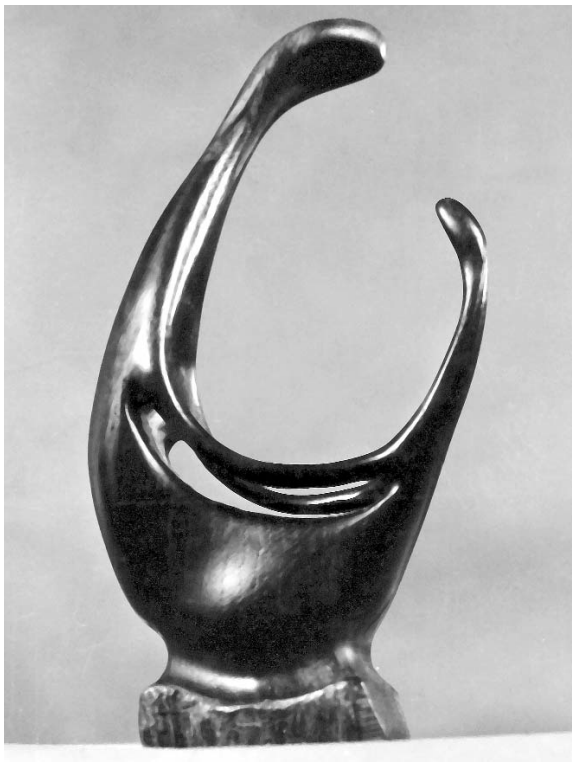
St. Fiacra Greeting the Sun
Model for Sculpture

Head
Bog Oak h.30 (12")
Private Collection



Large Beech Form
1990

The Great Oak
Bog Oak h.58 (23")
Private Collection



Mother and Child
Bog Oak h.23 (9")
Private Collection

Hollow Form
Golden Oak h.31 (12")
Arts Council Collection, 1981

Horse and Jockey
Bog Oak h.28 (11")
Private Collection

The Cloud
Wych Elm h.79 (31")
Offaly County Library

Virgo et Mater
Wych Elm h.94 (37")
Private Collection

The Risen Christ
Bog Yew h.54 (21")
Private Collection

Heron
Bog Oak h.120 (47")
Private Collection

Wind Eye
Bog Oak h.125 (49")
Private Collection

Root Sculpture
Bog Yew h.545 (18")
City West, Dublin, 1996
with Celtic Roots

Paddy Fox (left) of Bord na Móna sourcing bog wood with Kevin Casey and his wife Bridget.

Maternity
Bog Oak h.43 (17")
Private Collection

Bog Work

Embracing Forms
Bog Yew h.51 (20")
Private Collection

Mother and Child
Bog Oak h.97 (38")
Carmelite Friary, Moate, 1985-86

Ideas from Stone
Stone and Yew h.26 (10")

Tabernacle
Bog Yew h.107 (42")
Nuns Prayer Room, Loughrea

Home Coming
Bog Oak h.170 (67")
Newtowncashel Village, 1991

Ballyreevagh Quarry Park
Newtowncashel Village, 2000

Village of Birds

Lucy Brennan Shiel[12]

Newtowncashel is framed by the sculpture of Michael Casey. Entering the village by the main road, one first encounters a group of nesting water birds, swans, geese, ducks, herons or some mythical bird from Ireland's past? A nest that signifies "home coming". Passing through an arcade of ash we enter the village proper. Birdlife dominates Michael's sculptures about the village. The birds of woodland and hedgerow are now present. The central rock fountain that seems to earth the village has more aquatic birds, ducks or geese.

The road forks quietly towards the Ballyreevagh Quarry, now a tranquil garden of sculpture, art and nature. It hosts a mixture of Michael's work and that of his collaborators, most notably Dolores Nally. A waterbeast basks in the hand carved pool. Other carvings on the stone faces recollect mythical past, the love of Diarmuid agus Grainne, leading on to a place for today's lovers. A fairy tree grows through a hole in a large rock – small wonder the Tuatha de Danann make occasional appearances. Most mysterious is a giant bird's nest – will it someday hatch as a phoenix?

The Barley Harbour fork takes us out of the village to a spectacular view of Lough Ree and its fringe of ancient oak wood. A wading bird is attended by two smaller birds, thrushes or blackbirds, of whose song we could ask no more for inspiration. Does the giant bird metaphorically drink from the lake below?

