

A Place Defined by What Sits Between

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Abstract

This study examines lived experiences and cultural artefacts shaped by the experience of the Burren landscape throughout the twentieth century, as encountered by both native and non-native inhabitants. It explores how sustained engagement with a distinctive environment informs relationships between individuals, place, and regional culture over time. Central to the inquiry is an investigation into how a sense of regional identity emerges through long-term, embodied interaction with landscape.

The study addresses key questions: How does intimate, prolonged inhabitation of a unique landscape shape one's relationship with place and nature? How are temporal connections informed by walking through the landscape? How does a sense of belonging and regional identity develop through our environmental connection? These questions are explored through personal recollections of walking in the Burren, conversations with members of my family and local residents, observational walking practices.

Findings reveal a richly layered understanding of how attentive engagement with the landscape fosters a deep sense of place. This connection is cultivated through sensory encounters with physical textures, seasonal change, ritual practices, and habitual movement through the terrain. The study further demonstrates how regional identity is sustained through the transmission of oral histories, folklore, and the Irish language, all of which are closely tied to the landscape.

Material and cultural traces—stone forts, extensive dry-stone walls, historically embedded place-names—preserve a continuity between past and present, situating contemporary experience within a broader temporal framework. The work of Tim Robinson is highlighted for its role in recovering lost Irish toponyms, revealing how linguistic knowledge encodes historical relationships to the land. Local stories and songs preserve accounts of hardship and resilience that might otherwise be forgotten. Ultimately, this study argues that such inherited knowledge systems are vital for sustaining a symbiotic relationship between human communities and their environment, offering insights into enduring practices of ecological and cultural continuity.

Keywords: walking, place, landscape, folklore and temporality

Contents

Introduction	6
Walking and Remembering	10
Place is Always Slipping	24
Traces of Living	33
Deep Mapping	41
Conclusion	46
Bibliography	48
Image Sources	49

Note: all photographs are taken by the author unless otherwise referenced.



Introduction

A hidden winding road hints at the start of this pilgrimage. The route is varied in texture and surface, the ground calls for attention in its changing condition. Imprints of cattle and sheep hoofs in the mucky ground remind me of the animals roaming around, some free and others lightly contained by dry-stone walls – somehow, they know which fields they belong to and when they have roamed too far. A crooked farmer’s gate marks the threshold into the open Oughtdarra fields, where grasses roll and billow over fertile soil. Walking across this stretch is done with a quiet regard for the cows huddling on the other side. We walk at a distance; a tacit rule shared amongst locals. The dense, brambly hazel wood is traversed slowly, its undergrowth closing in at the edges. As a child, the shrubs rose only to my height, and the world seemed shaped to me; I could slip easily through the gaps without crouching. It’s important to wear your mucky clothes, the jacket with holes in it, so that the inevitable tug and tare could let you scramble with care-free ease. This was always the alluring part; at any unfamiliar turn, there was the possibility of getting lost. Still, the hill called to be reached tracking left, left, left. My brother pauses along the walk and points toward the hill, recalling a memory from an earlier time spent here:

I was imagining the Tuathanan, which were an ancient warrior tribe that resided on top of that hill, a part of our Irish mythology. I used to imagine Tuatha da Danan as the Balrog from *Lords of the Rings*, you know, the big fiery devil. It seemed like such fantasy. I loved it when dad brought us up there. When you reach the top, you could see, like, the whole of the area. And it felt really special, because every time dad would feel a big connection to this hill.

Emerging from the enclosed forest, the fairy hill appeared ahead like a sacred pinnacle. A final climb over its rocky slopes revealed an expansive view, where a deep stillness invited rest. It was easy to imagine the old folklore coming to life here — a pilgrimage of countless souls coming together. I feel like one of them, sitting here on the salty grass. My father would leave out a petri dish to capture wild yeast, brewing his sour beer from what the air itself offered — a small act of fermentation that seemed to echo something older still at this ancient site. In Irish mythology, the Tuatha Dé Danann are pre-Christian deities who ruled Ireland before retreating into the *sidhe* (fairy mounds), where they are believed to have remained, living on just beneath the surface of the landscape. The fairy hill at Oughtdarra is one of these significant sites. A sense of nostalgia, and a lasting attachment to the rural landscape in which I grew up, forms the starting point for this investigation into the meaning of place. The fields, paths, and quiet rhythms of that environment continue to shape the way I understand landscape—not simply as scenery, but as something lived, remembered, and felt over time. Walking, both as a practice and as a methodology, offers a way of moving through the landscape with greater attentiveness, opening space for a more intimate connection with the natural world.

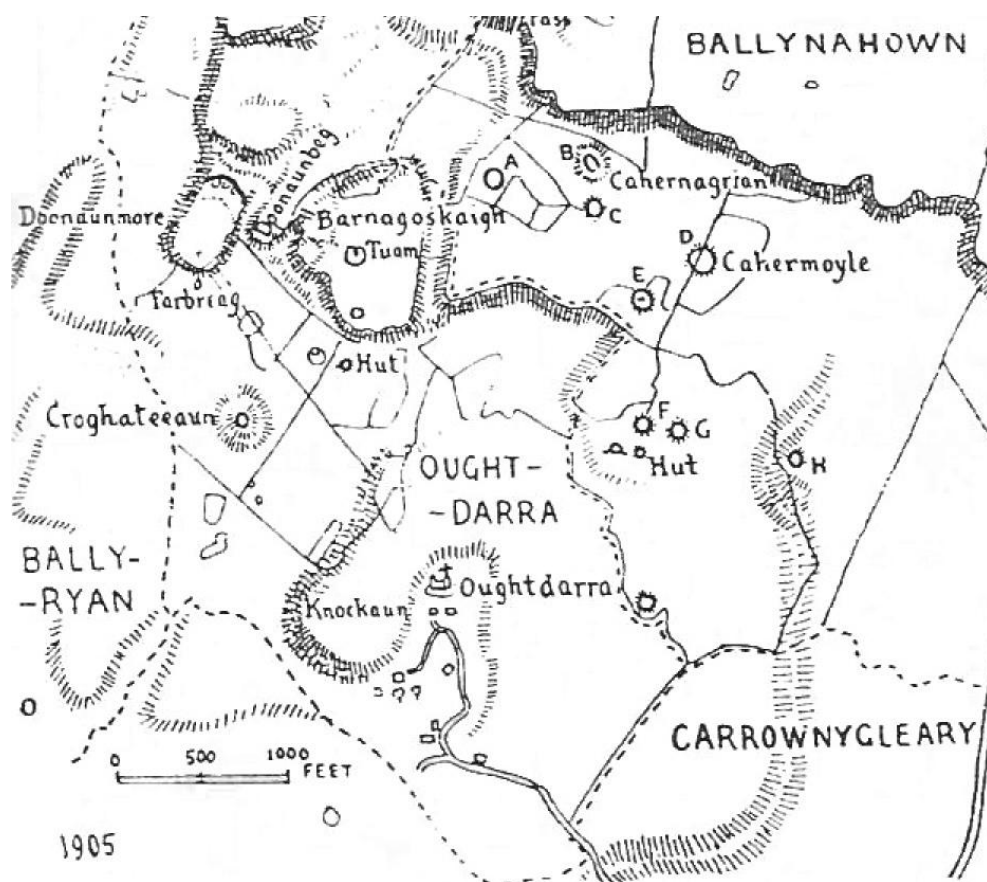


Fig. 1. Thomas Johnson Westropp,
The Ballynahown Group of Forts:
Hand-Drawn Survey of Oughtdarra, 1905.

