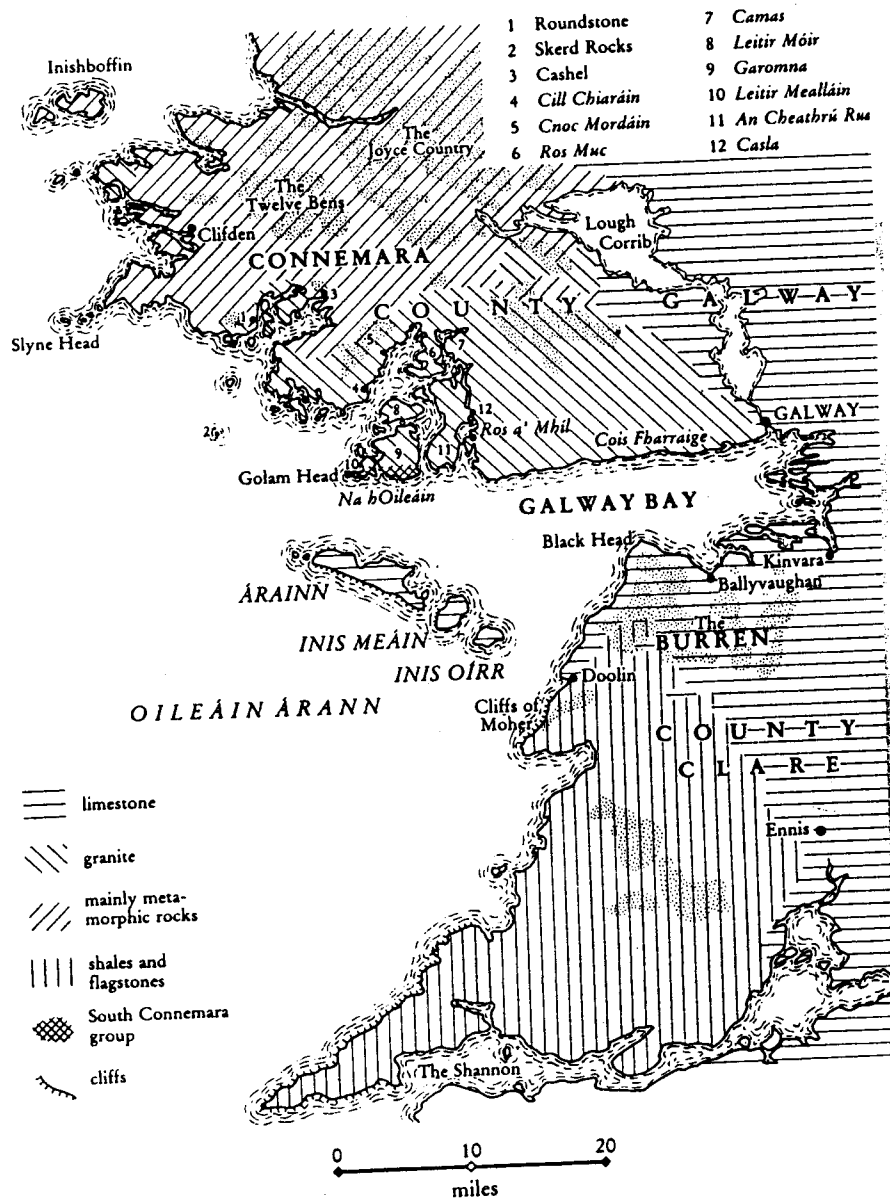


THE ARAN ISLANDS AND NEIGHBOURING COASTS



Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara & Other Writings

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Through Prehistoric Eyes

A raven materially outweighs a peregrine falcon – but in the scales of honour, the invisible scales of air poised above a precipice, the falcon is predominant.

