

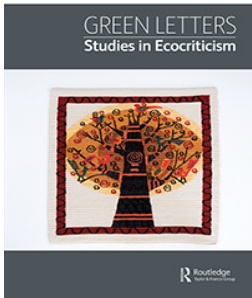
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Seamus Heaney's Ecopoetry and Environmental Causes: From Conservation to Climate Change

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ABSTRACT

Seamus Heaney is viewed as a pre-eminent poet of nature, and is often read through the lens of ecopoetic and ecocritical theories. Yet no earlier scholarship has mentioned his support for conservation. Through research on archives, limited editions and conservation documents, this article shows that Heaney supported high-profile environmental organisations and campaigns, including the Irish Peatland Conservation Council, World Wildlife Fund, the Ulster Trust for Nature Conservation, the RSPB, and a campaign against a new road that threatened a bogland. This article challenges readings of Heaney that proposed that he merely explored a 'connection' to nature, and shows that he used writing to protect environments he cared about. Heaney's modest environmental activities are not without complications. Yet when Heaney uses an early bog-poem to support a later conservation project, or when a campaign aims to save the ecology of 'Heaney Country', culture clearly plays a role in environmental engagement.

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In 2005, the unspoilt boglands and wetlands near Northern Ireland's Lough Neagh were menaced by a new motorway. One of the many people who raised his voice in protest was Seamus Heaney, who had received the Nobel Prize for Literature a decade earlier. He wrote to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that 'I have been alerted to the damage that will be done to the ecology in the Lough Beg/Creagh Bog area' (Heaney 2005, np). He added that he had 'known and loved this area since childhood and have written about it – or rather out of it – often' (2005, np).

Heaney remains better known for his poetic engagement with the sectarian conflicts of the Irish Troubles, which were his foundational political preoccupation. Yet from Gaia theory to climate change, from water pollution to peatland conservation, from vanishing bird populations to protecting biodiversity, Heaney was responsive to the environmental concerns of his age. His environmental awareness began during his rural boyhood, and became increasingly visible in his later poetry. Research at the National Library of Ireland's major Heaney archive reveals valuable

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information about Heaney's use of poems to raise funds for conservation, and shows the development of ecological ideas in his poems at draft level. Evidence from limited editions that Heaney sold to support conservation causes, campaign materials and environmental management documents, correspondence with the Seamus Heaney Estate, and information from environmental organisations, provide further details. Previous ecocritical readings of Heaney's work have not mentioned his support for conservation causes. Shedding light on Heaney's environmental activities enriches and deepens scholarly understanding of the ecopoetic dimensions of his work. Heaney's forthcoming *Letters*, edited by Christopher Reid, his *Collected Poems* edited by Bernard O'Donoghue and Rosie Lavan, and Fintan O'Toole's forthcoming biography, will afford further valuable information about the poet's life and work.

From the 1980s onwards, Heaney's reputation in literary circles enabled him to lend powerful support to charities and organisations close to his heart. He opened exhibitions, judged poetry competitions, championed libraries, and gave poems to anthologies sold in aid of UNICEF, Amnesty International, and many other high-profile organisations.¹ From the 1980s, several conservation causes benefited from using Heaney's poems and prose for fundraising and consciousness-raising. These include the Irish Peatland Conservation Council, the World Wide Fund for Nature, the Ulster Trust for Nature Conservation, and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB).² Towards the end of his career, the literary community recognised Heaney as a major environmental writer: his poetry featured in ecopoetry anthologies edited by Oswald (2005) and Astley (2021). His writing appeared alongside that of contemporaries who were deeply engaged in public discussions of climate change. In 2008, *Granta* magazine heralded the arrival of the 'new nature writing', featuring Heaney's essay 'The whisper of love' (Heaney 2008); the second article in the issue includes dire warnings about climate change (Holt 2008, 16–21). That same year, Heaney told fellow poet Dennis O'Driscoll that 'environmental issues have to a large extent changed the mind of poetry' (2008, 407).

Ecology was not Heaney's most central concern as a writer and public intellectual. Yet his daughter Catherine has pointed out the rich references to the earth and environment in Heaney's poetry, and she has contributed insights about his support for the RSPB for this article.³ The modest, quiet nature of Heaney's support for conservation organisations might explain the longstanding critical tendency to interpret him as a nature-poet, and most recently as an ecopoet, without any scholarly commentary on his work with environmental organisations.