Memory becomes another layer within the landscape: shifting over time, returning in fragments, and altering our relationship to familiar places. Rather than being defined by any single image, these shifting layers of place coalesce through what exists in the spaces between. Through revisiting formative memories and retracing familiar walks, this study reflects on personal experience as a means of understanding my connection with the Burren and the evolving meanings held within the landscape. Conversations with locals from the surrounding villages emerge alongside personal memories, their voices woven together with my own to convey the relational fabric through which place, memory, and community are collectively understood. These experiences are shaped by the Burren's distinct conditions and topography. Dialogues with local historians, farmers, and family members recount histories passed down through generations, contributing to a shared body of knowledge encompassing folklore and the meanings embedded within Irish placenames. Interpreting these names offers insight into historical ways of relating to the land, shaped and at times fractured by colonial anglicisation, yet still resonating across time.

Theoretical perspectives surrounding the presence of nature, alongside the social and emotional construction of place, frame an understanding of nature not as a passive backdrop but as a relational force shaping how people feel, remember, inhabit, and move through the landscape. Consideration is also given to theories of representation and the 'gaze', examining how landscapes are framed and interpreted through cultural, historical, and personal ways of seeing. These ideas are situated in relation to the Burren's geological character and layered history, seeking to understand how personal, communal, historical, and environmental experiences coalesce into a shared sense of place. By observing and tracing acts of inhabitation — a path worn into the ground, a Sunday ritual walk, the gathering of people at harvest time, the tending of toppled stone walls — this study examines how engagement with seasonal change, local ritual, and folklore reveals enduring relationships between people and environment. These acts uncover the memory, attachment, and shared meanings through which place is continually shaped over time.

The sequence begins by revisiting personal memories of walking through the Burren landscape, accompanied by photographs taken during a return journey home. As these memories unfold, fragments of conversation are woven alongside reflections exploring a collectively felt sense of presence within nature. Attention is given to the varied ways of relating to place shaped by the distinct topographies and conditions across the region's villages. Consideration is also given to how performance and representation emerge through the projections carried into the images we create and capture. Ideas of deep time and continuity are explored through Tim Robinson's maps, reflecting on the gaps, abstractions, and meanings that contribute to both shared and personal understandings of place.

Lios Dúin Bhearna, Dúlainn, Fánóir, Cnoc na Sí,
Baile Uí Bheacháin, Cill Fhionnúrach, An Carn,
Sliabh Eilbhe, Ucht Dara, Baile Uí Rinn, Baile na
leachan, Baile na hUamhan, Murrough, Gleann
Eidhneach, Cappanawalla, Cill Mhúine, Tuaim Bheara

Walking and Remembering

The Burren is a lunar-like glaciated karst limestone landscape in County Clare on the west coast of Ireland. It encompasses 530-square-kilometers of vast horizontal plateau of stone slabs, or Clints, that form pavements separated by deep vertical gaps called Grykes. The most recent glacial advance moved ice sheets from the north-east and scored the bedrock in the process. Water has a unique dynamic with the limestone; water created it, and water is destroying it. Acidic rainfall slowly erodes the soluble surface, an ongoing process that has been happening since the last ice age. This process grounds us to the present, a glimpse of our temporal moment in time. The layered and cavernous rock has formed stepped terraces that descend sequentially from the mountain top, lower land and out to the ocean edge. Shades of blue and grey glisten in the sun, bright yellow lichen signals fresh quality air. Wild goats voyage across the region, taking shelter behind stone walls from the harsh Atlantic winds. Flora is studded and sprinkled across the cracks, rich in nutrients that feed the cows.

The Irish placename *An Bhoireann*, meaning “the rocky place” or “great rock,” reflects a deep intertwining of language, mythology, and landscape. It is closely associated with the Tuatha Dé Danann, a divine Celtic race in Irish mythology who, after being defeated by the Milesians, retreated into the Otherworld. In the Burren, this transition is often linked to the region’s prehistoric megalithic sites, understood as entrances to their subterranean dwellings, mounds - or *sídh*.¹ Here, the boundary between the physical world and the Otherworld is considered especially thin. This sense of permeability can be felt in moments of stillness within the landscape, where the Burren’s rugged isolation and quietness evoke a heightened awareness of something just beyond the visible—an ephemeral presence that emerges through attentive wandering. My mother reflected on the richness of folklore and a sense of solace that kept a fastened draw upon her early experiences of the region: “My appreciation for the Burren came when I would go walking with Peter in the 80s, we would go and see the richness of archaeology, Corcomroe Abbey, the limestone carvings there. Hearing about the folklore, it was very much for the soul. It really moved me as a young woman listening to the music. If you get quiet in your mind and actually be. It’s a possibility. It’s always there.”

A heightened sensitivity to the unseen can also be understood through the lens of the “being away” effect described in ‘Attention Restoration Theory’ by Stephen Kaplan.² The Burren, with its expansive, sparsely populated terrain, creates the conditions for a psychological distance from everyday life, allowing habitual patterns of thought to recede. In this state, attention shifts from directed focus to a more open and receptive mode, shaped by the landscape’s quietness and subtle complexity.

1 Clare County Council, “*Protection: The Burren*,” accessed April 1, 2026, <https://www.clarecoco.ie/heritage-and-biodiversity/the-heritage-county-clare/protection-the-burren>

2 Rachel Kaplan and Stephen Kaplan, *The Experience of Nature: A Psychological Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). The context of this theory comes from a neuroscience field, whereby Kaplan is interested in the effect which walking has on our ability to enter a contemplative state of mind. This is often an experience I’ve felt personally when walking and helps to ground my sense of awareness in the present.

As the mind becomes less occupied by routine demands, it becomes more attuned to atmosphere and nuance, enabling a deeper, more embodied engagement with place. In this way, the restorative qualities of the Burren not only allow for a sense of psychological refresh, but also help to intensify the perception of presence suggested in its mythology, where the boundary between worlds feels momentarily perceptible. In the Burren, this condition is produced through its vastness, quietness, and minimal visual intrusion, which together create the sensory and psychological distance central to the “being away” effect. As attention becomes less controlled and more open, the landscape begins to structure perception in a subtler way, guiding experience through atmosphere, texture, and spatial rhythm. Conversations with family members and local inhabitants reveal shared resonances in these experiences, suggesting that such connections to the walked landscape are both deeply personal and collectively understood. A memory of mine unfolds:

It was a windy Sunday morning. We cleared the kitchen table of breakfast bowls, Weetabix, and crumbs as my dad unfolded the map of the Burren. A quiet deliberation followed—his hands moving northwest from our house, marked as a small black rectangle, toward the coast at Fanore. His finger traced the dotted path from the base up to the summit of Black Head. The decision was made: this would be our Sunday walk. Raincoats were gathered in a familiar sequence from tattered to most worn. Walking boots followed, sturdy enough to navigate the limestone’s cracks and uneven surfaces. The ritual felt ordered, almost instinctive. There was something meditative in the act of packing the car and watching the landscape unfold along the drive. It took us through dense forestry that gradually opened into grassy fields edged with ancient dry-stone walls. Narrow roads wound past horses, ditches, and the remains of stone cottages. As we reached the crest of a small hill, the landscape revealed itself: the Atlantic stretching outward, the Aran Islands in the distance, and Ballinalackan Castle rising from the valley below. Scattered houses appeared both separate and connected, forming a quiet sense of belonging. In my mind, we were part of this place—somewhere between Knocknashkaheen and Kilmoon.

