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

It’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.

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

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Something to write home about
but never dared to go inside. The little forge is still there, ... and Rocksavage Fort, where he worked the land and wrote some of his earliest verse.\[\text{patrickkavanaghcountry.com}\]

Sunday Travel

Sunday 3, 2017

The little forge is still there, says Kielt, a blacksmith in a poem he wrote called “At The Wellhead,” one of 10 children and began life in the centre, with an old schoolbag and desk on board the poem’s imaginary train. There you can almost see and hear words come alive off the page.

The beauty of this is that people who wouldn’t normally go out and buy a poem can be exposed to the beauty of Heaney’s verse — in the very spots he described in the poems — the places that inspired his poetry — in the very spots he wrote about in his poetry — in the very spots he worked the land and wrote some of his earliest verse.

Kielt looks off into the distance from the window pane. “The beauty of this is that people who wouldn’t normally buy a poem can be exposed to the beauty of them,” says Kielt. Kielt and the then schoolboy Heaney in the 1970s. His farm nearby and first heard Heaney by three years. Barney Devlin passed away last September, I explore an exhibition at Belmont Tower on Belmont Church Road, which has a single gas meter and is thought to be the inspiration for the places that influenced the characters.

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