Heaney's *Death of a Naturalist* (1996) saw him heralded as a poet of locality and nature.⁴ following Heaney's exposure to more overtly political poetry at Berkeley, *Wintering Out* has been viewed as more 'politicised' (Neil Corcoran 1987, 121). After *North* (1975), critical debates turned to Heaney's presentation of issues of historical memory and sectarian violence. Certain critics – notably Edna Longley – find Heaney's *North* (1975) to be too redolent of Irish nationalism (Longley 1982, 78). Blake Morrison saw *North* as speaking the 'language of the tribe' in order to give 'sectarian killing in Northern Ireland a historical respectability' (1982, 68), while Neil Corcoran viewed Heaney as celebrating the 'exhilaration, as well as the horror, of physical violence' (1987, 123). Ciarán Carson branded Heaney the 'laureate of violence' (1983, 183).

However, poems such as 'Funeral Rites' from *North* could instead be viewed as expressing grief for a repeated history of territorial violence, and a longing for the 'feud' to be 'placated' (Heaney 1975, 8). It is important to note that Heaney would later give poems from this very collection to causes that protected boglands in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.⁵

More recently, Heaney's work has been an important focus for ecocritics. Books, articles and book chapters by ecocritics such as Gifford (2011), Garrard (1998), Bate (2000), Lidström (2015), Farrier (2014, 2019), Auge (2021) and Corcoran (2021) develop important ecocritical and ecopoetic readings of his work. Part of Heaney's archive was purchased by Emory University in 2003, and the poet donated many of his manuscripts to the National Library of Ireland in 2011, providing later ecocritics with an opportunity to research Heaney's support for environmental causes. Brandes and Durkan's 2008 Heaney bibliography lists poems that appeared in an environmental anthology in 1989, and a limited edition sold in aid of a conservation cause.⁶ This presented opportunities for scholars to examine documents relating to conservation, before the opening of the National Library of Ireland's archives. Gifford views Heaney's poetry as evidencing 'connectedness with nature' (95), while Lidström finds that Heaney's work develops from 'a sense-based understanding of a local environment to an understanding of a transformed relation between human, local and global natures' (2015, 139). However, Heaney's early poetry evidences an environmental awareness that runs deeper than 'connectedness', and which is more sophisticated than a 'sense-based understanding'; he was highly aware of issues such as climate change. Andrew Auge claims that 'Heaney's poetry does not focus on the ecological significance of the bog' (2021, 43). Heaney was hardly so naïve about environmental issues, as he used his bog-poems of the 1960s and 1970s to support bog conservation in the 1980s and 1990s. Brendan Corcoran's ecocritical reading of Heaney's poetry is perceptive: he analyses the bog-poems of the 1970s in the context of the nascent environmental movement (2021, 122), and comments on a growing awareness of climate change that is manifest in *District and Circle*, yet there is no mention of Heaney's support for conservation.

Nature poetry, ecopoetry, ecopoetics: these terms continue to generate a wide array of definitions and critical opinions. Debates about the role of poetry in ecological activism, versus its aesthetic function, are ongoing. If Bate once argued that 'Ecopoetry is not synonymous with writing that is pragmatically green' (2000, 42), Gifford's view is that 'while "poetry makes nothing happen" in Auden's famous words, it can contribute to a shift in sensibility rather than life-style' (2011, 8).⁷ Yet Heaney was able to use poems both to shift sensibilities *and* to make modest interventions in conservation issues. Many critics also distinguish between poetry that celebrates an individual's connection to nature, versus poetry that engages with environmental issues that affect society; Lidström and Garrard certainly find Heaney's work to exemplify the latter (2014, 37). Poet Juliana Spahr makes a similar distinction between 'nature poetry' and more explicitly environmental work: 'I was more suspicious of nature poetry because even when it got the birds and the plants and the animals right it tended to show the beautiful bird but not so often the bulldozer off to the side that was destroying the bird's habitat' (Spahr 2011, 69). For some, ecopoetry and ecopoetics are distinct practices, with ecopoetics being more focused

