

The Burren

a living landscape

A visit to the Burren, one of the world's most stunningly unique natural heritage regions is the beginning of a journey through time. Nestling just off Galway Bay, on the western Atlantic coast of Ireland, are over 259 square kilometres of dramatic limestone karst landscape we know today as the Burren. This is a region which was largely sculpted over the last two million years by God and his glaciers, through the exposure and submergence of its landscape to ice, ocean and the plate movements of the earth. The splendid, distinctive limestone terraces and pavements of this region formed over the millennia like steps of stairs as glacial action plucked layers of stone from the hillsides. These terraces are made up of thick horizontal limestone layers or beds which were first laid down in a tropical sea floor about 335 million years ago, during a geological time period called the Carboniferous.



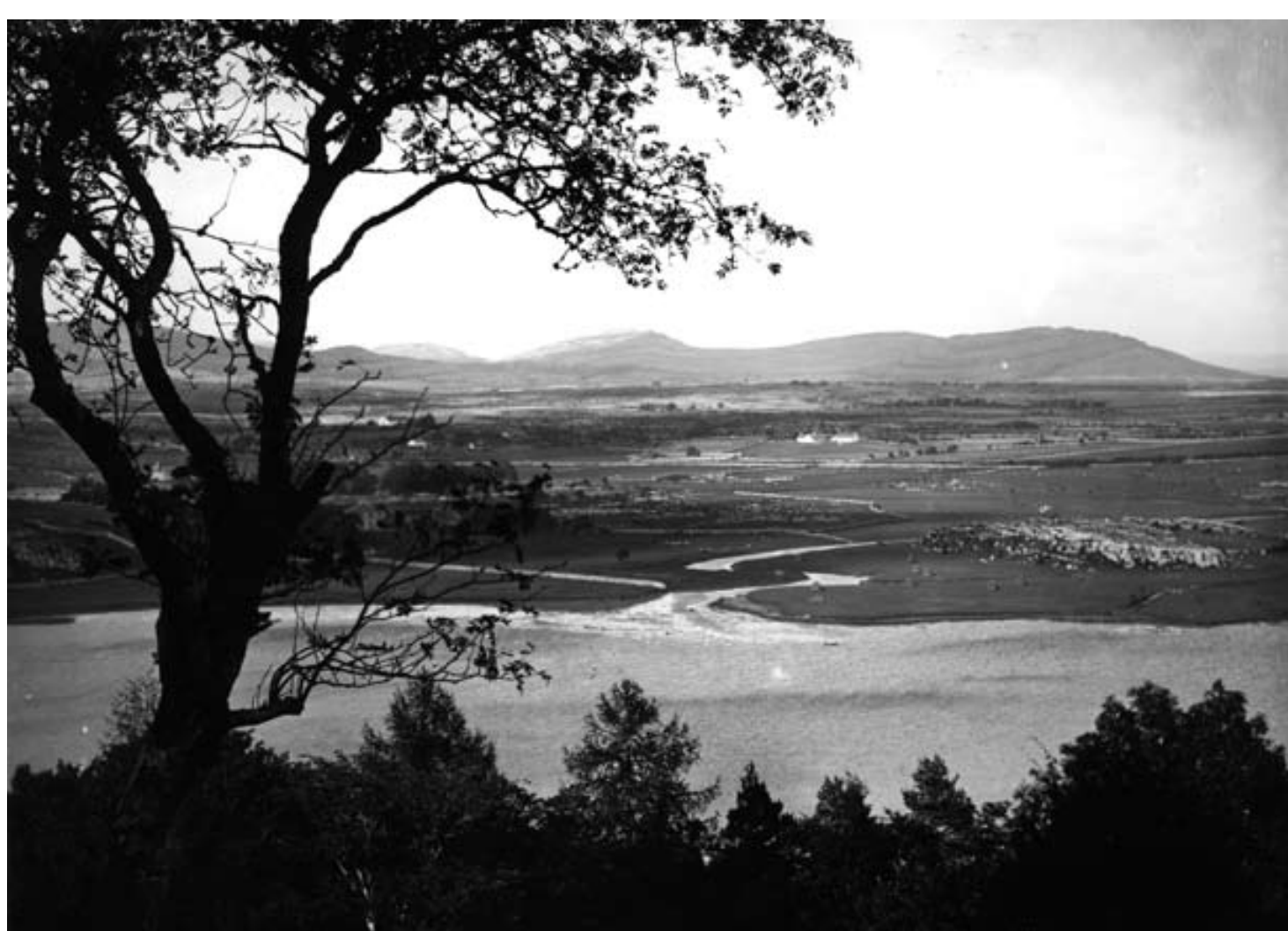
The trademark shattered and smooth pavements of the Burren are seedbed habitats