From there, the limestone landscape began to take hold, stretching northeast toward Oughtdarra—what I knew then as “Uckdarra.” We began our descent, the car weaving through the winding “badlands” roads — a local term once given to this boggy land, considered too poor for farming and used instead for forestry — carrying us deeper into the terrain that would soon be walked and experienced on foot. Ballyryan marks the threshold to the Fanore region. Flat, horizontal bands of limestone stretch out to form a vast slab. The long, exposed sweep of stone continues on either side as we pass the rock-climbing face to the right and round a hidden bend. Then Fanore reveals itself. Through the windscreen, we catch our first glimpses of the beach. The limestone cliff edge draws closer as the road winds along it, and small, modest houses begin to cluster by the roadside.



We pass the spot where a dolphin is sometimes said to appear, close enough to reach out and touch. The small, shed-like structure of Fanore Primary School slips by—often with no more than five children, spanning all ages in attendance. There is a quiet groundedness to the place, a sense of honesty in its scale. The beach entrance blurs past to the left, caravans scattered nearby, and dunes stretching endlessly beyond. More houses follow, sitting close to the road, until suddenly the limestone reasserts itself. The lighthouse signals the edge of the cliff, and with a sharp turn, we arrive at the narrow roadside beneath the towering presence of Black Head.

We step out of the car into the wind, taking deep breaths as the boot swings open and the dogs burst forward. There is a brief scramble to fasten their leads—they know where they are. The walk begins, all falling into a loose line. The first steps are tentative, feet adjusting to the cracks and sharp edges. Looking up, the mountain rises steeply in layered formations. Grass pushes through the fissures, and small pink flowers—unique to this terrain—poke through. A faint trace of wild goats lingers in the air. Paths reveal themselves subtly, worn over centuries. Others have passed this way before—druids, travellers, communities moving through the land. Now we walk here too, though for different reasons.

Halfway up, we pause. The view opens wide, and the Aran Islands come into sight again—Inis Meáin closest among them. There is a strange reciprocity in the gaze, as though we are looking at them and they at us. Dad passes around plastic mugs of tea and dark chocolate digestive biscuits, a quiet incentive to keep going. My legs ache from the uneven climb; the terrain feels immense at my scale, each step requiring careful balance. Still, we continue. At the top, the landscape shifts. The steep ascent gives way to an unexpected flatness, an expanse of grey and blue limestone stretching endlessly outward. The ocean edge disappears behind us. The wind intensifies. It feels otherworldly, as though we have stepped onto another space entirely. Scattered across the horizon are the remnants of stone forts and mounds, traces of a long and layered human presence. There is a depth here that is difficult to articulate—something ancient, immersive, and all-encompassing.

The memory and experience of walking have shaped a particular sense of connection to the landscape, as well as an awareness of my own position within it. Each step traces and retraces lines of memory, forming a mental map of points, paths, and features that I can recall and project even when I am elsewhere. Recounting the Burren allows me to reconnect with it—to feel a sense of belonging, of knowing, and of being able to summon its presence in my mind. Returning in person becomes something more intimate, akin to reconnecting with family—an act of reconciliation across time and distance. This relationship unfolds along a continuum of time and space, where both the landscape and I shift between proximity and distance.



Fig 3. pause approaching Oughtdarra
Fig 4. verge between

Echoing this gradual process of becoming attuned to place, Tom Cookson reflects in *Shallow Time: The Burren* on how walking deepens our connection to landscape: “This patient approach to engaging with landscapes ‘gradually renders them familiar’.”³ In a conversation with my father, a similar sense of familiarity emerges as he recalls years spent roaming the region with a close friend, letting intuition guide each walk:

On Sundays I would drive out with Dave and we wouldn’t discuss where we’d go, we would get into the car and go down the road and then we might go left, we might go right, we might do this, that and the other. And eventually we’d stop the car and just go over a wall and then go for a walk. And so, as a consequence we went virtually everywhere in the entire 200 square miles or 300 square kilometres. There was no place that we didn’t walk. Over the course of about nine years. Thousands of miles.

The iterative walks and overlapping footsteps, each approached from a slightly different direction or perspective, gradually accumulate into an embodied understanding of the landscape. Through repetition, the terrain becomes less something to navigate and more something instinctively read — its contours, rhythms, and subtle shifts absorbed through movement over time. In this way, familiarity with place is not formed solely through observation, but through the ongoing physical negotiation between body and environment. Through movement, the body becomes both receptive and responsive, each step a physical connection to the ground, shaped by gravity and terrain. As we move, we occupy space dynamically, our presence subtly articulating the landscape around us. This embodied engagement fosters a state of attunement, where the physical act of walking opens onto a more reflective, even meditative awareness. In such moments, as breath and pace begin to settle, a quiet stillness emerges—one in which a deeper sense of connection to both place and experience can be felt, aligning with the grounding force of the landscape itself.

³ Tom Cookson, *Shallow Time: The Burren* (Barcelona: DPR-Barcelona, 2023), 80. This book is written by an Irish Architect, framing and tracing the multi-layered significance of time, geomorphology, philosophy and art which can be experienced in the Burren. Cookson aptly draws upon Heidegger’s existentialist philosophical concepts relating to his engagement with sculpture and ‘void’ space that frames a surrounding, such as limestone structures in the Burren.

In ‘*We Have Never Been Modern*’, Bruno Latour challenges the modern separation of nature and society, arguing that this division is a constructed illusion rather than an accurate reflection of reality. He proposes that the world is composed of hybrid networks in which human and non-human ‘actors’ are continually entangled.⁴ Rather than existing as distinct domains, nature and culture are constantly co-produced through these interrelations. This perspective reframes reality as fundamentally relational, undermining the idea of a clear boundary between the natural world and human experience. Latour also challenges the idea that nature is a passive backdrop to human activity, instead suggesting that it possesses a form of presence through its capacity to act within networks of relations. In this sense, non-human entities—such as landscapes, materials, and ecological systems—are not inert objects but active participants that influence, shape, and sometimes disrupt human intentions and perceptions. Nature, therefore, is not simply observed or represented; it exerts agency through its interactions with people.

This understanding reframes human experience of place as a reciprocal process, where the natural environment continuously affects and is affected by our human presence, producing shifting and dynamic relationships rather than fixed distinctions between subject and object. Building on this relational view, Latour’s thinking can also be aligned with the notion of “affordances,” in which environments are understood in terms of the actions and possibilities they offer to an observer or inhabitant.⁵ Rather than meaning being imposed onto a landscape, it emerges through engagement, where the material and spatial qualities of a place invite, constrain, or enable particular ways of moving, seeing, and living.

In this way, the landscape is not only a site of interpretation but also an active space of possibilities that shapes human behaviour and perception through its physical and ecological characteristics. Within this framework, it becomes possible to understand how a sense of presence with nature can be felt rather than simply theorised. Through embodied practices such as walking and observation individuals may experience the landscape as something that resonates back—an environment that is not distant or passive, but feels alive to interaction. This felt presence arises from repeated engagement, where sensory awareness and lived experience bring the relational qualities of place into focus, allowing nature to be encountered as something that actively participates in shaping our perception, mood, and sense of meaning.

⁴ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10–12.

⁵ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 69–76.



Fig 5. (top left) familiar edge

Fig 6. (middle) approached

Fig 7. (bottom) below the canopy



Fig 8. (top left) silent bystander
Fig 9. (bottom left) leaving the fort
Fig 10. (bottom) badlands



A sense of wonder emerges as a recurring thread across different accounts of connection to this place, revealing how meaning can be both felt and perceived through lived experience. This connection develops not only through intentional acts of walking, but also through the quieter rhythms of everyday life. Over time, the presence of nature becomes woven into daily experience, offering grounding and solace. My father reflects on how the landscape gradually became a kind of salve for the soul:

There's such diversity, even though to people who don't know, the thing looks just a bunch of rocks. But the textures and the skyscape is very, very diverse. There's no sameness in it, you know. Like even the types of rock and how they look and how it is layered together and everything. It's just always, there's always a sense of wonder. I always had a sense of wonder in it. It was therapeutic. I knew that it would make me feel really good. You know, more than just exercise, feeling good.

