

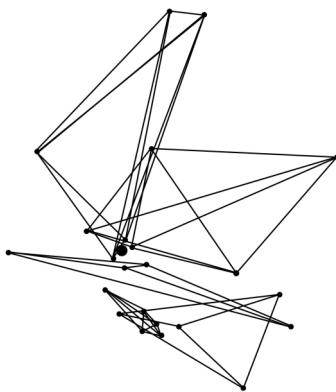
Field Notes

by

Tom Conaty

A Poem

In response to
'In the Current' by Yvonne Cullivan
a Public Art Project
based in Belturbet, County Cavan



Acknowledgements



Field Notes

by

Tom Conaty

A Poem

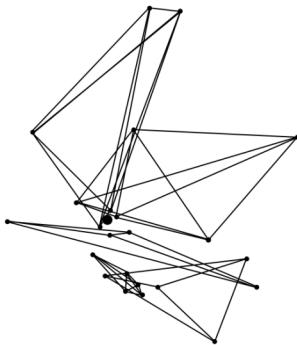
In response to
'In the Current' by Yvonne Cullivan
a Public Art Project
based in Belturbet, County Cavan

An OtherWorld Press Pamphlet

© Tom Conaty 2014. All rights reserved
Pamphlet designed and typeset by Seamus Cashman at
The Otherworld Press. Email: info@otherworld.ie

Field Notes

*In response to
'In the Current' by Yvonne Cullivan,
a Public Art Project based in Belturbet, County Cavan*



PART I

Memory,
is snagged on bushes,
on overhanging trees,
when waters recede.

Secrets,
are written in many tongues.
We go by word of mouth
and the mouth of the river
opens all.

Beál Tairbirt

Béal Tairbirt ag oscailt
ar shlí na habhann,
ag sní

idir doiléireacht na coillte is
fairsingeacht mó� an ghoirt.

Solás na hoíche,
scáth na maidne,
ar beola gach aon ní
atá a nochtadh,
ar beola gach aon ní
atá fé cheilt.

Belturbet

The mouth of Turbet opening
to the way of the river,
flowing,

through the darkness of the
wood,
the wide and open field.

Consolation of night,
shadow of morning,
on the lips of everything
being revealed,
on the lips of everything,
hidden away.

There are places
you have never seen,
that lie in waiting,
in places you have been before
and thought you knew.

Arrival

Talk was of straight lines,
from A to B
in no time,
bypass the byword.

Engineers theodolited their way
through trees and fields,
plotted the camber and the fall,

the dunt of the hard shoulder to the sheugh.

Right angles looked awkward,
horizontal lines too flat,
vertical ones had the whiff
of too much ascension,

oblique lines
made everything clear.

And so the mapmaker came
when the earth was turning,
when new roads around the town
were being laid down.

She wore a satchel.
Instruments were sharpened.
She had precision in mind,

a compass to point the way,
a mirror to see things
reflected back.

She had intent in her eyes.
With a pencil
she was taking things down:

the overhang of a tree,
a market house that had lost its name,
the hand that fed the weights to the scales,

that found fungus on the forest floor,
separated curds and whey,
spilt salt.

She pencilled in the shade of alleyways
that had not seen the light of day,
children at play on a fair green.

There's a parchment buried deep
and on it a song,
the songbirds sing.

Clay under her fingernails
from uncovering layers.
The foundations of the town
had to be found
and they lay under her feet.

Putiaghans

Scratch of flintstone,
spark enkindled straw,
wildfire run and smoke,
twilight, logburn,
ember red, meat crackling crisp,

they ate around fires like these.

They came through the woods –
alder and oak,
saw the light of day
in a clearing they made
next to where the river flows.

They wrote down our names
as next of kin,
in their wills they left pathways
hidden in clay.

The Putiaghans rise,
they're on the march again,
scars of earthmovers on their foreheads
and salt for ever in their hands.

You sleep deeply,
oh cradled ones,
in the folds of hills,
the roots of trees.

You drool at the mouth,
a river of fish,
dorsal and fin,
lightening rod in moonshine.

