

Bogland *for T. P. Flanagan*

We have no prairies
To slice a big sun at evening--
Everywhere the eye concedes to
Encroaching horizon,

Is wooed into the cyclops' eye
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country
Is bog that keeps crusting
Between the sights of the sun.

They've taken the skeleton
Of the Great Irish Elk
Out of the peat, set it up
An astounding crate full of air.

Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years
Was recovered salty and white.
The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,
Missing its last definition
By millions of years.
They'll never dig coal here,

Only the waterlogged trunks
Of great firs, soft as pulp.
Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless.



Summary and analysis:

This poem is dedicated to the artist T.P. Flanagan. He and Heaney, along with their wives and children, spent a Hallowe'en together in County Donegal. Flanagan said that 'The poem is a celebration for me of a very happy and creative time in both our lives.' He painted a picture of the bogland and dedicated it to Heaney. Heaney responded with this poem.

The Heaney opens by saying that Ireland has no equivalent to the flat expanses of American prairies. The words 'prairies' and 'big sun' evoke ideas of heading out into the sunset, exploring, adventure, pioneers and so on.

Perhaps fittingly – seeing as this poem is dedicated to a painter – Heaney describes the scene as if he were looking at it through a painter's critical eye. There is the foreground, with its tarn and there is the 'encroaching horizon'. This is not a flat, empty place; it closes in rather than opening up. Could that be a metaphor for our national consciousness too?

Heaney's affection for the place is shown in the word 'our'. He identifies with this place and feels a sense of shared belonging.

By comparing the tarn to a 'cyclops' eye', Heaney links the landscape to myth and mystery. This is a place of change, the soft surface crusts over each day and melts to softness again each night.

Having told us that the bogland is nothing like the American prairies with their potential for breaking new ground and striking outward, Heaney shows us that the Irish landscape can be equally interesting and exciting, but in a very different way. This is a place of history and discovery of a shared past.

The image of the 'Great Irish Elk' being an 'astounding crate full of air' is a dramatic one. It has a lightness and freedom now, having been buried in the heavy earth of the bog for thousands of years. The word 'astounding' is a powerful one and shows how impressive this sight is to Heaney. In an essay called 'Feeling into Words', Heaney wrote the following:

'I had been vaguely wishing to write a poem about bogland, chiefly because it is the landscape that has a strange, assuaging effect on me, one with associations reaching back into early childhood. We used to hear about bog-butter, butter kept fresh for a great number of years under the peat'. Then when I was at school the skeleton of an elk had been taken out

of a bog nearby and a few of our neighbours had got their photographs in the paper, peering out across its antlers. So I began to get an idea of bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened to it. In fact, if you go round the National Museum in Dublin, you will realise that a great proportion of the cherished material heritage of Ireland was “found in a bog”. Moreover, since memory was the faculty that supplied me with the first quickening of my own poetry, I had a tentative, unrealised need to make a congruence between memory and bogland, and, for the want of a better word, our national consciousness.’

In an interview in 1986, Heaney said that he felt it was ‘one of the most important poems I had written.’ He loved the bogland and thought it was ‘a beautiful place, physically’ with the heather, the water and the springy ground. Emotionally, he also felt a great link to the place because he spent so many days there with his father and ‘older people’. They were summer days and he said that while he was there he always had a sense of ‘being in migration’. He sums up this idea by saying that ‘emotionally, then in memory, it represented a free place for me.’

The elk is something marvellous and strange, but the butter is a domestic image – much closer to home. Both are from our past, though, and the bog links all our history, whether it is the ‘astounding’ elk or the much more ordinary butter. At the same time, the image of butter is a comforting and nourishing one. It picks up on the idea of the bog ‘crusting’ over – bringing to mind the crust of a loaf of bread. The bog is a nurturing place: the ground is ‘kind black butter’.

The bog lacks solidity ‘they’ll never dig coal her’. All that can be dug is turf: ‘the waterlogged trunks / of great firs’. Unlike the American pioneers, we dig ‘Inwards and downwards’. The digging of turf becomes a metaphor for peeling away layers of our history. The word ‘pioneer’ suggests adventure and new discoveries, but these are discoveries about our past. No matter how far we dig, there is still more to be discovered about our ancestors: ‘Every layer they strip / Seems camped on before.’

The final lines contain a warning. On a practical level, Heaney is remembering that he and the other children were always warned against falling into the pools at the bottom of trenches where turf had been dug, so they told the children that the pools were bottomless. Other critics have likened the bog to ‘the dark rich places of the human psyche’ and pointed out that water is linked with potential and the bottomless well of the imagination. (Think of Yeats and ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’ when he is standing on the dry, woodland paths and

envying the swans on the 'brimming water'.)

The final word on this idea is Heaney's: 'I have always listened for poems, they come sometimes like bodies out of a bog, almost complete, seeming to have been laid down a long time ago, surfacing with a touch of mystery.'

Themes:

Memory: Look again at the extract from Heaney's essay about bogland and memory. On one level the bog simply contains the physical history of our people and land, but on another level it is a metaphor for our national consciousness. We preserve our history in songs, stories and history books but each version is different, depending on who is telling it. Like the fluidity and lack of definition of the bog, our national consciousness is not easily defined.

There is a danger that in digging 'inward and downward' we may not look beyond the past but may become overly obsessed with it. On the one hand we remember and celebrate all that is good in our history, but on the other hand we may not let go of past grievances and injustices.

Poetry: A poet must dig deep to find inspiration. Digging in the bog is a metaphor for this. Heaney explores his memory to find material for his poetry.

The marvellous: Heaney sees mystery and wonder in the bog and in all that it preserves. The Great Irish Elk is 'astounding' and the deep pools are bottomless. There is always more to be discovered here. For every layer we strip away, there is a deeper one.

Nature: The poem is a celebration of the physical beauty of the landscape. Every aspect of it is lovingly described: it is indefinable, it is interesting rather than featureless and it is just as worthy a subject of poetry as the more obviously impressive prairies. This is a gentle, 'kind' place that is linked to the people. Heaney described the bog a 'very beautiful, benign place'.