Looking west toward the Aran Islands—a walk, a summit, a pause to look over there. An ancient dry-stone wall assembles itself at the edge, framing the distance. From here, there is a distinct sense of looking out from mass to mass, from mainland to island—The Burren, us, and them. The islands feel like a smaller, distant relative, formed from the same geological body, the same fractured logic of limestone, yet set apart. At this edge, the land seems to fall away with a strange immediacy. There is an urge—an image—of stepping, almost jumping, down into the sea. The distance holds, yet collapses. It feels close. Fifteen minutes, maybe, to swim across. An illusion, of course—but a convincing one. Nearness and separation exist together: them and us, held in tension. Everything concentrates here into sensation. The brittle, porous limestone underfoot. Patches of green pushing through—grass, small movements of life. And beyond it all, the Atlantic itself—restless, shifting, sometimes choppy, sometimes unnervingly still.

I recall that moment as a kind of release—an opening out, not just of the view, but of something internal. We—my family and partner—chose this walk in the dark stretch of December, during a trip home. There was a pull toward it, a need to return. What surfaced was not simple. A rush—connection, love, and a quiet sadness at not being fully within it anymore. A sense of distance, self-imposed. Guilt, even, for leaving—for choosing elsewhere, something that must be “better” to justify the absence. And beneath that, something heavier. A feeling of responsibility. To remain, to contribute to the continuity of a place shaped by many spirits—by shared rhythms of nature, ocean, limestone, ritual, accent, dialect, gesture, way of being. It feels weighty, but also generous. A privilege. To know this landscape, to breathe it in—the Atlantic air, dense with salt and minerals, moving through you. To stand within it and feel both held by it and bound with it at the same time.



Fig 11. (top) from mainland to island
Fig 12. (bottom) return

Place is Always Slipping

The hurried rhythm of childhood mornings on the way to school began along a familiar path: through the mucky shoe-room, damp with the traces of weather and dogs, and out beyond the ringfort of trees that stood watch around the house. In memory—and in Tim Robinson’s mapping—the house sits as a small, formal black rectangle, a precise marker within a wider field of landscape. Leaving is always marked by sound—the sharp rattle of the cattle grid as the car dips onto the long lane, a noise that carried both departure and return. It was the same sound that signalled my father coming home after closing the pub, late at night, the wheels catching the grid before the house settled itself around his arrival.

What follows is a quiet ritual of departure: a muted farewell to the doghouse, the left field, the horses grazing, the right field, and the heaped bend slowly folding from view. In Robinson’s map, this becomes a thick black line, surrounded by fields drawn as sparse strokes and open white space, while dense diagonal markings indicate planted forestry—another layer of enclosure, another boundary between what feels like “ours” and something more distant, other. And yet the landscape turns almost without warning: walk two kilometres northwest and the ground gives way to the Burren, limestone opening underfoot like the earth shrugging. Beyond it, the Atlantic unfurls in long repetitions—water after water after water—until the imagination reaches America. Turn instead southeast and the direction changes completely. The road thickens as it carries us toward Lisdoonvarna, where black rectangles gather along the roadside, forming the linear ribbon of the main street. From our roads, it was always visible in the distance: sitting low in the valley, held by surrounding fields and the darker mass of the mountain behind, cast in northern shadow. Living within this 360-degree field creates the strange sense that home is never singular, but distributed—always extending outward in multiple directions at once. Everything seems connected from this vantage point, as if the landscape is constantly unfolding from where I stand, binding fields, roads, towns, and coastline into one continuous place.

Boundaries soften into gradients of terrain and mood, yet the limestone persists throughout—the walls, fractured rock, and geological lines that Robinson so carefully traces—quietly holding these separations together even as they pull things apart. Lisdoonvarna sits inland between the coastal townships of Doolin and Fanore, looking up toward the “badlands” that is our fields. The name comes from the Irish *Lios Dúin Bhearna*, often translated as “fort of the gap” or “enclosure of the fort in the gap.” It is linked to the nearby earthen fort of LISSATEEAUN (fort of the fairy hill), about 2.4km to the north-east near an old castle site, in an area rich with archaeology, including the stone fort of Caherbarna.⁸ As my dad always explained it to me: *lios* (fort), *dún* (fort), *bhearna* (gap)—a place defined by what sits between things.

⁸ Clare County Council, “*Protection: The Burren*,” accessed April 1, 2026, <https://www.clarecoco.ie/heritage-and-biodiversity/the-heritage-county-clare/protection-the-burren>. This stone fort was formed as an enclosure to a old law school dating back to the Brehan times estimated xxx.

And in many ways, that was exactly how it felt: not fully inside the Burren, but not separate from it either—always positioned in the in-between. Growing up there, the Burren was both presence and distance: something celebrated in school geology books and spoken of as a local point of pride, yet still held beyond everyday reach. Day to day, it felt as if we lived inland, enclosed by the surrounding hills, with the landscape beyond suspended just out of view. Reaching it meant moving through a sequence of views. The wide road out of town, lined with passing cars and thinning houses, gradually narrows until only one or two remain. Then comes the turn: narrow lanes, deep potholes, tight bends, and hedgerows rising on either side. Forest walls close in, the light shifts, and the sense of enclosure returns. Dogs appear at gateways, fields turn wet and boggy, horses stand loose in the ground. Even fallen trees seem to fray the edges of the road as it climbs. And then, almost without warning, everything opens. The road reaches its highest point, the sky takes over, and the Burren appears—wide, pale limestone stretching outward, with the Atlantic and the islands resting beyond it all at once.

Place often gets called on in discussions of landscape and *genius loci*, as if it's something stable you can point to, but it feels more like a force made up of time, weather, light, seasons—things constantly moving through it and taking it away again. Its elusive nature is something we try to pin down in theory and abstraction, yet any real grasp of its deeper, almost transcendental qualities is limited by the span of a human life.⁹ Even so, there are ways of getting closer to it—slower, more grounded ways—through observation and reflection. A lot of this comes back to paying attention: walking, looking, listening, smelling, just being in it long enough for things to start to register.

The remnants of history and the deep layering of geological time opens up a way of imagining a much longer horizon—sunrises and sunsets unfolding over scales far beyond our own. Watching these cycles, and the way conditions keep shifting in front of you, can quietly re-orient how you understand your own place in it all. In those moments, there's a sense that something is resonating between the tangible and the intangible, even if it's hard to fully name. And maybe that's the point—trying to reduce it into one clear explanation never really works. Because place is always slipping, always becoming something else, perhaps the closest we get is simply in the act of paying attention itself. In this way, images accumulate in layers of resemblance, yet it is the gaps between them that allow us to keep adding to them, enabling continual reassembly and reconfiguration.

⁹ Samuel Stair and Lily Éire Parsons, eds., *CHEZ ETYM* (Glasgow: Good Press, 2023), 9.



Fig 13. (top) between stone and fairy hill
Fig 14. (bottom) slipping...



Fig 15. (left) Thomas Holmes Mason, *Limestone Terraces, Stone Wall, Burren, County Clare*, 1890. Archive photograph.

Fig 16. (right) personal photograph revisiting walk at Slieve Elva, 2025.



