

TRAVELExtra

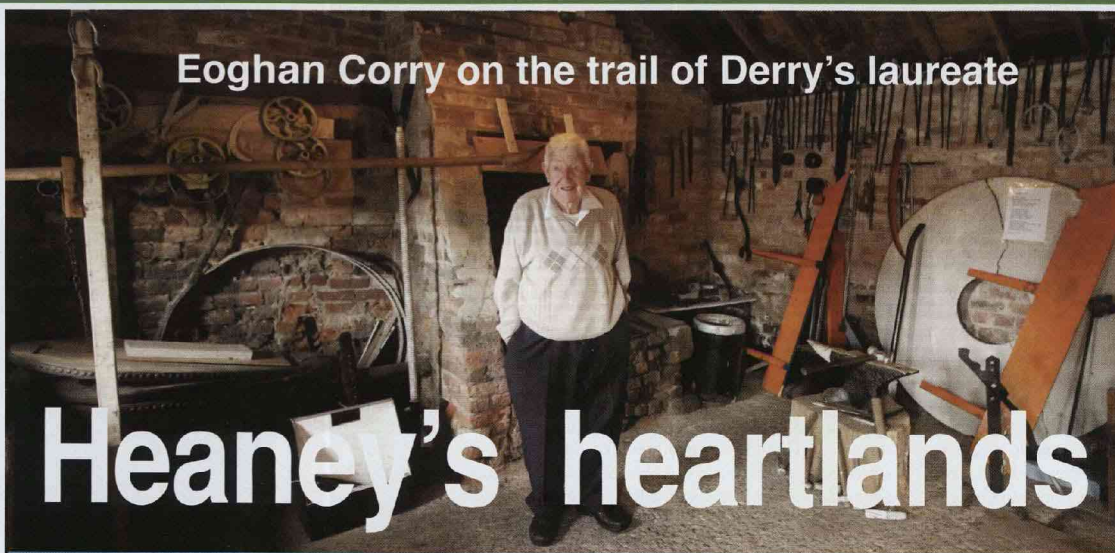
IRELAND'S LEADING TRAVEL NEWSPAPER SINCE 1995

Usually for a poet Seamus Heaney knew a thing or two about marketing. His poems were accessible and direct and occasionally emotional.

The same could be said about the Heaney **tourism** product which is wining its way into the itineraries of the world's literary footstep tourists, fans, and Heaney-boppers who used to turn up in such large numbers for his performances and to buy his books.

Heaney's most powerful performances would have included the Poet and The Piper with Liam Og O Flóinn as seen at **Derry** fleadh last year or at Willie Clancy week in Miltown Malbay. There are few things as refreshing as finding there is another dimension behind the poetry of one so recognised and analysed, and that is what happens on every step of the journey through Heaney's childhood terrain in a small group of adjoining parishes in South **Derry**. Heaney grew up on a boarder, several borders. Tour guide Eugene Kielt will bring you an important one beside the homestead of his early childhood.

Without a guide you would miss the small things that are somehow big things, like the drain, culverted under a road on the diocesan border between **Derry** and **Armagh**, the border between his



Barney Devlin: Heaney's poem *The Forge* captured his workplace

enforced choice of school, St Columb's or St Pat's,

To see the fast rushing Moyola, you pass through an estate in Castledawson, its identity crisis festooned in Union Jacks and Unionist and Scottish paramilitary regalia.

Here Eugene read Heaney's own requiem to the borders of his childhood, the border between the territories of the conqueror and conquered. His ancestry came from both sides of that river and the tour is at its most interesting and edgy when it moves from the marsh and the bog and the homesteads of Bellaghy into Castledawson and Magherafelt.

South **Derry**, like much of rural Ireland, has kept

the fabric and integrity of its terrain and community so apparent in those early poems beneath the surface of gentrification and aggrandisement.

That is what great landscapes do. Landscapes do not come greater or more familiar than those of the Heaney trail.

Toner's Bog may be the location for Seamus Heaney's most quoted most famous poem, but it is the requiem for his cousin Colum McCartney that is the best situated for **tourism** purposes.

The nature reserve looking out on church island was the landscape that Heaney describes in *The Strand at Lough Beg* after his cousin Colum McCartney was killed at

a British paramilitary checkpoint returning from the 1975 all Ireland semi-final.

The Strand on the west shore of the Lough Beg natural reserve is a large expanse of wet grassland that is flooded each year. there were cattle grazing when we called.

Here you climb over a stile and you can pick some blackberries just as Heaney described from his childhood.

You can also see the folly built by Bishop Harvey to make Church Island look like it had a church on it. It does not. Like much of the paraphernalia of conquest in **Derry** it is a façade.

It is a folly, a tower without a church, and a beautiful backdrop for photographers hunting the Heaney Trail, almost an in-joke by the ancient culdee monks who choose the sight, in a cross-century cultural collaboration with our towering late 20th-century Irish ports.

To look for the people who feature most prominently in his poetry its easier than you might expect.

Bellaghy has the look of a tidy village, a well finished place a bit like a completed free verse poem with the final dot applied to it.

The Bawn is a white house that sits on top of a hill surveying the length of Castle Street. The name indicates there was once a planter's castle here, but now the white-washed walls are garrison the memory of the hinterland's most famous resident.

The *Heaney Collection* in an upstairs room is small, The satchel he carried to school and a collection of his books, some photographs of a more youthful similar laureate than we are used to, a picture of him in the bar and an engraved copy of *Digging*, his most famous poem, familiar to Irish school children of three generations now, was in his very first collection. The prize won so young.

There is no headstone on his grave, a year later, but that is no deterrent to the increasing number of people seeking his last

resting place.

There are two signs directing you past the large parish, its square tower comfortable of its and its community's positions in a countryside divided between conqueror and conquered for 300 years. with all the baggage that entails.

At journey's end, a simple wooden cross sits on his carpeted grave by the cemetery wall. No horseman passing by, the epitaph has not yet been decided.

There is a quiet unpretentious air to these villages. Bellaghy is the site of the interpretative centre which will be built, but it could equally be Castledawson festooned in Union Jacks and Unionist regalia, an odd Scottish saltire and lion thrown in, struggling in its insecurity to confirm its identity.

Heaney understood and was at home in both, he knew about borders and identity.

It shaped his poetry. It may be about to shape his **tourism** trail as well.



Clockwise: Eugene Kielt at Lough Beg, the grave, Moyola river and Heaney's first childhood home at Moss Bawn, since rebuilt

- Eugene Kielt organises tours from Laurel Villa Townhouse, Magherafelt.
- The guesthouse was home to Heaney readings and the Heaney commemorative **On Home Ground** festival in September. Rooms are dedicated to Heaney and literary figures such as Patrick Kavanagh, Michael Longley and Louis Macneice
- <http://laurel-villa.com> +4428 79301459