for the amazingly diverse array of plants and wildflowers. Here alpine and arctic plants grow side by side with Mediterranean species. Over 70% of Ireland's 900 native plant species are found here. This diverse flora supports a wonderful diversity of fauna, and such a rich ecology is the result of a unique combination of geographical, climatic and agricultural factors found in the Burren. This phenomenon has been created by the prevailing



Gulf Stream, soft rain, relative absence of frost and the carboniferous bedding of the plants. The Burren is sometimes aptly referred to as the 'fertile rock'.

Yet what is truly unique about the Burren is that its landscape has also been shaped by its human story, and is a living visual legacy of the interaction between natural forces and humankind for over 6,000 years. Humankind has been central to the formation of the Burren Circle of Life and farmers have been an integral part of the eco-system here. It was the agricultural practices and clearance of the pine dominated woodlands with its understory of hazel that exposed so much bare limestone



in the first place, the soil washing away down the fissures. It is the continued use of winterages over the centuries which sustain the Burren's unique, world renowned flora and archaeology and has renowned benefits for both livestock and the environment. This is the unique practice of moving cattle to lowlands in summer and to highlands in winter and is the only region in Europe where this practice takes place.

Ireland's great outdoor museum

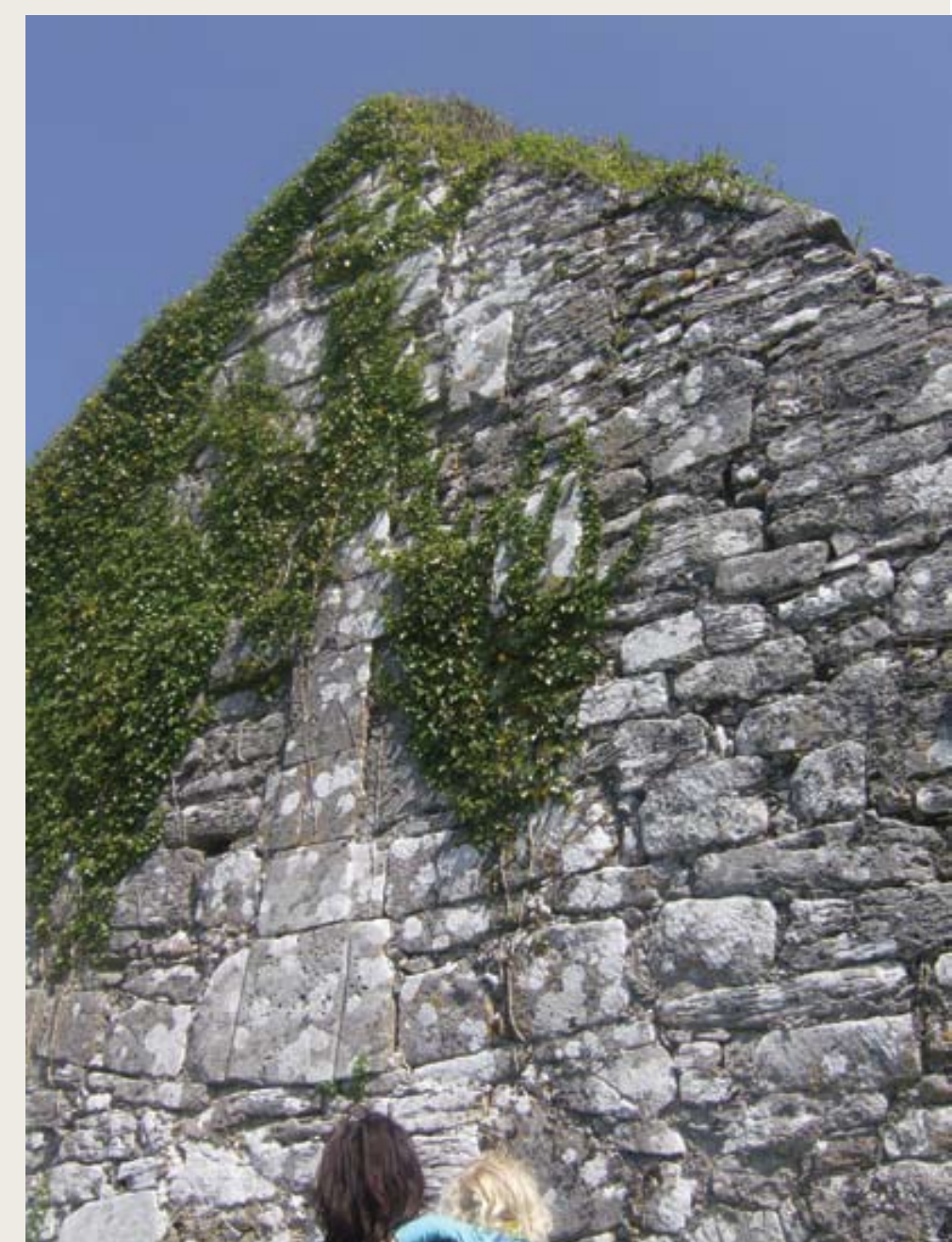
The Burren name comes from the Irish word Boireann which means a place of stone. The omnipresent stone-built monuments which abound in the Burren whisper of a civilization whose architecture was ancient by the time the Egyptian pyramids at Giza were even conceived. Farming practices such as winter grazing on the limestone hills and the keeping of goat herds have helped to shape the immense variety of building styles found in the stone architecture of the Burren hills. What further highlights the role of the farmer here as custodian our Irish heritage is that the highest concentration of wedge tombs in the country are found in the good winter grazing of the Burren uplands.



