BEFORE THE PLANTATIONS

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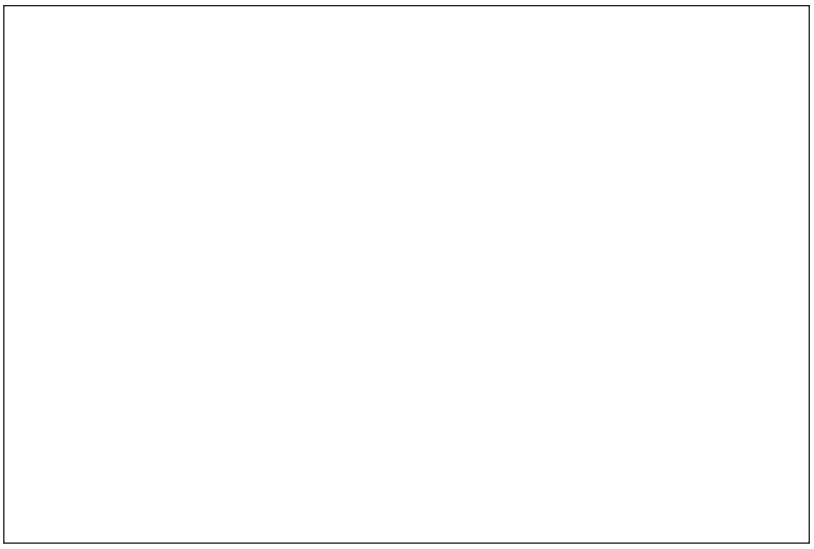

Wherever you go in Leitrim you are confronted with a mystery. There are unaccountable presences all around. That raised patch of ground could be the foundations of an ancestral home tumbled back into ruin. Perhaps it is the track of a lazybed where a potato crop once nourished by manure and soft rains rotted into the earth during the Great Hunger.

That wind-raked solitary thorn-tree bent by the elements is surely a fairy bush. Another tree tied with coloured rags marks the site of a holy well.

Under your feet a grassy pathway leads across a clear flowing stream, and before you know it you have embarked on a spiritual journey into the heart of a richly suggestive landscape

In shafts of sunlight and shadow on a pathway through native woodlands, the play of light and dark through the broadleaf canopy becomes a point of entry into a frame of mind that puts you in touch with things known and unknown, with buried wisdom and remembrance of a forgotten sacred knowledge.

The prehistoric alphabet, Ogham, is composed of strokes cut at right angles along the edge of a standing stone, the twenty-three letters of the alphabet named after native trees carefully sequenced to denote the position each tree occupied in a seasonal calendar of the year. You also read Ogham the way you climb a tree, from the bottom up, or just as the sap rises from the roots to the crown.

As you consider the manifold ways in which an earlier people tried to communicate mysteries held sacred by them in an alphabet aligned with the progress of the seasons, your sense of wonder grows in the presence of our native trees, rich in immediate character, old associations and magical qualities.

Every roadside edged with hawthorn and wild rose, every wet bottomland with an avenue of birch trees, every little lake ringed by red-berried rowan trees, every field overlooked by a broad ash tree, every stream running under alders, every bend in the river edged with willow, every bosky dip in the hillside lined with scrub hazel, every outcrop of rock sheltering gorse, has a unique tale to tell and legend associated with it.

In Gaelic this wisdom is called *dinnshenchas:* 'the lore of prominent places'. There are stories and legends at the root of every placename in Leitrim and throughout Ireland, and these stories are the bedrock of a deep, timeless wisdom. It is a legacy that has already been depleted by intrusive pine-tree plantations, fenced off for commercial exploitation, and later clear-felled to leave our prominent places looking like First World War battlefields. The sites of wisdom ignored and better instincts banished.

Our forebearers handed down to future generations a great body of knowledge contained within the contours of the fields and hills and streams that surround us. The scholars, poets and healers of the past entrusted to us for safekeeping the land itself, and an intangible wisdom grounded in the landscape.

The test for our present generation is, at the very least, to be conscious of this lore of prominent places, and to be sensitive to these mysteries bounded in seasonality and in the natural cycles of birth, growth, decay and renewal expressed by our native trees. It is no more and no less than respect for where you live, and love for its visible and hidden beauty.