on experimental, avant-garde or Modernist work that explores the materiality of text and language (e.g. Skinner 2001, Keller 2017; Griffiths 20172017; Milne 2018). Heaney's poetry is certainly more traditional in form than much of the work to which these ecopoetics scholars have devoted their attention. However, 'ecopoetics' and 'ecopoetry' continue to generate a proliferation of theoretical ideas, and other definitions of the term have proved to be more wide-ranging. Hume and Osborne's *Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field* (Hume et al 2018) is deliberately broad-ranging, recognising 'the range of writing types to which the term "ecopoetics" might be applied' and invoking 'a diversity of field-writing practices' (2018, 5). It is undeniable that poetry often joins other art-forms in voicing dissent and accompanying activism (Milne 2018, 239), and indeed, Heaney deployed the power of poetry for conservationist ends.

Heaney and the environmental movement

The environmental movement gained increasing momentum during the 1960s and early 1970s. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* became a bestseller in 1963, outlining the impacts of pesticides on living organisms from birds to human beings, and this seminal work had widespread impacts on the public, on policymakers, and on poets such as Heaney.⁸ Heaney's evocation of the impact of 'combines and chemicals' on the corncrake in his 1969 poem 'Serenades' suggests that he shared Carson's concerns about the impacts of pesticides on birds.⁹ The term 'environmentalist' to mean a person concerned about human-caused damage to the environment appeared in 1966 (*OED*), and environmental publications were flourishing. Heaney's friend Hughes, and his colleagues Daniel Weissbort and David Ross, published the first issue of *Your Environment* in 1969 (Reddick 2017, 175). Heaney's poem 'Augury' appeared in print the year after the first Earth Day in 1970, and after Heaney's time in California had made him aware of the resonance between the 'Gaia factor' in his own work and the environmental themes of Gary Snyder and Robert Bly (O'Driscoll 2008, 141). Appearing in *Criterion* in 1971 (Brandes and Durkan 2008, 305) and collected in *Wintering Out* the following year, the poem's references to broader geographies evokes Heaney's time in the United States, as a visiting professor at Berkeley for the academic year of 1970–1971. The drafts of 'Augury' illuminate the issues that Heaney was considering as he wrote it. The poem presents a fish with its face opened like a 'valve' (1972, 42), a metaphorical evocation of human interference in environmental processes. In an interview with Heaney, O'Driscoll points out that 'Augury' suggests an 'early' awareness of environmental concerns, which developed during Heaney's boyhood (2008, 336). Heaney's poem also suggests sources of pollution that were more contemporary. Hughes, Weissbort and Ross published an article about the hazards of detergents to fish (Jones 1970, 55–59), and Heaney's close friend Ted Hughes was aware that the resulting disease had originated in Ireland in the late 1960s (Gifford 2011, 148–9). In its published form, 'Augury' consists of four pared-down quatrains. However, was developing the poem, Heaney focuses more closely on the individual fish and the industrial processes that have damaged its health¹⁰:

A. Pollution

AS WE ROVED-OUT

The fish faced into the current,
Its mouth agape,
Its whole head opened like a valve.
You said "It's diseased."

Sure enough, a neat crusted sore
Made a white eyepatch
From one gill to the working jaw
As it supported itself

Against the rush of the race.
Behind us, great wheels and belts
In the powerhouse hummed and quivered
The catwalk where we were standing.

The fish flashed, wound away -
A slow-stour-rising *shoving*
And running, a creep
And clearance of murk.

At the trembling rail
We hang charmed. That eye
Could poison the Great Lakes,
Waste us by looking.

*grey tails
of weed*

*What can
Feed us now? What can
Unpoison the Great Lakes,
~~the stream?~~*

Soothe the hurt eye

*Of the sun
Unpoison the Great Lakes,
Turn back
The rot on the road.*

Heaney's revision of his title from 'As We Roved Out' to 'Augury' changes the tone of the poem, evoking threats to environmental futures. In the typescript, Heaney's close focus on the suffering fish does heighten pathos, but the poem becomes broader in scope in its published version. Heaney's editorial decisions are astute, and the poem increases in literary refinement as it develops. Yet what Heaney's typescript reveals is that the poem

responds to a very specific place: the ‘wheels and belts’ suggest the Nestlé factory at Castledawson, where he observed effluent flowing into the River Moyola during his childhood (O’Driscoll 2008, 336). However, in the published version, Heaney removes this local focus, creating a finished piece that is more applicable to global environmental dilemmas:

Augury
 The fish faced into the current
 Its mouth agape,
 Its whole head opened like a valve.
 You said ‘It’s diseased’.