The art historian Alasdair Forbes suggests something similar in his essay on creating landscape at Plaz Metaxu in north Devon, where he describes how the recognition of place can become almost a necessity when we're faced with disorientation in the modern world.¹⁰ I recognise this in my own way through the Burren. It's built from fragments: early memories of family walks, sitting in the car watching the landscape pass, returning to it again as an adult, sometimes through ritual, sometimes just through walking. As cups of tea are made, the conversation drifts back toward the landscape outside, and my sister pauses for a moment before reflecting: "It feels hard to live away from the Burren. There is a longing at times to be there. Like the kind of freedom of getting into the car and kind of that instant effect of being in a very wild place. That can be difficult to be away from. When you go there, you can kind of expand the mind." Her reflection captures something I recognise deeply myself: the persistent draw of the Burren, and the familiar way the landscape can both soothe and stimulate the mind. My memory doesn't stay fixed—it shifts and layers itself over time, different versions of the same place sitting on top of each other. Even something as simple as the smell of seaweed in the air doesn't point to one specific moment, but instead triggers a kind of emotional recognition, a feeling that belongs to the place without needing to be pinned down to a single memory.

The Performative Stones

Our attempts to represent the intangible—through photographs, maps, drawings, or other forms of making—create a kind of temporary, tangible stand-in for something that is otherwise hard to hold onto. In that gap, the gaze becomes important; it frames how we see, and in doing so, shapes what gets represented of the experience in the first place. In one photograph, I'm standing directly facing a group of large stone boulders. Perspective starts to emerge from a faint trail that slips behind the wider boulder on the left, suggesting movement beyond what is immediately visible. There's something almost sculptural about them—the way scale quietly settles itself through their differing heights and rounded forms. It echoes something of Paul Nash's monolithic 'Equivalents for the Megaliths', where stone forms feel both geological and strangely alive at the same time.

The hazy sky and tangled hazel bushes soften the horizon, obscuring any clear edge of the ocean behind. The whole scene begins to feel less like an open landscape and more like an enclosed interior—almost like a room. The nearby fairy hill sits just behind and to the left, feeling surprisingly close, as if it could be part of the same space. The scattered rocks in the foreground sit like a kind of rough carpet underfoot, while the bushes form walls and a backdrop to a space that is both familiar and unknown. The frame of the image isolates only these elements—the boulders, the scrub, the faint light—creating an unexpected sense of intimacy. What might normally be read as vast or exterior instead becomes held, contained, and strangely present.

¹⁰ John Dixon Hunt, *The Genius of the Place: The English Landscape Garden 1620–1820* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 177.



Fig 17. (top) Paul Nash, *Equivalents for the Megaliths*, 1935. Oil painting.
Fig 18. (bottom) the performing stones, 2025.

The English landscape historian John Dixon Hunt traces the evolution of how we understand *genius loci*, or the spirit of place, from its earlier, almost divine Latin origins to a more vernacular and everyday idea, while still recognising it as something rooted in “essential instincts” that persist into the present.¹¹ I found myself wondering whether the concept could still carry meaning within a secular society increasingly suspicious of anything that gestures toward the sacred. Hunt suggests that *genius loci* emerges through the ways a person comes to identify with a site—whether a home or a local landscape—and that these attachments are often deeply sensory, grounded in the body through smell, sound, rhythm, and especially language.

As he writes, places can be “inhabited” in profound ways.¹² From there, it becomes easier to understand how repeated encounters with a landscape slowly build a kind of internal imprint—an accumulation of experience that settles into something like a felt identity of place. This identification is not only formed in the moment of being there, but continues afterwards, in memory, where the place is reassembled through fragments of sensation and thought. In this sense, belonging is not fixed but ongoing, shaped equally by presence and recollection, by walking through a landscape and by carrying it afterwards in the mind.

This is where Martin Heidegger’s writing on dwelling and phenomenology becomes useful.¹³ As a philosophical approach, phenomenology is concerned with describing experience as it is lived—before it is categorised, explained, or abstracted. It tries to stay close to how things actually appear to us, in perception, attention, and bodily awareness. Rather than treating the world as something separate to be analysed from a distance, it begins from the fact that we are already embedded within it, always experiencing from somewhere, in somebody, at some moment. Phenomenology offers a language for approaching the subtle, often difficult-to-express dimensions of experience—those that sit just below conscious articulation.

Applied to place, this means paying attention not only to what a landscape is, but how it is encountered: how it feels underfoot, how it sounds in wind, how it shifts with mood, light, and movement. Later thinkers like Tim Ingold, particularly his work on lines, walking, and perception-in-motion, develops phenomenology into an anthropology of movement and environment.¹⁴ Thinking from this perspective allows space for the idea that meaning is not simply projected onto a site, but emerges through ongoing, embodied engagement with it. In doing so, phenomenology becomes a way of staying close to experience itself, allowing the often quiet, intuitive, and subconscious layers of our relationship to place to surface and be acknowledged.

11 Hunt, *The Genius of the Place*, 1.

12 *Ibid.*, 9.

13 Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 141–160.

14 Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000)

Traces of Living

Many Patient Hands: Stitching Landscape

This way of thinking about place—through phenomenology and the gradual accumulation of lived, embodied experience—becomes especially clear when considered in relation to nearby Fanore, a village that sits immediately at the edge of the Burren and feels inseparable from it. Fanore is the coastal town at the base of the mountains, and in many ways its most immediate inhabited village. For me, it stands out because of its layered physical character, where three distinct topographies meet: the higher ground closest to the mountain, the shifting sandy dunes by the beach, and the strip of rocky soil in between. It feels like a place held together by transition itself. The people who live there seem closely attuned to this condition, shaped by the demands of a landscape that moves between harshness and calm. There is a sense that living here requires practical knowledge, adaptability, and a deep familiarity with the land—an understanding earned through daily negotiation with its extremes. A local farmer shares an example of farming methods that respond to the local climate and geology:

We don't need sheds for cattle, what we have is, at the end of October, beginning of November, we can gather all our animals and put them out in the mountains, because the limestone keeps the heat from the summer. And they can live quite well unless you get snow. So the radiation of the heat goes up to the limestone mountain. It sucks in the heat and lets it out gradually.

It's not hard to imagine this ingrained knowledge being followed amongst ancient celtic tribes. Time stretches far along these ridges, but these practices make it easier to connect along its continuum. With a small population, the village carries a close-knit sense of community, often made visible in simple gestures—like the sign outside O'Donoghue's pub that reads "Go on the Burren Gaels" as you pass through. A conversation with the same farmer evolves as he reminisces on old Irish lore growing up: "As a young boy we would go 'chuaire', that's to go visit your neighbour. If you didn't bring something to the house, they'd throw you out. In other words, if you didn't recite a poem, you didn't sing a song, do a bit of a dance, or anything, they wouldn't let you stay."

Generosity of company has been an important part of the social fabric of this small community. Living between the mountain and the sea in this isolated village is never static. Every day life requires constant movement—travel for work, school, or basic errands, most often by car or bike. Distances to neighbours, and to the single local pub or shop, are generally experienced as "far." In this context, relating to the landscape is first and foremost practical, a necessity shaped by geography and limited infrastructure. Any deeper emotional attachment tends to sit alongside this rather than lead it. Yet it is perhaps in the combination of both—practical reliance and quieter forms of belonging—that people sustain life here.



Fig 19. before stone gives way

West of Lisdoonvarna, along the south-western edge of the Burren, lies Doolin—a place that feels slightly more peripheral, yet still very much an extension of the same limestone character. Once a small fishing village, it sits where the Burren meets the Atlantic, its shoreline marked by broad limestone slabs stretching for around 4.5km toward Ballyryan and the edge of Fanore. A walk along this coast exposes you fully to the wind, with long views out toward boats heading for the nearby Aran Islands. Doolin (Dúlainn, from dubh linn, meaning “dark pool”) carries its own layered history, once associated with a branch of the O’Brien clan known as the Glac.¹⁵ Today, the village forms a long ribbon of houses, busy B&Bs, and pubs shaped by tourism and arrival. There is a certain polished quality to it—well-kept homes, bright painted façades, colours designed to catch the eye as you pass through. Small bridges, tidy ruins, and carefully maintained edges. And yet, beneath this curated surface, the same limestone persists—the continuity of rock, coast, and wind that connects it back into the Burren.