I witnessed this one spring a few years ago, in the Twelve Bens, the mountains at the core of Connemara. I was accompanying a friend who was researching the breeding birds of high stony and boggy places, in an exploration of a magnificent valley called Gleninagh which runs up into the heart of the mountain range from the east. The cliff, hung like a great curtain between two peaks of its south-western perimeter, boasts the longest rock climb in Ireland: Carrot Ridge, so named from an episode in which more carrot than stick had to be used to get a certain climber up it. No combination of carrot and stick would induce me to try, but I have walked along the top of it, the col called Mám na bhFonsaí, or the pass of the rims. On this occasion, as we approached the foot of the cliff, a pair of ravens flew out from a crevice high up on its left-hand side, and my bird-man remarked that since the ravens had not built their nest in the prime site, the very centre of the cliff, we could expect to find peregrine falcons nesting there. And sure enough a peregrine falcon soon appeared over the top of the cliff – a much slighter bird, a fluttering dot against the bright sky, insignificant until you noticed how fast it was crossing your visual field – and it dived at the ravens once or twice in a perfunctory way, not seeking to damage them but just to remind them of their place.

In the good old days that the Prehistoric Society* exists to commemorate, there would have been a pair of golden eagles on

lon.

* To which this talk was addressed.

the cliff as well; but the principle of precedence would have been the same; these things were settled long before human eyes were turned up to them.

It had already been a rich day's walk. Coming up the track past the valley's only farmhouse, we had seen the menfolk of the Bodkin family planting their potatoes. Bodkin is an ancient name in County Galway; the family came in with the Normans. However, I don't believe they have been in Gleninagh for more than a few generations, although to see them building spade-ridges, that ran at forty-five degrees up the hillside and seemed to be composed of nothing but stones, one had an impression of a way of life of chthonic immutability. Farther on, we sat down to drink our coffee, on the sunnier flank of the valley. As we rested, my eyes went straying, grazing with the sheep and spring lambs, across the floor of the valley; and were brought up short by a row of little bumps on the profile of a low ridge a few hundred yards away. Something regular, it seemed, something organized, contrasting with the sprawling topography of the bog; evidently worth investigating. We splashed across wet places and climbed the bank, which proved to be a glacial morain crossing the valley; the stream meandering down the valley has had to cut a sharp little ravine through it, about fifty feet deep. And there on the crest of the ridge was a line of six boulders; roundish, sack-shaped, glacial boulders of quartzite. There was no doubt about which way the line pointed; the largest – it was only waist-high – being at one end, and distinguished from the rest by the streaks of white quartz in it. I knew enough to recognize this as a Bronze Age site – there is another very fine alignment in north-west Connemara, and a smaller one in the Joyce Country to the east – and I was excited by the discovery, because nothing of the Bronze Age had at that time been found in central Connemara. So I busied myself pacing it out and taking its compass-bearing, playing the amateur archaeologist instead of using my eyes. The orientation was about south-south-west, and did not appear to me to be of much importance, because the line was pointing vaguely at the high wall of mountains. In any case I was prejudiced against the idea of the astronomical significance of such structures, which I felt was often merely the projection of the archaeologist's suppressed superstitions onto the sensible folk of the prehistoric past.

Unfortunately, my rationalism had blinded me to the evidence of my eyes. Later on I showed the Gleninagh stones to Michael Gibbons, who has made a lot of archaeological discoveries around Connemara of recent years, and he noted that they do not just point vaguely at the mountains, they point precisely at the col, the high pass between two peaks, above the precipice. And, revisited the site on midwinter's eve, he observed that the sun sets neatly into that cleft in the horizon, when viewed from the alignment. I returned to Gleninagh myself the next midwinter, to pay my respects, and indeed apologies, to this phenomenon. At two o'clock in the afternoon the sun was already sliding down into the gap between the peaks. The sky around it was dazzling, eating away the black profile of the mountains. It was very difficult to see what was happening, the blaze of light was so intense; light was bouncing off the boulders like grasshoppers. The valley was flooded with gold, the Bodkins' farm was picked out in vivid detail, and, hundreds of yards farther up the bracken-invaded hillside behind it, traces of potato ridges, that must have dated back to pre-Famine days when the valley carried a larger population, were equally insistently present, as if the moment were transparent, X-rayed, visibly built up out of layers of the past. Time, in our everyday experience, does not consist of such moments; they are as rare in the general flux as grains of gold in the gravel of our Connemara streams. Perhaps the high light-levels of classic lands produce more of these intoxicating instants in which one feels that all history has been harvested, pressed out and fermented into the wine of the now; but they do occur even here, and sometimes with almost painful sharpness, when a low shaft of sunlight under cloud cover or between mountains transfixes the scene and pins it to the retina. The same must have happened in the Bronze Age; it's a matter of the eye's physiology.