[...]

What can fend us now
 Can soothe the hurt eye

 Of the sun,
 Unpoison great lakes,
 Turn back
 The rat on the road. (1972, 42)

Heaney’s turn of phrase ‘great lakes’ might well apply to Northern Ireland’s Lough Neagh, but it cannot fail to evoke North America’s Great Lakes. The scalar ambit of ‘Augury’ widens beyond Ireland, suggesting widespread environmental contamination.

Bog-poems and bog conservation

A man hard at work, cutting ‘turf’ by hand; a warm peat fire with its fragrant blue smoke: such images are so culturally important in Ireland that peatlands continue to be viewed as ‘a cultural reservoir of “authentic” Irish identity’ (O’Connor and Gearey 2020, 382). In Heaney’s poems, peat-cutting reveals remarkably well-preserved traces of the past, including a prehistoric Irish Elk skeleton, the remains of former forests, and most famously, the extraordinary ‘bog bodies’ that feature in *North* (1975).¹¹ But the use of boglands raises questions about whether we can reconcile traditional turf-cutting with preserving the habitats of the snipe, sundew and sphagnum. Exhuming the landscapes of the past risks disturbing the carbon sinks of the present. Peatlands are important for biodiversity, and as carbon sinks and stores. The peatlands have, what Renou-Wilson and her colleagues term, an ‘archive value’ for scientists and archaeologists alike (2011, xii). However, not everyone agrees about how they should be managed. This section looks at Heaney’s poetic preoccupation with peat, and then turns to the complexities of his later bog-conservation activities.

Heaney’s fascination with the bogland developed from his early life. The bog provided a rich vein of peaty material; the resulting poetic project spans the entirety of his career. Indeed, when Heaney began supporting conservation causes from the late 1980s onwards, most of the campaigns he backed focused on protecting boglands. Peat-cutting as tradition and peat as fuel; the bog as historical archive and cultural stratum, home turf and disputed territory; the Northern Irish bog as a pre-

plantation and pre-colonial space – all of these themes are undeniably crucial for Heaney. Michael Parker writes that for Heaney, ‘from childhood, bogland had been ‘a genuine obsession’, since it covered ‘such a large area of his home territory’ (Parker 1993, 7). The poet revisited the bogland with his friend, the painter T. P. Flanagan, in the late 1960s (Parker 1993, 87), and this visit inspired his poem ‘Bogland’ from Heaney (1969).

The poem begins:

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 (1969, 41)

These opening stanzas evoke a strong sense of place, of a mythical landscape whose ‘unfenced’ expanses suggest wildness and an unconquered, undivided symbol of Irish identity.¹² And yet, in the image of the bog as ‘kind, black butter/Melting and opening underfoot’ (41) later in the poem, the peatland appears as yielding and feminised. The image of men digging peat from a bog perceived as ripe for exploitation, suggests ‘a specifically gendered version of Irishness’ (O’Connor and Gearey 2020, 384). Understandably, some feminist critics are troubled by Heaney’s evocation of the bog as a feminine landscape, ‘mastered’ by turf-cutting men (Coughlan 2017). From an ecological perspective, one could view this poem as celebrating the bogland for largely human-centred reasons. However, over twenty years after he first placed them in a collection, Heaney would use these stanzas from ‘Bogland’ to support the Ulster Trust for Nature Conservation.