Doolin becomes less a separate place and more a threshold space, where everyday life, tourism, and landscape overlap. A local historian to Doolin tells me that a turning point came in the 1960s, with the arrival of English students coming to study the geology in a more formal way. Their presence marked a shift toward systematically recording the region’s geology, dates, and historical features, giving structure to what had previously been held largely through local knowledge and oral memory. From there, interest in the area gradually expanded. In the following decades, this attention fed into a growing flow of tourism, which coincided with a wider revival of interest in traditional Irish and Celtic music during the 1970s. The emergence of well-known music festivals in both Doolin and Lisdoonvarna helped to draw increasing numbers of visitors, gradually cementing tourism as a key part of the local economy. Over time, many locals adapted to this shift, building livelihoods around hospitality, music, and seasonal trade, as the rhythm of the place began to include both living and visiting footsteps.

In the same conversation, the local also spoke about meeting the English writer and cartographer Tim Robinson during his time roaming through the area. He described how Robinson was deeply committed to recording the original Irish placenames with care and precision, often working closely with local speakers to ensure their meanings and pronunciations were preserved rather than translated or simplified. He recalled how Robinson learned much of the older Irish from islanders along the Doolin coast, at a time when the language was still widely spoken in everyday life, before formal grammar and standardisation were fully introduced into the Irish education system. The local reflected on this shift in passing, noting that for his own parents’ generation, Irish was still the natural language of expression—something through which they could fully express themselves.

¹⁵ Eddie Stack, ed., *Doolin: People, Place and Culture*, 1st ed. (Doolin, Ireland: Eddie Stack, 2004).

In many ways, the stone walls stretching across the Burren feel like physical connections to past generations—quiet markers of lives lived, worked, and repeated over time. They remain largely untouched, with only occasional collapses and repairs, each intervention adding another layer to a kind of living palimpsest. The gaps between the stones, I’m told by the local farmer in Fanore, lets the wind pass straight through, as if the landscape itself refuses anything fully sealed or fixed—and in doing so, it helps keep the walls sturdy, allowing them to stand for centuries. A subtle wisdom long overlooked within these walls. Originally built to enclose parcels of land for tenants under English landlords during Penal times, they still carry that history of division and survival, even as they’ve become something more open-ended over time.

What I find interesting is how these same walls don’t just divide land—they also quietly connect it. Moving between Lisdoonvarna, Doolin, Fanore, and the wider Burren, you start to notice how the walls carry a kind of shared language across these places. They shift slightly in form and function, but they always feel part of the same language of making and marking space. In that sense, they hold different perspectives of the landscape together—farmers, walkers, locals, visitors—each reading the same lines in slightly different ways. This continuity is already perceptible in *The Stranger’s Gaze: Travels in County Clare*, a collection of letters spanning more than four centuries that records first-hand accounts of travellers from Britain, Europe, Australia, and America who visited Clare between 1534 and 1950 with differing intentions, occupations, and pursuits. One nineteenth-century English traveller, for instance, observed how the extended walls on higher ground protected cattle from the harsh winds, sometimes forming T-shaped structures that guided and sheltered movement according to the weather.¹⁶ In these humble formations of stone lies a quiet lore — an inherited understanding of land, weather, and animal life — woven quietly through the landscape itself.

Built slowly, by hand, out of rough limestone simply stacked, they feel like what Cookson describes as ‘anti-monuments’—collective, anonymous, and continually maintained across generations.¹⁷ There’s something grounding in that, in the way care is repeated rather than declared, suggesting a more patient, shared way of living with the landscape rather than over it. Framed volumes such as stone forts and dolmens act as wayfinding points across the region, marking moments of pause and orientation within the wider landscape. Roaming cattle and goats continue this presence, carrying forward a legacy of modest, sustained inhabitation that stretches across centuries. These places still hold a quiet sense of simple living and a wider connection to the cosmos, as if their arrangement in the land is both practical and symbolic at once. The untouched quality of found stone offers a lasting reminder of care, suggesting a form of symbiosis that persists through continued use and quiet maintenance. Cookson shares a meaning that can be understood from the Burren’s qualities:

¹⁶ *The Stranger’s Gaze: Travels in County Clare 1534–1950* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), 149.

¹⁷ Tom Cookson, *Shallow Time: The Burren* (Barcelona: DPR-Barcelona, 2023), 90.

The Burren can teach us lessons about managing and inhabiting a fragile environment. The symbiotic relationship between flora, livestock, and humans. The resilience of the natural world, and an architectural attitude for building in such places.¹⁸

Rituals here tend to follow the rhythm of the land itself, repeating and revolving around the cycles of growth, grazing, and harvest. They act as anchors, tying the community back into the natural environment rather than separating it from it. Seasonal milestones—like harvest time or Imbolc, which marks the beginning of spring—are often still associated with sacred hills, stone sites, and familiar gathering points across the landscape, keeping a quiet continuity with older ways of marking time. One of the clearest examples of this is the Irish tradition of Meitheal, a form of cooperative labour where neighbours would come together to help each other with seasonal work, especially haymaking in the spring. The farmer from Fanore let his gaze drift across the fields, lingering there with a quiet nostalgia:

The woman in the house, as she was called, might arrive with tea or bread. There'll be no sandwiches that time, brown bread with probably slabs of cold bacon. Smoking small pipes and talk, yeah, you know, great sense of community.

Rather than working alone, people would move collectively from one farm to the next, sharing labour and rotating support day by day. Each household would, in turn, host the group, offering food and a place to rest. What stands out to me is how practical this system was, but also how social and grounded—it wasn't just about getting work done, but about maintaining relationships through shared effort, rhythm, and presence in the land. Building on these layers of ritual, landscape, and memory, I return to a hazy recollection of driving out to the start of a walk near Carran in my mid-twenties. The road itself felt part of the experience: a sharp, winding route through Corkscrew Hill and past Gregan's Castle, a place linked in local stories to visits by J. R. R. Tolkien. At some point, my dad became fixated on tracing Tolkien's connections to the Burren landscape and its placenames. It began, as I remember it, in a pub in Galway in his early twenties, where he ended up in conversation with a housekeeper from Gregan's Castle. She recalled Tolkien as a friend of the family who had visited several times, taking long walks across the Burren.

These stories started to shape how we moved through the landscape ourselves—like we were walking through overlapping layers of narrative and place at once. On one of these walks we came across what we learned was “Phelim's Cave,” a feature marked on Robinson's Burren maps, and a place my parents later chose when naming my eldest brother. When we finally arrived, it was barely visible—just a soft opening in the grassy slope, almost absorbed into the hill itself, with only faint traces of light giving it away. One by one, we knelt and leaned inside, peering into the hollow space.

¹⁸ Cookson, *Shallow Time*, 52.

A narrow gap on the far side allowed air to pass through, giving the impression of a hidden passage rather than a closed cave. It felt like a secret shelter, something half-natural, half-imagined—like a place made for small groups to slip into and disappear for a while.

The more daring among us slipped through the opening and crouch inside the earth. I lingered at the entrance for a moment, uneasy at the thought of disappearing beneath the surface—what past souls might still linger there, and what stories they carried with them? Inside, an unexpected calm settled in, a sense of being held or protected, like a place the wind had forgotten. There was a strange pull toward deep time too—a feeling that this space had been occupied, imagined, or returned to for far longer than I could hear. Time seemed to slow, but also to stretch backwards, folding the present into something older and harder to name. This hollow contains vignettes of presence — time itself, and its misreadings across recurring yet never identical moments. Its vacancy, whether extended over long periods or only just before our arrival, a scurrying hare we did not see, seemed to overlap incessantly. There is a glimpse of something—just there, just now—then it is gone: at once reassuring, fleeting, shared, and momentarily mine.

