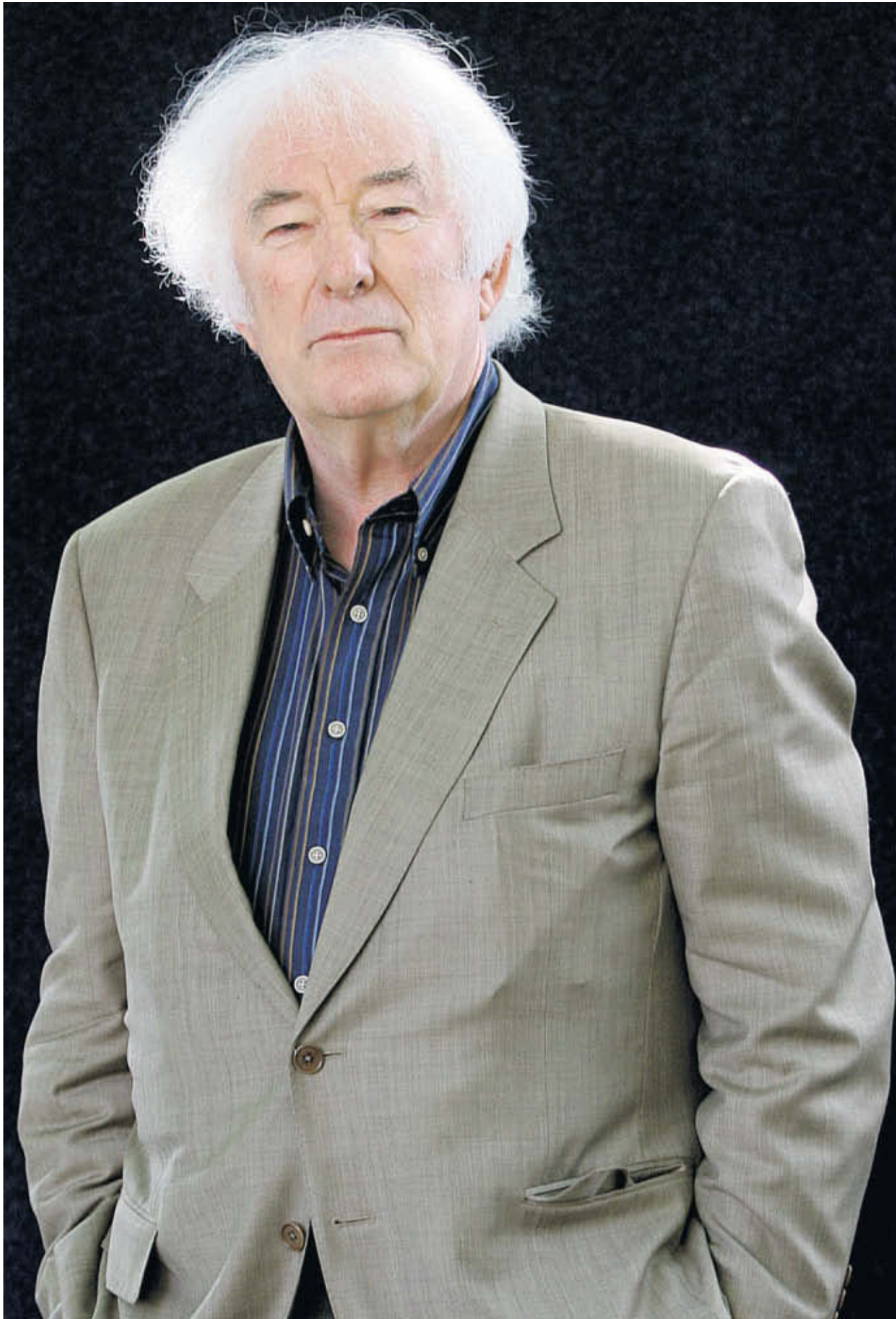


# Travel

# 24

IN THE EXTREME  
THE PLANET'S  
TOUGHEST  
ENDURANCE  
EVENTS



Heaney, born and raised in Co Derry, drew on his memories of Castledawson, Bellaghy and Magherafelt for inspiration

# Something to write home about

A trip to the birthplace of Seamus Heaney leaves Yvonne Gordon well versed in the late poet's life

**I**t's a chilly morning by the Moyola river at Castledawson in Co Derry. A light, white frost covers the grassy banks and there's a sprinkling of snow on a wooden bench overlooking the water, which has rushed downstream from the Sperrin mountains on its way to Lough Neagh. It gushes beneath O'Hara's bridge, past an old linen mill with a redbrick chimney. It is a picturesque, if ordinary, Irish riverside scene: fit for a poet who was made Nobel Laureate for works "which exalt everyday miracles".

I am on the home turf of Seamus Heaney, recipient of the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature and one of the most important poets of the 20th century, who died four years ago last week. Although his poems are read around the world by those who have never set foot in Northern Ireland, it is the people and the places of this area that formed the

“

**To hear a local poet talking of things you have experienced... he recorded a way of life that's no longer there**

writer and shaped his verse, and I soon discover that a visit to experience first hand the places he wrote about brings a new insight into, and appreciation for, his work.

Heaney was born at the family farm at nearby Mossbawn in 1939, the eldest of nine. He played beside the Moyola as a child, later recalling that this part of the river once had a trail of stepping stones that linked the thatched cottage-filled parish of Bellaghy, where his father's family was from, to the working-class terraces of Castledawson, birthplace of his mother.