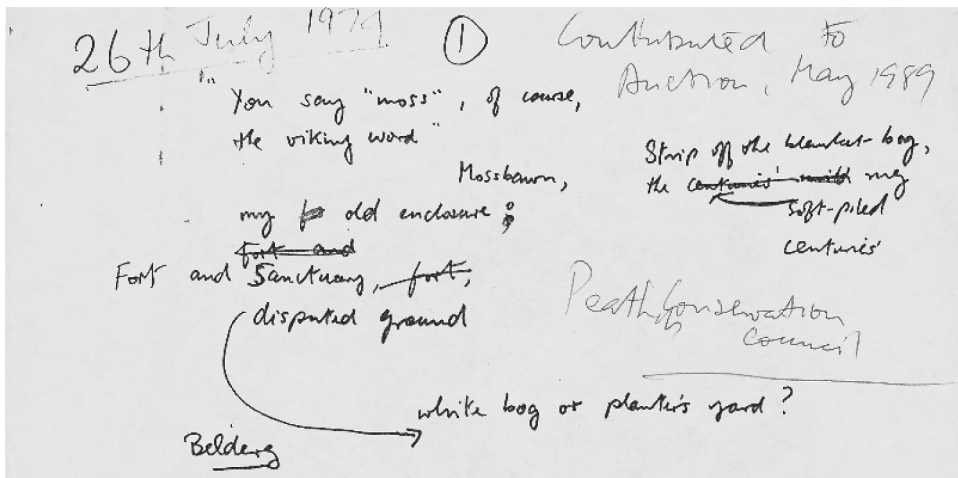
By 1991, Heaney had been living in the Republic of Ireland for nearly two decades and had acquired an Irish passport. Yet the boglands of Northern Ireland were the location of his first encounter with bogs, and he was happy to use his poems to support a conservation cause focused on the landscapes of ‘Ulster’ – a term appropriated by unionists.¹³ Sections of Heaney’s poem ‘The Peninsula’, from Heaney (1969), feature on the ‘Wetlands’ poster, an excerpt from ‘Exposure’ (1975) on ‘Woodlands’, and an extract from ‘Fieldwork’ on the ‘Meadowlands’. The posters were sponsored by a brewing company, and were intended for educational and fundraising purposes. The resonant opening stanzas of ‘Bogland’ accompany Flanagan’s painting ‘Where Sheep Have Passed’. (Curiously, the image selected is not Flanagan’s ‘Boglands’, which Flanagan dedicated to Heaney, and which would have provided a far more intuitive pairing of painting and poem.) The poster contains the following information:

Peatlands are under serious threat because of cutting, drainage, afforestation and erosion. Irish peatlands have their own unique characteristics and are therefore very important in a European and world context. We have a responsibility to conserve and restore what remains (Ulster Trust for Nature Conservation, 'Peatlands' poster, 1991).¹⁴

Here, the process of 'cutting' is named as a threat to peatlands, and one could read Heaney's use of this early poem to support an ecological cause, as a sign of a shift in thinking. His family was undoubtedly dependent on his father and grandfather's peat-cutting for fuel, as we read in 'Digging' from *Death of a Naturalist* (1966). And yet, by 1991, the Ulster Trust for Nature Conservation was clearly looking to raise public awareness that even such domestic peat-cutting could be damaging. Heaney's donation of the poem suggests that his own awareness of such issues was gaining further nuances and complexities as his career progressed.

Heaney returns to the bogland over the years, and it constitutes a theme that he revises and revisits in later books. An entire archival folder of research materials at the Emory Rose Library is entitled 'Bogs', and it shows that Heaney researched peaty landscapes in extensive detail in the 1970s. From bog formation and bog archaeology, to combustion and peat-fired power stations, Heaney immersed himself in all things peaty.¹⁵ Industrial peat extraction in Ireland increased after the establishment of Bord na Móna (the Peat Board) in 1946 (O'Connor and Gearey 2020, 383), and indeed Heaney's research materials in the 'Bogs' folder include a Bord na Móna document that focuses on economics and extraction, drainage and energy.¹⁶ Bogland history fascinated Heaney far more than the bald economic value of peat, and he delved into the rich archaeological treasure-trove of Danish boglands via Glob's *The Bog People* (1965, translated into English in 1969). He continued digging into this rich layer of material in *Bog Poems*, printed by Olwyn Hughes with peaty watercolours by Barrie Cooke (1975). His celebrated 1975 collection *North* features both Danish and Irish boglands. Heaney also used his bog-poems to support peatland conservation in the Republic of Ireland.