By a quarter past two the sun was just above the bottom of the col, and exactly in line with the row of boulders. It was a spectacular conjunction of energy and matter. I had no idea how to photograph it, but in the viewfinder of my camera it looked like sword-in-the-stone fantasy-fiction. Is it fantasy to believe that, at a level below all cultural constructions and reconstructions, I was experiencing the same illumination that any embodied mind would have been subject to at this place three or four thousand years ago

to the minute? But I was confused and distracted by my delight in having discovered the site – something worth telling the Pre-historic Society about! – and irritation that I hadn't been first with its essential interpretation. And so, to peel off those layers of ego-investment and recover the structure of the experience, as an index of human continuity and community since prehistoric times, is my aim in this paper.

The conjunction I have described would be peculiar to midwinter solstice; at any other time of year the sunset would be further round to the west. But why had this particular site on the valley bottom been chosen? Consider the situation from the point of view of the sun – a great blind eye that has seen through prehistory, will stare down history and overlook whatever comes after that, but which has never seen darkness, neither night nor the least patch of noontide shade. The sun's view embraces the illuminated disc of the earth; as the earth turns the Twelve Bens travel in an arc across that field of view towards its north-eastern limb. Just as the mountain peaks are beginning to obscure the sun's access to the valley behind them, the col between them swings into line and opens up the valley floor; then that window closes by degrees, and the mountains roll on towards the edge of night and sink over it. Now watch the same process through the eyes of the peregrine falcon high in the light-filled air above the mountain-tops. In spring there would be morning sunshine on the cliff-face, but in midwinter it is perpetually dark. As the sun sinks to the southwest the evening shadows of the mountains spread across the valley. A silhouette of the two peaks and the col becomes clearly accentuated for a while, and creeps across the broad meander-plain and the morains, and begins to climb the opposite slopes. The point of that shadow-profile corresponding to the bottom of the col is well defined for perhaps an hour or so and traces out a lengthy locus. Anyone standing on any point of that locus will see the midwinter sun set uniquely into the V of the col. If the alignment had purely practical purposes – marking the day from which one starts counting the days of the year, so that one knows when to put the crops in, when to expect the salmon running upstream and the goose-flocks migrating northwards, *etc.*, – it could have been placed anywhere on that line across the valley.

Thus the practical astronomy of horizons is not enough to

determine the positioning of the stone alignment. But on that *locus* of possible positions, the actual one, the crest of the morain, is undoubtedly the one any of us would have chosen; and here we can feel sure that we, too, are seeing through prehistoric eyes. For the eye, alert to spatial balances, visual discontinuities, the rhetoric of visibility, of seeing and being seen, vastly predates all cultural constructions on that organic basis. (In the eye, I include as much of the image-processing, pattern-recognizing, neural networks of the visual cortex as is necessary to make good my argument.) The eye is evolution's answer to a potential visual field that is a Darwinian arena of life-opportunities and death-threats. Centrality and marginality, openness and closure, balance and imbalance – these states were branded into our nervous systems as fraught with potentialities long before they were conceptualized. The words I use to convey a sense of this place as elevated above and central within the arena of the valley, respectful but not self-abasing before the cirque of mountains, are modern metaphors for ancient phenomenologies. So: this site marks the intersection of an astronomical constant with a constant of human spatial awareness; it is in itself ceremonious, observant of the geometry of humanity and the heavens.