Newtowncashel symbolises the journey of a lifetime of making, a gem in the landscape with a clear sense of community. Michael's work in the village reflects his appreciation of this and the community spirit is nurtured by the gift of his hand.

CASHEL AND THE DREAM

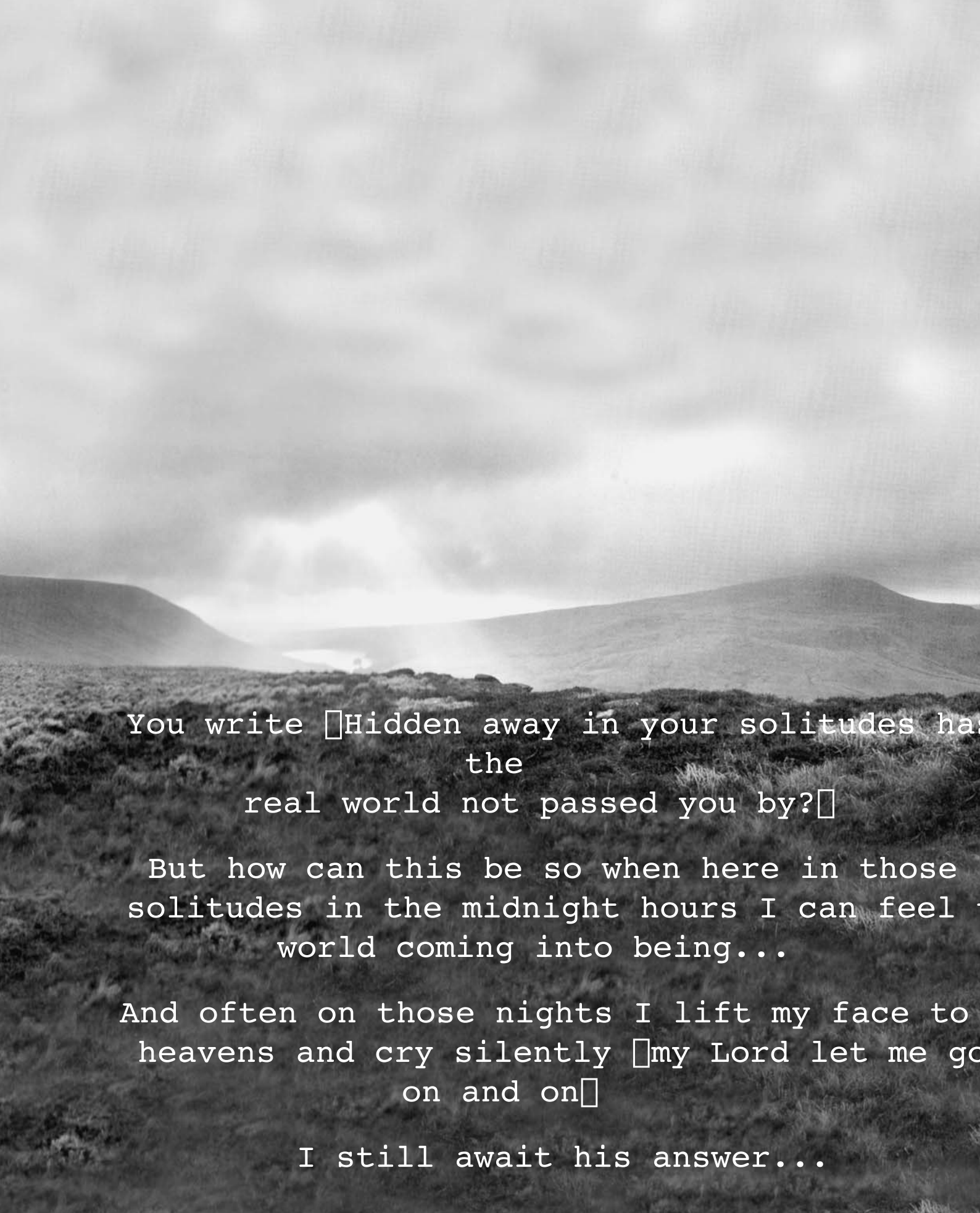
Within the time mystery that gave it birth
The pulse of Cashel beat on.
The artist sensed its inspirations,
His soul was stirred
By a spark from creation's fire.
Derrydarragh, aged wood of the oak,
Derrydarragh, nestling around the inlet of the lakeshore,
Brooding over the ancient spring,
Ladywell, Holywell, Tobar Mhuire.
Back into time it stretches,
Older than Danu the goddess,
Older than Cessair and her fifty women,
Yet ever young it dances playfully
Choreographing the wide-eyed bubbles
That glance up shyly at the May bush
Robed in splendour on its brink.
Here the ancients waited and watched –
Watched and waited –
As the mystery of new life revealed itself out of the earth.
Here they reached out to the hidden presences
Behind those immense realities.
They bowed to the spirit of the well
The benevolent, lifegiving spirit,
Renewing everything amidst the wonders of everything.
And in the oakwood they knew a tree by name
Not for its oak planks or the boat it might make
But for its strength and endurance
And its fidelity to its won identity.
Over to the east there were other great oaks
Lying asleep below the surface of Buggaun bog.
There they have lain dreaming
Since before the coming of the Celts
Long before the same Celts overflowed westward
In the great Indo-European expansion.
Above them the purple heather waved in the wind
The ceannabhan bowed snow white to the fleetfooted elk
Bounding lightly across all the years
While the fuiseog poured down his benediction
On the enchanted scene.
Timeless landscape,
Unchanging, yet always different,
Old as the beginning, yet eternally young and new,
A haunt of bards and sages
A ripe milieu for the artist
For the eye and the hand of the artist
For the soul of the artist.