Heaney's poem 'Belderg' details the discovery of Neolithic quernstones in a bog in County Mayo. In 1972, Heaney met both the archaeologist who worked on this important archaeological site, and the archaeologist's father, who first understood the significance of the quernstones (O'Driscoll 2008 loc 3276; Mayo 2019 np.) Many years after he wrote it, Heaney selected this poem to help support another bog-related cause. In May 1989, Heaney contributed a manuscript draft of 'Belderg' to an auction for the Irish Peatland Conservation Council.¹⁷ Formed in 1982, the Irish Peatland Conservation Council launched its ongoing 'Save the Bogs' campaigns, purchasing boglands for conservation purposes, and developing educational initiatives (Irish Peatland Conservation Council 2022). A draft in the National Library of Ireland details Heaney's use of the poem to support this cause. Here is the beginning of Heaney's manuscript draft¹⁸:



The manuscript gives valuable information about the development of the poem. In his collection *North*, the published version of 'Belderg' begins:

They just kept turning up
 And were thought of as foreign' –
 One-eyed and benign
 They lie about his house,
 Quernstones out of a bog (1975, 4)

In the published version, Heaney creates a vivid opening by quoting the speech of the discoverer or archaeologist, rather than beginning with the more ecologically-focused word 'moss' (both place and species) that appears at the top of the manuscript. The draft above evokes 'disputed ground', a more direct engagement with disputed territory than the intricate layers of identity that are more fully evoked in the published draft. Heaney's use of 'Belderg' to support a conservation cause would suggest that it is not always easy to distinguish between nature poetry and ecopoetry, ecopoetry and ecological ideas, art and ideology. While Heaney's earlier poetry celebrates the domestic cutting of peat for fuel, his later use of the poem to support bogland conservation suggests that the 'cutting' mentioned by the Ulster Trust for Nature Conservation poster came to be viewed as with greater ambivalence in environmental circles. Drainage and disturbance are required to uncover the archaeological remains that Heaney's poem celebrates: 'the processes of exposure and hence discovery (drainage and peat cutting) are also ultimately the agents of destruction' (O'Connor and Gearey 2020, 383).

The bogland takes on different connotations at different points in Heaney's career, and his use of it reflects a changing political situation and deepening environmental awareness. In a B.B.C film about bogs from 1988, Heaney said, 'People may be awful, but the land they live on gives them a possibility of coming together' (Heaney 1988) – a reflection on a sense of place that is the motivation behind his later environmental activities. He was becoming increasingly aware of the fragility of bogland environments, and this is reflected in his writing. In 1996, in his essay 'The man and the bog' for the museum at Silkeborg that houses famous bog bodies, Heaney wrote that bog bodies 'erase the boundary-line between culture and nature' (Heaney 1996, 2), anticipating the challenge

to anthropocentrism in Bruno Latour's *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2005). 'The man and the bog' appeared in a 'Wetlands Archaeology Research Project' conference proceedings in 1998; the conference explored the tensions between industrial peat extraction, and preserving bog environments and the archaeological remains in them.¹⁹ Heaney lent further support to bog conservation in 1999, when his poem 'The Child That's Due' from 'Bann Valley Eclogue' was printed in a limited-edition broadside by the Bank of Ireland Group Treasury, with some signed copies for the Irish Peatland Conservation Council. The Bank of Ireland Group made a donation to the Irish Peatland Conservation Council's 'Save the Bogs' campaign in recognition of Heaney's contribution (Brandes and Durkan 2008, 158). Heaney's 'Bann Valley Eclogue' is an appropriate choice, given that the poem-sequence focuses on a new, peaceful chapter of history, new human life, and new life for wetlands and watercourses: 'The valley will be washed like the new baby' (Heaney 2001, 11). Yet it is in Heaney (2006) that Heaney creates his most explicitly environmental bog-poem, 'The Tollund Man in Springtime', which he groups with climate change poems such as 'Höfn' and 'On the Spot'. Heaney's final poetic portrait of the Tollund Man is his attempt to reconcile different views of peatlands: the domestic peat-extraction that he witnessed in rural County Derry, the ability that bogs have to preserve prehistoric remains, and their importance for biodiversity and carbon dioxide storage.