There are approximately 6,000 national monuments in County Clare, the vast majority of these located in the Burren. One quarter of all the known megalithic wedge tombs in Ireland are situated in this region. One of the most iconic Irish images – and the single most photographed monument in the country - is Poul nabrone. This megalithic grave was also probably a site of deep spiritual significance to those who built it. The portal stone of this tomb is aligned towards the rising sun. This is an architectural characteristic of portal tombs

whereas the later wedge tombs such as at nearby Gleninsheen are aligned towards the setting sun. One of Ireland's great national treasures, the Gleninsheen Gold Collar was discovered near here in 1932. The well preserved stone built ring fort, Caherconnell, Parknabinnia, Ballykinvarga fort, and Cahercommaun, with its dramatic, stunning vistas overlooking the Burren are fine visual vestiges of the ancient past. Cahercommaun is not just one of the finest archaeological attractions in the country but also the largest inland cliff fort. The Burren Centre in Kilfenora provides a superb three dimensional interpretation of this site.

If there are many remains of early pagan beliefs here, there is also a wonderful abundance of ancient sites and buildings bearing testimony to Christianity in the Burren. In the north, lies the twelfth century Corcomroe Abbey, also known as Sancta Maria de Petra Fertilis, Holy Mary of the Fertile Rock. At Kilnaboy Church there is the only example in the whole of northwestern Europe of a double-armed cross built into a west gable. This type of cross, the Lorraine Cross, perhaps indicates the former presence here of a reliquary of the True Cross. Kilfenora itself was known in ancient Gaelic literature as The City of the Crosses, famed for its outstanding collection of High Crosses.



The high concentration of such accessible visual heritage from our past in close proximity to each other makes the Burren Ireland's ultimate outdoor museum, hugely popular with visitors and scholars alike. Such an abundance of archaeological remains testify to the vitality and ingenuity of the Burren's ancestral inhabitants. These features now make the Burren one of the richest archaeological landscapes in the world.