Your complexion,
under this patina of peat,
is bone deep.

Squelch in the marsh,
a quaking scraw,
the dry rattle of weeds
in the wind, like the wailing
of women who heard you cry,
then consecrated your fields

with salt in their hands,
tears from the sky.

The mapmaker had river water in her hands,
the sound of lapping water on her tongue,
frothing at the edge,
to willow music in the wind,

swan-song white to the flap and wing beat
rhythm of butterfly, dragonfly,
mayfly on the whip-crack-away
cast of fishermen

into a slow frame, scribbling the air,
a snake-flight line
left to straighten
and right itself

on the ripple of the riverrun

Hands hold
the stains of pollen,
a rainbow bruise
from gathering in
the names of flowers.

And pushing through
when words for flowers were withering,
the benediction of common weeds.

The benediction of common weeds

The mapmaker carried the names
of common weeds with her,
everywhere

she wore
black bindweed, black nightshade,

spoke of
fool's parsley and scarlet pimpernel,

she weaved
ground ivy, creeping soft grass,
creeping thistle around her wrist.

Scented and scentless mayweed,
stinking camomile, she kept
in a jar by the door.

She drank the hemlock.

On her head a scarf
of white campion, white clover.
Winter wild oats in her hair,
in her eyes,
volunteer oilseed rape.

She remembered the forget-me-not,
and next to her heart,
in a locket around her neck,
self-heal for safe keeping.

Fields stretched out before her.
Ditches lay down and
she could see
the lie of the land:

how otters build,
badgers and foxes tunnel,
how rabbits open networks,
hares form.

She pointed this out to road makers.
Swifts sped past,
feeding on the wing.
Crows and ravens used the fly-over
on the way home.

PART 2

The Lie of the Land

The circuitry of water
and the flood,
the meander of cows.
Old roads twist and turn
to the hum of hollow and hill,
that rise and fall
through a patchwork of fields.

The whitethorn blazes a trail,
the maring ditch,
the marching drain,
hold the plot.

Drumlines are written on these hills,
they beat the submission of choked light
– rainfall glugging into glar.

No-one can name the sapling now
on the river bank,
they forgot to record the elder's name
before they came and cut it down,
to beat
a path to the water's edge,
for tourist feet.

Trees shade and shawl,
silhouettes fall
in the meadow marsh.

If only we could see
in this watery land,
escaping to higher ground is harder
when the hills seem far away.

'You are here'

The 'you are here'
mark of location on the Diamond map,
is under perspex
and clouded over now from heavy weather
and too many fingers pointing the way.

Who are you,
who stands beside me now?
What colour from the palette
do you choose?

And when the layers are scraped
and blow-torched away,
what colour, then, lies beneath?

For you and I sing dumb
about our true colours.

We wear flamboyant clothes,
fatigues, camouflages and
the red seeps through.

Clay holds The Bloody Pass,
water washes it down and
the red seeps through,
a menstruation of light
through stained glass windows

of high and low churches,
where people at prayer in different pews,
hold rosary beads, books of common prayer
as touchstones,
of the glorious and sorrowful mysteries
of a town, on a river,
flowing north,
across a border,
to the sea.

The Boundary Commission drew
a dividing line through water,
the river runs on...

Your chalice and monstrance
host the same lamb
to the slaughter.

Declarations,
exhortations and
your finger-pointing blame;
when it comes to salvation,
your semtex smells the same.

The cartographer maps the heavy air,
divines water that flows,
keeps the fire, that detonates and blasts,
that rings out in volleys.

She sees past
the empty cartridges and magazines,
spent bullet points in the tired tales
of this borderland.

Routes

In the Big Houses on The Lawn
they traced their way by hand
along the wainscott rail,
embossed braille on wallpaper.

Escape routes opened
through fake history books
on bogus shelving,

routes that become roads,
bringing us back to
what we are running from.

She sets the set-square down
in the middle of the town.

Opens cats-eyes on Main Street
for all of us to see.

The ‘sorry for your troubles’
shakes the severed hand,
that points the way
through rubble and ruin,

severed branches of a tree
lie in broken masonry.