In 'The Tollund Man in Springtime', Heaney resurrects a famous prehistoric Danish bog-man at a time of imperilled environments, in air polluted by 'exhaust fumes, silage reek' and 'thickened traffic' (2006, 56). There are also threats to biodiversity and water quality:

a sixth-sensed threat:
Panicked snipe offshooting into twilight,
Then going awry, larks quietened in the sun,
Clear alteration in the bog-pooled rain (2006, 55)

The 'Panicked snipe' no longer symbolise the displaced Irish language, as they did in Heaney's earlier poem 'A Backward Look', but go 'awry' in response to ecological threats. The line 'Clear alteration in the bog-pooled rain', with the richly significant word-play on 'clear', suggests multiple environmental interpretations. Acid rain causes watercourses to become lifeless – abnormally 'clear' – and of course this alteration is 'clear' to an observer. Altered rain also speaks of the shifting weather-patterns of climate change. The Tollund Man is described using multiple metaphors and similes that aspire to vigorous growth: his wrists are like 'silver birches' and his hands are like 'young sward' (2006, 56), suggesting a flourishing bogland environment that might act to offset those 'exhaust fumes'. The end of the poem sees the Tollund Man attempting to transplant a bunch of 'Tollund rushes' that are in danger of withering to 'dust' (2006, 57). He spits on his hands like a peat-cutter, but instead of picking up his spade and digging, he enters a contemporary, urban setting where his regenerative powers are needed:

As a man would, cutting turf,
I straightened, spat on my hands, felt benefit
And spirited myself into the street (2006, 57)

When asked if the poem was 'environmental protest or lament', Heaney commented that the Tollund Man 'senses that all is not well in the earth and air', but he is also 'a principle of regeneration' (O'Driscoll 2008, 411). While both the peat-cutting that the Tollund Man's

contemporaries would have done, and the later cutting that revealed him, disturb the bog, the poem suggests that the Tollund Man, with his tree-like wrists and sward-like hands, might be able to repair this.

Saving the bog and saving the lough

When Lady Moyola wrote to Heaney about the new road through the bog near Lough Neagh, the poet was 'horrified'. Heaney replied to her:

Those undisturbed acres are as much a common spiritual resource as they are an ecological treasure. All over the world it is being realised that the outback, as we might call it, of the 'developed' areas, is the last vital ditch in need of protection, and this work of protection has to be done vigorously at local level (ctd in Woodworth 2019, np.)

The area that Heaney mobilised to protect was crucial to his poetry. The landscape under threat included Anahorish, 'My "place of clear water",' (1972, 6), and the River Moyola, 'In those days she flowed/black-lick and quick' (2006, 58). When Heaney mentions the 'outback' in his letter to Lady Moyola, he looks back at his poem 'Kinship' in *North* (1975, 35). Heaney's evocation of the bog as both a 'spiritual' resource and an 'ecological treasure' references the complex accretion of history, human and nonhuman life, ritual and memory with which he associates the bog in *North*. Heaney even said later in an interview that an alternative route for the motorway would be less of a 'wound on the ecology' (Bailie 2016, np.). The campaign to oppose the motorway would continue for many years to come, and Heaney's lasting legacy is detailed shortly. The A6 motorway in Northern Ireland was not the only one that Heaney opposed; in a B.B.C broadcast from 2008, Heaney spoke out against a motorway that would pass near the historical sites at Tara in the Republic of Ireland (McDonald 2008, np.)

Lough Beg is one of the areas that Heaney mentions in the 2005 letter quoted at the beginning of this article. This landscape is highly significant for Heaney: 'The Strand at Lough Beg' (Heaney 1996), with its 'lowland clays and waters' (1979, 17), is the setting of his elegy for his murdered cousin, Colum McCartney. In 2010, the RSPB's Northern Ireland branch asked Heaney to support a new management plan for Lough Beg. Heaney responded to the RSPB's request by penning a lyrical foreword to their pragmatically-titled 'Lough Beg Management Plan':

New Ferry, Church Island, The Mullach, Aughrim . . . In the following pages, those names are to be found on a map showing the local wild life habitats, but for me and for anyone of my generation brought up in the Lough Beg area, they belong first and foremost in memory and imagination. They evoke a dream land that was once the real land, a shore at evening, quiet water, wind in the grass, the calls of birds, maybe a man or woman out in a back field just standing looking, counting cattle, listening.

The Lough Beg Management Plan intends to make that country of the mind a reality once again. It wants to bring back a landscape where the peewit and the curlew and the whirring snipe are as common as they used to be on those 1940s evenings when I'd go with my father to check on our cattle on the strand. In the meantime, as a result of different threats – pollution and development and drainage and undergrazing among them – the wet and the weeds and the wilderness have suffered, and the bird life and flora and fauna that gave our part of the world its secret beauty have been sadly diminished.