Of course only one boulder is needed to mark such a point, given some such distinctive profile of the horizon; the five extra boulders are redundant, part of the generous redundancy that constitutes human culture. They are an indication that there was ceremony attached to the observation of the midwinter sunset from this point. Nobody could fail to be awe-struck by the spectacle, and no doubt the forces it marshals – the sun, the mountain peaks, the battle of light and dark – were apprehended religiously. Right next to the alignment is a roundish depression, a few yards across and a few feet deep. I had assumed that this was a kettle-hole, a place where a block of ice left over from the waning of the glacier had melted *in situ* on the morain. But, if so, why does the only such pit happen to be exactly here? Mike Gibbons suggests that this may have been where precious objects were ritually deposited. And the Bodkins, straightening their backs from their potato ridges, tell me that people used to dig for treasure there, long ago. The Bodkins, although not the absolute aboriginals of this valley, probably know more of their secrets than we ever shall.

But whatever their religious and practical dimensions, the placing of these boulders was an aesthetic act, a response to the sense of place and balance I have credited the prehistoric eye with. The choice of this spot pulls all the forces of the valley together and knots them into a form one can grasp. I'm not talking ley-lines or anything mystical here; nothing more mysterious than art, which is mystery enough for me. A site has been created, around which the terrain assembles itself into a landscape – that is, an area apprehended by the eye, taken from a vantage-point. The concept of landscape, we know, is of modern origin, and its connections with Enlightenment objectivity, with the portraiture of estates and the perspectivism of power-relations, have been much discussed; but the roots of its possibility are in the nature of the eye, an organ trained by stick and carrot to command a sphere of vision.

Calendrical functions and religious conceptions wither away with time, but a well-founded aesthetic intervention can grow in stature indefinitely. This privileged site articulates more of the dynamics of the valley than the Bronze Age could have known. Thus, the line of boulders points us back to the precipice, which is where they themselves came from. The precipice is part of a corrie, a glacier's nest. Imagine the building of this nest, long before humans came here. The prevailing winds off the Atlantic are driving snow over the mountain tops, and the snow is settling and freezing in that sheltered, shadowed, north-east-facing hollow. And then the accumulated mass begins to slip downhill under its own weight. As it inches away it plucks fragments of rock out of the slope behind it. A crevasse opens up between the rear of this newborn glacier and the hillside; more snow drifts into the crevasse, freezes, welds the ice-body to the rock-face again, so that more stones are ripped out. So, over centuries and millenia, the slope is eaten back into a cliff, and the corrie is excavated. The glacier advances, sweeping all before it, so that the valley itself is widened and deepened and given its characteristic U-shaped cross-section. And all that rock is slowly dragged away by the ice, and deposited in the sea or in terminal morains many miles away.

But then the climate changes. Melting-back of the glacier snout outpaces the downhill slippage of ice. Periodically, the retreat of the ice-margin is stalled; for centuries at a time, the glacier pours out its load of crushed stone along a certain front, building up a

great bank of till across the valley. Thus the ridge of the morain I have described marks a point of temporary balance between those two huge processes. Finally the glacier retires to its nest, and dwindles and dies. The raven and the peregrine begin the sequence of their springtime ritual battles. Human beings, perhaps after thousands of years of farming there, select the stones to build the alignment, from among the countless fragments torn off the mountainside by the glacier and scattered in the valley bottom. They toilsomely drag them up onto the morain and set them in position – a position carefully chosen after much observation and perhaps already consecrated by some slighter structure. And that act of selection brings the whole valley and its force-field into aesthetic oneness. For the first time. The mountains themselves are 460 million years old, and the morain was built ten or fifteen thousand years ago, but it was in the Bronze Age, say four thousand years ago, that this focusing of the terrain into a landscape took place – an event of a new sort, an act characteristic and perhaps definitive of humanity of all times and all places.