The gaps between Tolkien's flourished imaginings and my own reading of this landscape are crucial to the space that shapes my sense of wonder, drawing me back repeatedly to the films where these impressions begin to merge. Although I have not yet finished this walk, I find myself stitching images and memories in front of me again. It becomes dreamlike and superimposed—moving between story, memory, and the crouch of wind. Still watching it before my feet have stopped on this path; even from my desk as I write, and as I speak with my mother on the phone, it continues to gather itself in layers. There is a pause as the local historian from Doolin nods thoughtfully while I ask about the old graveyard only a short walk up from this kitchen; I can tell the story he was told has lifted itself—maybe slightly different this time, stories bleed together, what it really feels like when things slip away:

If you go along the road you meet around 13-14 settlements—one of the oldest about 6000 BC. Robinson surveyed it all; it's a very good map. That kind of thing is all fading away, people wouldn't meet those who know of it now. He had that way about him; met people by word of mouth. There's some beautiful work there, all done by hand; the inscription on the stone is perfect. The graveyard stopped being used in the 1960s. The vault beside it is the Macnamara vault; that was used as a prison in 1914 by the IRA. The steel door is still there, as if it were the day people were locked in. There's a lot of history around these fields. Dunmacfelim Castle there is said to have belonged to the O'Connor family; it was owned by Phelim O'Connor.

I find this serendipity interesting: my brother is married into the O'Connor family here today, their histories and ours quietly stitched together.



Fig 20. (top left) portal to the otherside
Fig 21. (bottom left) solemnly standing

Deep Mapping

Tim Robinson develops an ethnographic and deeply situated approach, drawing on oral histories gathered through long periods of living and walking in the Aran Islands and surrounding west of Ireland. These accounts are never just recorded at a distance; they are filtered through his own embodied experience of moving through the landscape, retracing paths, and slowly building an understanding through walking itself.¹⁹ This intimate knowledge of place is then translated into another form — his hand-drawn maps — where a three-dimensional, experienced world is carefully compressed into two-dimensional representation. Rather than flattening the landscape, this act of drawing becomes a kind of “deep mapping,” where history, memory, conversations and geography are held together in a single, layered field of attention.

In *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage*, Robinson traces stone walls, roads, contours, and geological formations not just as physical features, but as carriers of meaning and lived presence, using a prose style that moves between observation, memory, and reflection.²⁰ What makes this work particularly significant for me is how personal it feels—not only in Robinson’s own method, but in how his maps have entered my own experience of place. In my family, they were not just books or representations, but tools we actively used on weekend walks. In that sense, they became part of a shared, lived mapping of the landscape we grew up in. The maps themselves carefully draw attention to certain features—the speckled curves and inlets around Ballyvaughan—allowing the reader to begin sensing the Burren not as an abstract space, but as something tactile and relational. The hand-drawn marks, shifting between geological, morphological, and imagined forms, open up a way of seeing that holds texture, distance, and memory together at once. They become less about fixing the landscape, and more about staying with its complexity—its richness of surface, structure, and lived experience.

In a talk given by the French-born photographer and friend of Tim Robinson, Nicolas Fève, at the symposium *Reimagining Connections*, Fève outlines key aspects of Robinson’s own thinking about what he describes as “remapping connections” to the Burren through his practice of map-making.²¹ What emerges is not a fixed method, but a way of moving between landscape and representation that is always shifting, always partial. Fève describes three overlapping dimensions through which this translation happens. First, there is the objective dimension—the physical landscape itself, its geological forms, contours, and visible structures. Second, the subjective dimension—the viewpoint of the observer, the embodied gaze through which the landscape is encountered. And third, the poetic dimension—the act of expression itself, where place is carried into language, image, drawing, or writing. Together, these form a passage from lived reality into representation, not as a simple transfer, but as a continual negotiation between seeing, experiencing, and making.

¹⁹ Tim Robinson, *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* (London: Penguin, 1995), 17.

²⁰ Robinson, *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage*, 17.

²¹ Nicolas Fève, “*Reimagining Connections: Drawing, Mapping and Landscape*,” YouTube video, accessed January 21, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGUD7HlJeog>

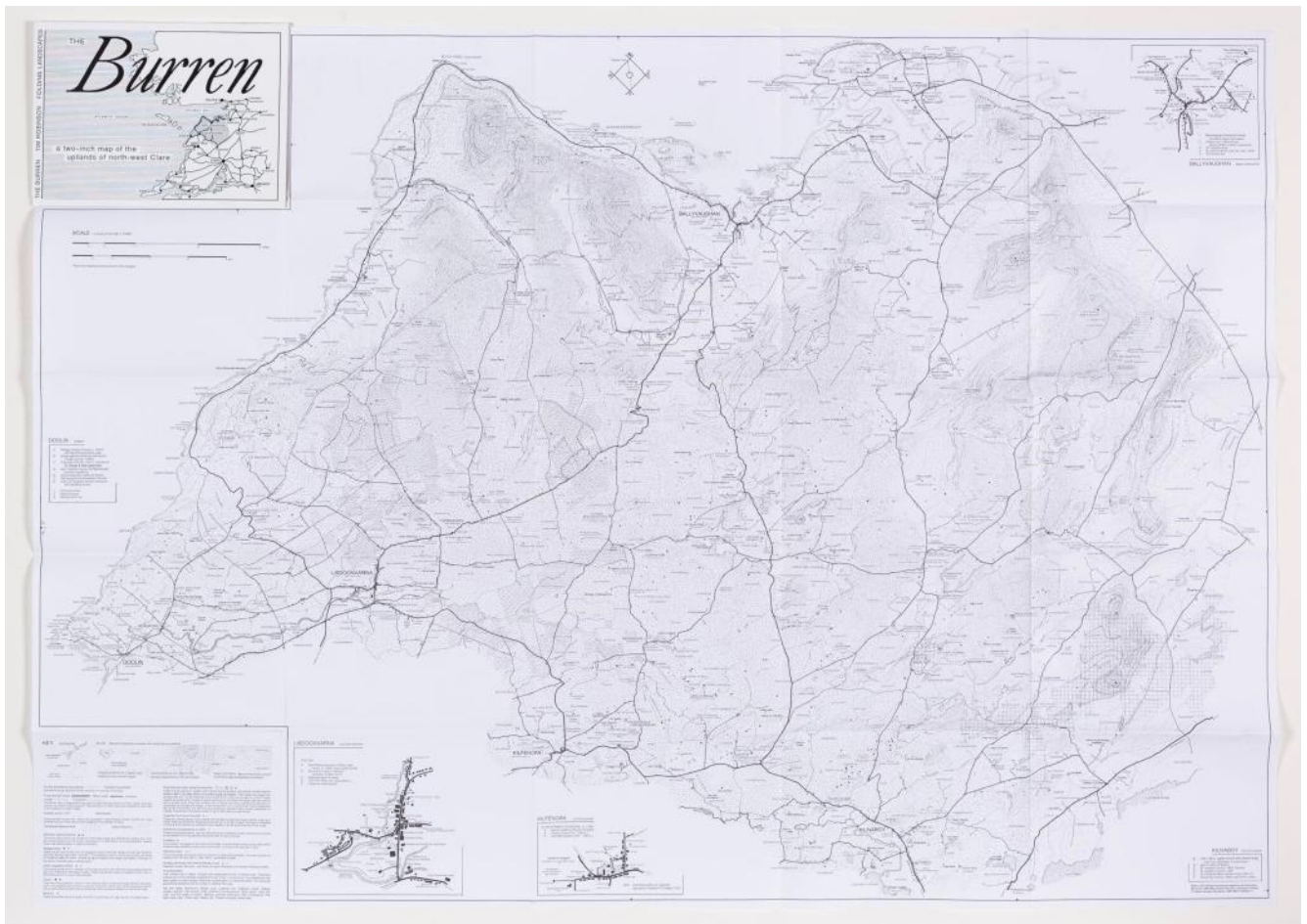


Fig 22. Tim Robinson, *A Two-Inch Map of the Uplands of North-West Clare*, 1977. Hand-drawn map.