The fields, rivers and everyday scenes here featured prominently in Heaney's work. In his first published poem, *Tractors* (1962) he described how the vehicles "ache across mud". *The Forge* (1969), with its "door into the dark" refers to Devlin's forge, which he passed many times as a child

Continued on page 17 →





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# Sunday Travel

but never dared to go inside. The little forge is still there, a tiny white-washed stone building at Hillhead near Bellaghy, but its blacksmith Barney Devlin passed away last year, aged 96, having outlived Heaney by three years.

Heaney wrote, too, of the “midge-veiled, high-hedged side-road” on the way to his neighbour Rosie Keenan’s cottage (At The Wellhead, 1996). The cottage now sits empty, though when I pass it the front door appears ajar, as if its long-gone occupant has just popped out for a moment. In the town of Magherafelt is the building that housed PJ Loudan’s, the butcher a young Heaney visited with his father to buy the Sunday roast, its “red beef, white string, brown paper” immortalised in The Nod (2006).

These locations are brought to life by guide Eugene Kiehl, a local who has run tours of “Heaney Country” for more than 20 years. When he plays recordings of Heaney reading his poetry – in the very spots described in the poems – the words come alive off the page. You can almost see and hear the characters.

Kiehl and his wife Gerardine run Laurel Villa, a guesthouse in Magherafelt. On the walls of the dining room, overlooking a large table with candelabra, are huge framed broadsides of Heaney’s poems, lined up like observers at a banquet. The broadsides (limited edition prints of the poems, printed on linen and framed) are to be read, but also admired as works of art. “The beauty of this is that people who wouldn’t normally go out and buy a poem can be exposed to the beauty of them,” says Kiehl. By the fire in the building’s cosy backroom, Kiehl looks off into the distance as he recites The Forge, while wind and sleet whip and tap on the window pane.

Kiehl grew up on a 30-acre farm nearby and first heard Heaney in the 1970s. His poetry had huge resonance with the then schoolboy because it described scenes, people and places he could identify with. “I was drawn into his language,” says Kiehl.



“We had been studying the English poets – Shelley and Wordsworth – but to hear a local poet talking of things you have experienced, like duties around the farm, how people like the blacksmith did things and how they made things . . . He recorded a way of life that’s no longer here.”

At the Seamus Heaney HomePlace in Bellaghy, the cultural centre dedicated to the poet’s life and art that opened last September, I explore an

interactive exhibition that takes the visitor through Heaney’s life and literature. There’s a large map of his home in the centre, with an old schoolbag and desk on display. There are family photos and poems from different stages of Heaney’s life from childhood through to the birth of his grandchildren – even the family dog features.

Children have not been neglected in this literary landscape: there are brass

rubbings, flip books and block puzzles. Many of the displays have audio recordings of Heaney’s poems and a small space in front of a print of 1996 work A Sofa in The Forties invites young visitors to “jump on board” and recreate the poem’s imaginary train. There is a creative corner with art projects for youngsters and shelves of his poetry books for anyone to read.

Touchscreens give access to tributes from the former American president Bill Clinton, former Irish president Mary Robinson, and Prince Charles, as well as local schoolchildren and family friends. The first floor exhibition examines Heaney’s inspiration, with large windows giving visitors a view of the landscape Heaney would have written about, while a café, theatre and seminar rooms play host to a busy programme of music, poetry and readings.

Heaney’s Nobel Prize was awarded “for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past”. Hearing the words of his poems come alive off the page, while standing at the very places that inspired his work, is an experience that will reward any visitor to Heaney’s birthplace and leave his words echoing long after.

For information on the Seamus Heaney HomePlace, visit [seamushaneyhome.com](http://seamushaneyhome.com). To book a stay at the Laurel Villa guest house or a tour of Heaney country, visit [laurel-villa.com](http://laurel-villa.com)

## EXAMINE WRITERS’ ROOTS

### PATRICK KAVANAGH RESOURCE CENTRE, CO MONAGHAN

The rolling hills and drumlins of Monaghan were the key inspirations for the work of poet Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967), although he described it as “the stony grey soil” that “burgled my bank of youth”. Like Seamus Heaney, Kavanagh was born into a farming family. He was one of 10 children and began writing at the age of 12.

The parish church at Inniskeen, where the poet is buried, is now the site of the Patrick Kavanagh Resource Centre. It is packed with memorabilia, including large-format prints of his poems, maps and books.

You can take a tour of Kavanagh country from the centre and see the sites he immortalised, including the dance hall at Mullaghinsha, Billy Brennan’s barn, and Rocksavage Fort, where he worked the land and wrote some of his earliest verse. [patrickkavanaghcountry.com](http://patrickkavanaghcountry.com)

### CS LEWIS TRAIL, BELFAST

The author Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963), best known for The Chronicles of Narnia, was born and raised in east Belfast. Fans of his work can explore the CS Lewis Trail and visit the places that influenced him as a boy.

The trail begins at the CS Lewis Square on Newtownards Road, which features seven bronze sculptures of Narnia characters, including the lion Aslan and Mr Tumnus.

Other stops on the trail include St Mark’s Church, where an ornate door handle in the shape of a lion’s head is said to have influenced the character of Aslan, and Lewis’s alma mater Campbell College, which has a single gas lamp in its grounds that is thought to be the inspiration for the lamp in Narnia.

There’s also a CS Lewis exhibition at Belmont Tower on Belmont Church Road. [discovernorthernireland.com](http://discovernorthernireland.com)



Fans can visit the childhood homes of Kavanagh, far left, and Lewis, left, to see first-hand the places that influenced their writing

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The HomePlace in Bellaghy, left, is a centre dedicated to the late poet that features interactive exhibits, above, and insights into his childhood, top