In fact I am tempted to boast that, in the whole prehistory and history of the valley, there have been two creative events; the first, the setting-up of the alignment, the second, the rediscovery of its significance. However, I must note a slight discrepancy, to see if it amounts to a loose link in my argument. The midwinter sun actually misses the very lowest point of the col; it passes just a degree or two above it and vanishes behind the mountain slope on its west. Part of that discrepancy represents a small change in the orientation of the earth's spin over the last 4000 years, due to the gravitational influence of the other planets; for just as a child's top nods and wobbles, so the earth's axis bows all around itself in a cycle lasting 26,000 years, and the depth of the bow varies slightly, in another cycle lasting 40,000 years. The angle between the plane of the equator and the plane of the earth's orbit round the sun – the obliquity of the ecliptic – has decreased by about half a degree since the Bronze Age, so that the midwinter sun now rides a little higher in the sky than it used to. Thus the whole vast system has got slightly out of focus since the alignment was built. But realizing that fact is like readjusting the focus, toning up the valley once again, bringing it into sync, not just with the order of the seasons but with the earth's orientation in the cosmos.

As to the preservation of such a landscape: evidently the first necessity is to keep the sightlines clear, the rays of connection uninterrupted. Obstacles can spring up with amazing rapidity if one is not vigilant. In this country we are particularly afflicted by sitka spruce and interpretative centres. Not that I'm against all such centres – the Céide Fields pyramid seems to me to effect in itself a focusing, valid in that stupendous landscape of sprawling bogs and streeling clouds. But as for the accursed Mullach Mór, it would have been not so much an interpretative centre as an interruptive centre. Interpretation calls for a knowledge of the language, and since the language of the Burren includes such terms as strangeness, and silence, and mystery, obviously foreign to the mentality of those who wanted to site the centre out in the area to be interpreted rather than in one of the nearby villages, all it could have offered would have been an impertinent interruption. The Mullach Mór scandal makes one wonder if the idea of an interpretative centre is of devilish origin. It is the devil of commercialism and commodification who takes one up into a high place, and shows one a landscape, and says, 'All this can be yours, cognitively, if you will only fall down and worship me.' Anyway, such a modest site as this I have described in Gleninagh – I know I have interpreted it as the very fulcrum of the universe, but it is indeed a modest site – needs no interpretation. It is in the best sense an interpretative centre itself, it is the stance from which the relationships of the terrain can be sensed even before they are theorized, as the Bronze Age well understood.

So, its conservators, apart from simply ensuring the physical integrity of the stones and their uninterrupted dialogue with the skyline, have to look to the general metabolism of the landscape. It might seem that, as yet, there are few problems in the wild recesses of Connemara; due process of Nature seems to be the rule. The raven and the falcon re-establish their primordial pecking order each spring; the lambs bleat, the stream meanders, the Bodkins build their stony potato ridges. But – to pick up one clue to a hidden distemper – this year in the stream, which is one of the headwaters of the Ballynahinch River, famous since mediaeval days, there were no salmon spawning. On this fishery, according to Roderic O'Flaherty, writing in 1684, '... experience was made how the salmon hath still recourse from the sea to its first off-

spring; for here, eighteen salmon were marked, with a fin cut off each of them, at their going to the sea, and seaventeen of them were taken next season, in the same place, coming back'. And now, for the first time in many thousands of years, the salmon no longer has recourse to its own origin. One of the reasons for this is European Union policy. The farmers of 'disadvantaged areas' such as Connemara cannot compete with New Zealand in the cheap raising of lamb; so they are helped out with grants, headage payments of so much per ewe. There is little market for the end-product, neither the meat nor the wool, at present, but it is still profitable to collect the grants. The result is overgrazing. (I am not pointing the finger at the Bodkins; I know nothing of their stocking levels. This is a general observation about Connemara and other rain-soaked western mountain regions.) Thousands of sheep – more than have ever been seen there before – are eating the heather down to the ground, and incidentally are suffering and dying in the winter and spring; then the rainstorms are breaking up the shallow exposed peat layer, and the streams are sweeping it away, and the delicate pebble beds the salmon need to lay their eggs in are burdened with mud and rubble. There is an outcry, mainly from the commercial point of view, about the decline of the salmon and sea-trout fisheries (the sea-trout suffer from a veritable Gordian knot of environmental problems). People enjoy killing salmon, and Connemara's gillies and hoteliers live by holding their coats and praising them mightily when they succeed, and the rest of us let them stand rounds when flushed from their triumphs. This is, to say the least, interruptive of that silver ring, the life cycle of the salmon, that we glimpse in pools and waterfalls when its recurrent destiny interlinks it, too often fatally, with our own world. Even in Bronze Age eyes, I am sure, the king of fish was more than a source of food and cruel fun. But when the grants system is amended, as it will be, if only in the interests of the economy, will the farmers turn to the sitka spruce? I dread to see the forestry ploughs go into the valley of Gleninagh. Several other superb valleys of the Twelve Bens and the Maumturk Mountains have great rectangular sticking-plasters of forestry on their cheeks. Without going farther into the maze of ecological interactions, I think I have made the point that to preserve a pre-historic sacred landscape it is necessary to preserve what we still