Culture, history and traditions of the Burren

‘The land spoke of itself and its history in its placenames’

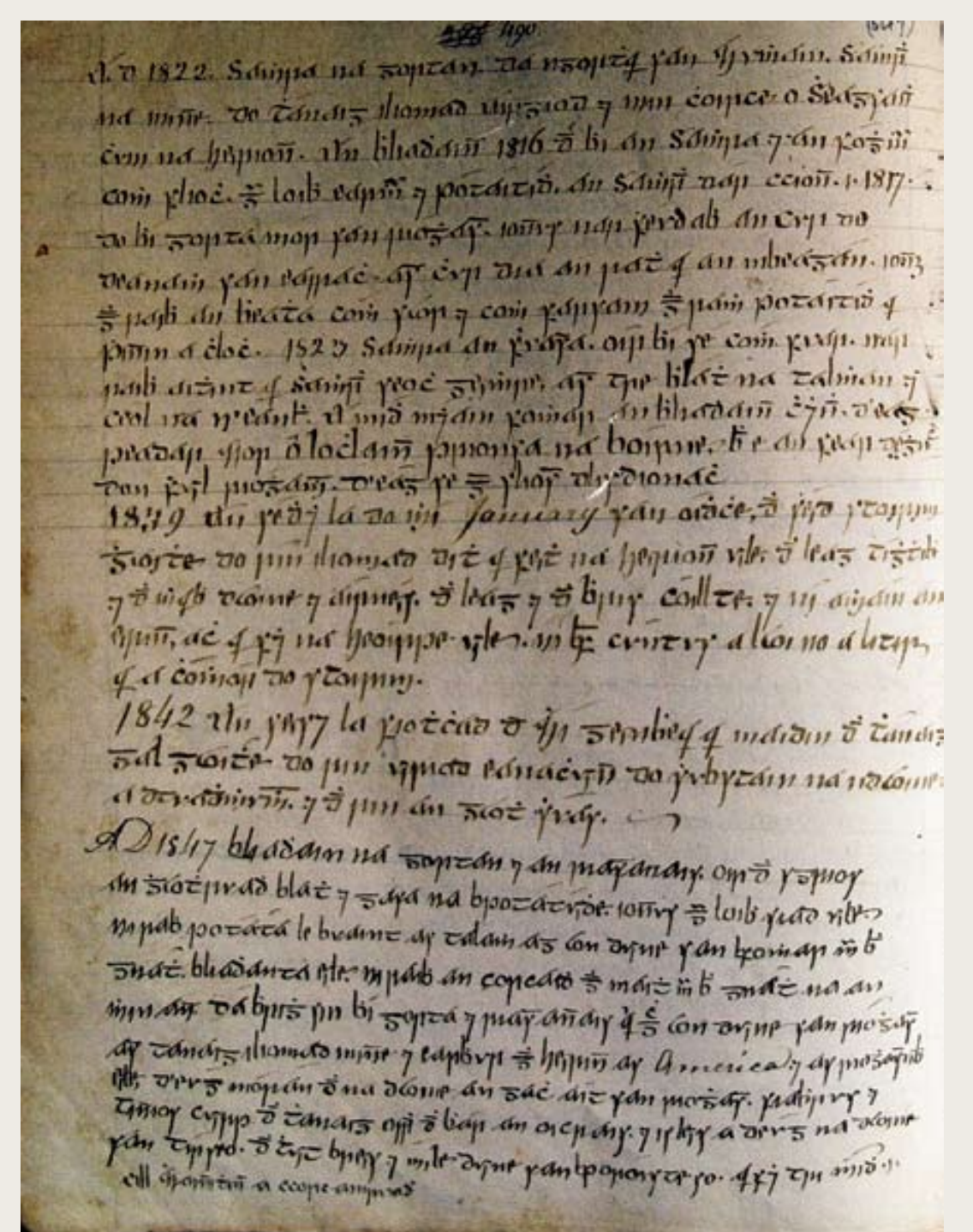
The Burren has long had an ancient standing as a centre of learning. Here, the limestone hills and plateaux shelter the remains of Cahermacnaughten and its once great Brehon law school held under the auspices of the O'Davorens. Cahermacnaughten was the Harvard or Yale of the old Gaelic order right up to the seventeenth century. This school possessed a very large collection of early Irish legal texts. The most famous of these, known as Egerton 88, is in the British Museum. The Burren is where the Four Masters came for the seal of approval from the ollaimhe (historians) at their Kilkeedy School, and where the Bardic School of Ó Dálaigh in Finavarra was held. Under the old Brehon system of society, such was the respect for learning that the ollamh or professor, held equal rank to a king or bishop. The wealth of the Burren's folklore is inspired not just by its monumental surrounds but by the learning environment created by these schools. Thomas J. Westropp, the father of Irish archaeology has recorded many of the bountiful myths and legends of the region, and collections from the lifeworks of Westropp are proudly displayed at the Burren Centre.