In Robinson's approach, the image becomes this passage: a way of moving between landscape and reader, rather than simply depicting one for the other. At one point, he describes tracing "lines made of words" into maps, suggesting that writing itself can function like drawing, and that both can hold spatial meaning.²² To relate to landscape in this way is also to gain a kind of voice—both as someone who authors the place and as someone who is authorised to read it, to interpret it, to move through it attentively. Fève summarises this process as beginning with direct experience, then identifying key points, linking them together, and allowing associations, images, and reflections to emerge through a kind of experimental attention to reality.²³ From this, he draws out a broader way of working that can be understood in four movements:

- i) to identify and link key points within the landscape
- ii) to connect lived experience to the reader through image-making and mapping
- iii) to relate the reader back into the landscape through prose as a non-metric, open form of language
- iv) and, more broadly, to narrate the journey itself—the ongoing process of relating, rather than arriving at a fixed conclusion

In this sense, Robinson's work is less about representing the Burren as something complete, and more about continually testing how it might be encountered, retold, and re-imagined through different acts of attention. A formal engagement with this process—translating lived experience into drawn form—inevitably results in the production of 2D artefacts such as maps. Yet the flatness of the page, along with its fixed annotations, can only ever offer a partial and contained version of a landscape. In being captured, time is effectively paused and stamped, while the ongoing processes of erosion, movement, and change are held outside the frame.

As *Shallow Time* notes, much of the modernist tradition is marked by an interest in flatness and "shallow time", where space is organised through grids, order, and single-point perspective.²⁴ Cookson suggests that, in contrast, figures such as Robert Smithson and Donald Judd were drawn toward something quite different—monolithic forms that seem to sit outside human scale and linear time, like the stone structures scattered across the Burren. In this reading, there is a sense of searching for "deep time" within seemingly simple or "shallow" spaces, where geological presence disrupts the neatness of human ordering. This concern also runs through the early work of Tim Robinson, whose struggle was consistently how to translate the topographic complexity of lived experience into the constraints of a two-dimensional surface.²⁵

²² Fève, "Reimagining Connections."

²³ Ibid, 11:15.

²⁴ Tom Cookson, *Shallow Time: The Burren* (Barcelona: DPR-Barcelona, 2023), 69.

²⁵ Cookson, *Shallow Time*, 90.

Maps can be understood then to resist the conventions of perspective. They do not offer a single vanishing point like a Renaissance image or photograph; instead, the eye is forced to wander across the surface, assembling meaning through attention rather than passive viewing. As Cookson notes, the reader is made to actively roam the drawing. Much like architectural drawings, meaning is carried through variations in line thickness, spacing, and density, which together communicate shifts in scale, elevation, and material presence.²⁶ To draw the landscape in this way requires a careful balancing of clarity and complexity—organic curves to suggest the slow erosion of limestone, measured placement of text to avoid overcrowding, and a sensitivity to how information accumulates across the surface.

In Robinson's Burren maps, this balance becomes especially evident. His drawings carry what Cookson describes as the "countenance" of the landscape—a kind of personality or presence that emerges through line rather than image.²⁷ The varying density of marks traces the structure of limestone strata, while shifts in spacing suggest changes in elevation and terrain. Even the brittleness of rock seems to register through the delicacy of the drawing, as edges fracture into shadow and form. What emerges is not a neutral record of place, but a lived interpretation—where drawing becomes a way of sensing as much as representing, and where the landscape is held, however briefly, within the rhythms of hand, eye, and memory. Taken together, these ways of moving between walking, remembering, mapping, and telling begin to form a continuous thread through the Burren rather than separate ideas about it.

From childhood routes and family walks to local stories, placenames, rituals, and the stone walls that carry the villages into one another, the landscape keeps reappearing as something both material and felt. Whether through oral histories shared in pubs, the rhythms of seasonal labour and festival, or the more formal act of drawing and writing the land, each mode becomes another way of tracing the same underlying presence of place. Even attempts to represent it—through maps, photographs, or theory—circle back to lived experience. The Burren is not just a backdrop to these narratives, but an active field that holds them together. Through his careful strokes and patient recovery of lost placenames, Robinson contributes to a layered fabric of history and time, inspiring my own desire to make sense of this place and my relation to it. It felt important to follow a similar path: to seek out conversations with local people and allow stories and passing lore to emerge gradually through encounter. These narratives surfaced slowly—in pauses, recollections, and casual turns of speech. Listening became its own form of movement through layers of place carried not only in stone and path, but in voice, memory, and shared retelling.

²⁶ Ibid, 73.

²⁷ Ibid, 77.

Conclusion

Returning to the starting point of this research—the revisiting of formative memories and familiar walks through the Burren—it becomes clear that what first appeared to be a study of place has gradually unfolded as a study of relation. The Burren is encountered not as a fixed landscape, but as something shaped continuously through movement, perception, memory, and return. Each walk does not replace earlier experiences, but draws them back into the present, allowing different versions of place to gather within the same terrain. Memory operates in much the same way: fragments of conversation, weather, texture, and image surface unevenly, overlapping rather than resolving into a singular narrative. The landscape therefore emerges less as a stable object than as an accumulation of encounters, reassembled over time through attention and repetition.

Walking becomes not simply a means of accessing the Burren, but a way of understanding how place reveals itself gradually through movement. Thresholds—gates, cattle grids, bends in the road, shifts in weather or ground—become perceptual transitions that alter one’s relation to the landscape. Lisdoonvarna, Fanore, Doolin, and the wider Burren appear not as isolated locations, but as interconnected presences within a broader network of paths, stone walls, labour, and inherited stories. Through walking, conversations and observations begin to sediment into a personal form of mapping in which earlier encounters remain active within later ones. A remembered voice, a ruined structure, or the outline of a field can suddenly return while moving through the landscape again, collapsing distance between past and present.

The theoretical frameworks drawn upon throughout this research—Latour’s relational networks, Hunt’s *genius loci*, a phenomenological approach to how place is encountered, Ingold’s development of movement, lines, and perception-in-motion, Cookson’s articulation of deep time, and Robinson’s deep mapping—provide ways of articulating these encounters without reducing them to abstraction. Together, they frame landscape not as geological or representational alone, but as something continually narrated and reshaped through the entanglement of human and non-human presence, memory, labour, weather, and time.

Ultimately, this research returns to the question with which it began: how is place known through lived experience? Rather than offering a definitive reading, the study reveals place as something sensed cumulatively—through habit, familiarity, and the gradual layering of experience. The Burren emerges as both ordinary and mythic, immediate and distant—not merely a backdrop to experience, but an active presence that shapes how people move, remember, and orient themselves within the world. Grounded in lived experience, this inquiry does not seek to define the Burren conclusively, but to trace an ongoing relationship with it, sustained through walking, conversation, and repeated encounter.



Fig 23. (top) a place that sits between
Fig 24. (bottom) a rocky place revisited

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