have, of the nature that gave it its meaning. Otherwise, what we pass on is a poignancy of regret, a reproach.

One might think that, to a conservationist, time, both past and future, is the problem, for if, in considering the preservation of ancient sites, we are humbled by how old they are, we might well also be abashed by how young they are, these objects and relationships between objects, that we are supposed to hand on in wholeness to future centuries, to millenia, perhaps to timespans of geological magnitude. But in so doing, we are hardly just playing the pedagogue, informing and improving the mind of futurity. That we entertain this stupendous project of conservation must mean that we still preserve, in ourselves, an openness to present space as well, a reverence before the play of forces a site such as this in Gleninagh celebrates.

In this talk, the ceremonies of raven and falcon, the setting sun and the shadow of the mountain, the salmon seeking out its origins, the glacier disgorging its burden of rock, the changing obliquity of the ecliptic, have been both metaphors for and instances of the processes of nature, the genderless mutual engendering of time and space. And in presenting them in terms of retinal images, of optical geometry, I have been insinuating the idea that the eye itself has its religion, its sense of relationship to the whole, anterior to, underlying, and outlasting all other cults. I fear that these six boulders in Gleninagh, like six precarious stepping stones, are leading me too far out into the Ineffability of the Absolute, but instead of underpinning all I have said with a reference to innate, pre-cultural, Chomskyesque universal spatial grammars, I will suggest that spacetime is the irreducibly general religious object we share with the Bronze Age and with all future inheritors of the prehistoric eye. And with that, before I fall and drown, I will be silent.

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Taking Steps

Pausing to catch my breath near the top of Derryclare Mountain in Connemara a few years ago, I turned to look across the boggy plain below that stretches southwards and breaks up into islands scattering out into the Atlantic. A few miles away, Cashel Hill, an isolated pyramid not as high as Derryclare, arose out of these lowlands, dark against the light-flooded distances. I noticed that, from where I stood, the top of it was exactly level with the ocean horizon. That meant that a straight line drawn from my eye to the summit of Cashel Hill would go on to graze the curve of the Earth's surface, like a tangent to a circle. Surely, I thought, I could calculate the radius of the Earth from this observation, given the height of Cashel Hill and the height of the point I was now at, which I could read off a map. So, when I got home that evening I drew a few little diagrams, and resurrected from my schoolday memories one of Euclid's theorems about circles, and found that, indeed, the calculation would have been quite simple, had I remembered to mark on the map where I was when I made the observation, which, unfortunately, I had not done.

However, I have no intention of reclimbing the mountain in order to find that spot again, since it is only the theoretical possibility of the calculation that excites me. Further, I now realize, I have no need to refer to maps for the heights and distances needed for the calculation; there is near my house a long level stretch of road with a clear view of both Cashel Hill and Derryclare Mountain; I could walk, say, a thousand paces along this road, and take sightings of the two mountains from either end of that distance, and with a bit of trigonometry arrive at rough estimates of all the data I need. Thus I could calculate the size of the Earth in terms of my own pace, without recourse to maps, astronomy or