It is perhaps a natural follow-on then that the Burren has also produced some brilliant scholars, musicians, innovators and leaders. County Clare as a physical entity is distinct and island like. Its people formed an insular community more so than any other in Ireland, protective of its traditions and of its kinship. However as Ireland entered into its modern history, the people of the Burren were also shaped by social, economic and political forces. The grievances which had led to the 1799 north Clare uprising had remained, and continued to trouble both the Burren and the county until Irish independence from Britain. Clare was badly scarred by the Great Irish Famine of

the mid nineteenth century. In a devastating ten year period, almost 50,000 people died of famine and disease, 40,000 of these in the workhouses, with the local Ennistymon workhouse being amongst the most notorious. Another temporary workhouse was opened in Kilfenora. Bishop Fallon, the last bishop of Kilfenora wrote 'let us thus avoid death in a country teeming with abundance of all kind of eatables except the potato, the wretched stable of the worst fed peasantry in Europe.' Another 40,000 fled Clare during this apocalypse, most emigrating to the hope of America.

It is therefore noteworthy that it was a son of the Burren, Michael Cusack, born in Black 1847 who was to become the first leader of the Gaelic revival, and founder of the world's largest amateur sporting and cultural organisation, the Gaelic Athletic Association. By his act of preservation of the Burren traditions his people passed on to him, Cusack saved the national sport of hurling for those hundreds of thousands who today throng the playing fields of Ireland and the world, including its annual All-Ireland final showcase in Europe's finest stadium, Croke Park, Dublin



Kilfenora - the City of the Crosses

Kilfenora is a picturesque Burren village steeped in both tradition, antiquity and ecclesiastical importance. St. Fachtnan was said to have founded a church in Kilfenora in the 6th century. However it was when the synod of Rathbreasail snubbed the claims for diocesan status by Kilfenora in 1111 that the O'Connors and the O'Loughlens came together. It was their desire to remain aloof of the diocese of Killaloe which was very much under the patronage of the O'Briens. It was the O'Briens who had burned Kilfenora Abbey and its inhabitants in 1055. In a show of determination to press its claims, some of the finest stonework bequeathed to us from the period, was produced. Seven carved stone crosses are associated with Kilfenora from this era, all survive with one removed to St. Flannan's Cathedral in Killaloe.



The Burren actually had more churches per parish in the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries than anywhere else in Ireland. Some of its medieval churches were decorated by a fine school of twelfth century sculptors specialising in stylised human heads. Kilfenora Cathedral was a focal point, with its present structure dating from the late twelfth century. At the Synod of Kells in 1152 Kilfenora did indeed prevail and win diocesan status and the beautiful Doorty Cross would seem to commemorate this event. However with the limited resources of just thirteen parishes it could not sustain its achievement and is now under the administration of the Galway Catholic diocese with the Pope as its nominal Bishop. Part of Kilfenora Cathedral is still in use for divine worship by the Church of Ireland. Amongst its most renowned local and international ambassadors is the Kilfenora Céilí band. Traditional music has always played a powerful role in the life of Clare people. It represents continuity with the past, from wakes and weddings in houses and pubs to gatherings at dances, festivals and sessions. If in the sporting passions of the Irish you glimpse the heart of the people, it is at these musical gatherings you see into its soul. The musicians from this region have carved a niche in the musical world and made their own soul a part of it.

Here, in the Burren, local chefs reap the bountiful harvest of the sea to provide regional culinary delights, and monkfish, bass and trout are specialities in many of these eating-houses. Vernacular foods can be sampled such as the famous Burren Lamb dishes served up throughout the county, with its inviting taste, a product of the sweet pasturages of the Burren. Mionnán, or goat is another trademark regional dish served up at local hostelryes.