Here is the land of Cashel
Which Lough Ree has overtaken and seduced
Where ghosts from the islands meet síógs from the forts
A place once spirited away and lost
In a long-forgotten Celtic dream.
And a voice from out the dream kept calling
Calling Michael Casey, Michael Casey,
Artist extraordinaire.
"Come bone of our bone, clay of our clay
You with roots running old and deep,
You who embody the precious heritage of this place
(A maternal ancestor was Prior of Inis Clothrann in 1424.)
You, like the old sages, can sense the treasures
Beneath the daylight of the commonplace
Come and lead those ancient presences
Into new realities of shape and form
And empower them to speak in our time
Of things that are beyond all time."

Through Derrydarragh he wandered in the night
And at morn by the lakeshore where the lake stones
Eyed him from a thousand different forms
And the reeds played and swayed
Like the musical arms of the orchestra
Floating up and down, up and down,
Until the cry of a curlew crossing the water
Called him back into himself.
It was the sleeping trees that woke him,
The oaks lying fourteen spit deep in Buggaun bog,
The trees that could remember stories of the melting ice
And the glaciers slipping away off island shores
Old trees replete with time and memory.
"Artist of the birthing hands deliver this new life
Young and beautiful from the old and gnarled forms."
Slowly they emerge, miracles of line and grace,
Images of eternal perfections that tiptoe around
The membraned walls of consciousness and echo
The wholeness and the holiness of created things.

Thus did Michael engage,
With the deepest human aspiration
To seek to know the beauty of the world
And to shape its wonder and its mystery
In lasting celebration.

SEAN CAHILL[13]



You write "Hidden away in your solitudes has
the
real world not passed you by?"

But how can this be so when here in those
solitudes in the midnight hours I can feel
world coming into being...

And often on those nights I lift my face to
heavens and cry silently "my Lord let me go
on and on"

I still await his answer...

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5. Extract from the Rome ceremony, and from the handing over ceremony in Dublin in August 1996.

6. Catherine O'Connell: from *Celebrating Boglands* published by the Irish Peatland Conservation Council in 2002.

7. Jeff O'Connell: Author and Journalist. This article was written during an exhibition of Michael Casey's in Galway.

8. Dr. John Feehan: Senior Lecturer, University College Dublin. He has written a number of books on the environment, including *The Bogs of Ireland* with Grace O'Donovan.

9. Jimmy Casey: Retired School Principal, and a native of Cashel. He has written a number of books on local history.

10. John Nankivell: Artist and Illustrator. He has drawn extensively in India and Ireland. Among the books he has illustrated is *A Vision of Britain* by Prince Charles.

11. Fr. Thomas Carroll: Author and Theologian. This article was written after a visit to Pollagh Church in 1991. He lectured in Literature and Theology in Dallas University.
    a G.M. Hopkins, Poems and Prose
    b Ibid
    c Patrick Kavanagh, The Complete Poems

12. Lucy Brennan Shiel: A native of Co. Roscommon. She is an artist, based in London.

13. Seán Cahill: Retired School Principal. He has collaborated with Jimmy Casey in writing many books, among them *Rathcline, The Primary Schools of County Longford* and *The Life of John Keegan Casey.*