A north wind blows,
dusts down broken limbs.

The spine arches, uncoils
the cranium lifts the heavy weight,
radius and ulna take up the hand,
bring the patella to bend
and stand once more.

Achilles stretches,
marches on.

Pounding hearts pulse,
the red weeps, seeps through,
pushes the needle on the compass
to its very limits,
to reveal – True North

and everything else is relative.

New bridges were borne in mind.
old ones, that had taken the blows,
were given the all clear again,
for weight bearing

but never opened for long.

She set her eyes
to the eyes of the bridge,
that were blown away.
Neighbours waved across the water,
their salutations drowned out
by tourist boats revving-up.

Inflections and stresses
in their speech became more distinct,
more pronounced.

They had to take
the long way round now.
Some chose the short circuit,
out.

In the only eye of the bridge left,
Simon sat.

You know the one,
who helped with the cross,
who manned the boat,
when fishermen slept.

Up and down the river, all day,
he carried the sorrow -

GERALDINE

O'REILLY,

that blood red sorrow that seeped
through his veins -

STANLEY, PATRICK

that blood red grief that seeped
through this remembering
and forgetting land -

EMILY & TOMMY
BULLOCK

DONEGAN, SAM

He stands with them in a rowing boat
listing, from side to side,
the names of the dead.

When the corncrake forgot about being extinct,
he opened his voice in a singing field.
Song burst from the river,
the kingfisher hovered high.

Levitation was in the air.

Crow remembered that black notes
were on the scale too.

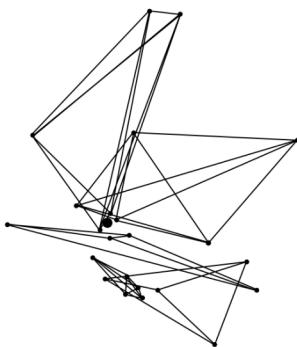
They got the carriage moving again.
down the track it shunted,
over and back, over and back,
on old sleepers.

The mapmaker left when grass was long,
clocks stole a march on time,
waving winter time goodbye.

The mayfly was up, fish arced,
trees, heavy with leaves, stooped,
drank in the river stream.

The horse-chestnut had sent chandeliers
of up-lighting from its boughs
and between it and the sunlight
of the morning
the sky took on a reddish hue,

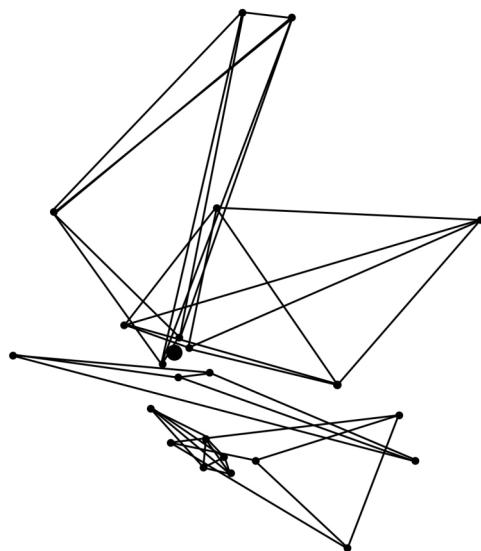
and shepherds remained silent.



The poem, ‘Field Notes’ was written as a response to ‘*In The Current*’, a new work by Yvonne Cullinan which consists of eight short films. These were produced by Yvonne following a period of research and sustained engagement with residents and specialists from the Belturbet area of County Cavan. This public art project was commissioned under the Per Cent for Art Scheme with Cavan County Council, and funded by the National Roads Authority.

Her work draws on local historical and contemporary culture and is grounded in the physical fabric of the landscape. The films blur the lines of fact and fiction, reality and the imagined, carrying information from peripheral locations, via the airwaves, through the water, in the ground, and across layers of time.

My poem reflects the above and draws on Yvonne’s research notes received by post from the field. I visited the town, met local people, walked the land, and followed the run of the river.



An OtherWorld Press Pamphlet