But now there is a realization by the people who own and live by these wetlands that they can reverse this trend. What is most hopeful and heartening is the news that local farmers are prepared to co-operate with the sponsors of this Management Plan. These families have a precious corner of our planet in their keeping and deserve high praise for taking thought and taking care of it for future generations. In doing so, they make themselves examples at local level of what has to happen globally – they are helping the earth's immunity system to contend with the dangers it now faces everywhere. (Heaney 2010, 2)

Yet Heaney did not merely contribute this foreword: he read and commented on the entire booklet before it was published. According to Seamus Burns, who worked with Heaney on the Management Plan, 'he certainly played his part in the co-ordinated management of the Lough Beg wet grassland management, the legacy of which continues to this day and will do for many years to come in the area'.²⁰ When one examines Heaney's foreword, one sees how he draws on the work of earlier environmental poets and prose writers. His turn of phrase 'the wet and the weeds and the wilderness' is of course a reference to Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'Inversnaid' – 'Long live the weeds and the wilderness' (Hughes and Heaney 2016., 215). This was clearly an important poem to Heaney and his friend Hughes, as it also appears in their anthology *The Rattle Bag*; Hopkins is read as an ecological poet by critics such as John Parham (2017). Rachel Carson's idyllic opening paragraph of *Silent Spring* is also a touchstone for Heaney:

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms [...] The countryside was, in fact, famous for the abundance and variety of its bird life. (Carson 1963, 1975, 21)

Heaney's foreword for the RSPB is also redolent of his own literary preoccupations. The first line calls up the etymologies of place-names in Irish poetry (Heaney 1980, 131), a regional Northern Irish version of the poetic countries of the mind in his essay 'Englands of the Mind' (150–169). The recitation of place-names recalls his earlier evocation of the shipping forecast in *Field Work*: 'Dogger, Rockall, Malin, Irish Sea' (1979, 39); the mention of the snipe is a backward glance at Heaney's poem 'The Backward Look', itself preoccupied with dwindling bird populations (1972, 19–20). Heaney presents the home ground of his poetry as of great literary, cultural, historical and environmental significance; these issues are intertwined. Here, he uses writing to lend small-scale – but practical and effective – support to preserve wetlands and waterfowl.

Conclusion

Few poets can hope to create major or immediate changes to environmental policy. Heaney's support for small-scale, often local, conservation activities did not have the global impacts of movements such as climate change strikes. However, authors can, and do, collaborate with others to lobby for reform. Heaney was no environmental radical; high-profile contemporary poets who give their poems to Extinction Rebellion might see his support for conservation as moderate.²¹ Moreover, the environmental strains in his work are not uncomplicated. Later conservation activities to restore boglands and wetlands might have aimed to preserve them because

Heaney knew that turf cutting had degraded them; in 'The Tollund Man in Springtime', flourishing vegetation only just gains the upper hand over environmental destruction. However, Heaney's passionate defence of the landscapes he loved has lasted beyond his lifetime. After Heaney's death in 2013, his legacy was used for further campaigns against the proposed motorway in Northern Ireland. A petition to 'Stop Ecocide in Heaney Country' aimed to continue the resistance.²² The turn of phrase 'Heaney Country' gives his poetry the same importance to a sense of place as 'Yeats Country' and 'Wordsworth Country'. Indeed, Heaney's biographer Fintan O'Toole has written of the way Heaney's poetry is not merely shaped by these places, but shapes people's cultural concept of them (O'Toole 2016). Friends of the Earth quote extensively from Heaney's letters opposing the new motorway, in a (1965) campaign document. The poet's legacy provides much of the impetus behind the campaign to preserve the bogland: 'As the place that nourished the poetry of Séamus [sic] Heaney it is a global treasure' Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland (1965), 3).²³

Let us return to Juliana Spahr's view of the nature-poem that celebrates the bird while ignoring the bulldozer (Spahr 2001, 69). Heaney's work shows how a poem that celebrates the snipe in the bog *can* attempt to halt the bulldozer that threatens it. His letter to Peter Hain opposing the road helped to hold back the diggers, if only temporarily; the road was eventually built. Heaney supported many causes, but the ecological organisations he lent support to lead one to re-interpret landscape-poems and place-poems that do not mention ecological issues explicitly, in a different light. A lyrical landscape poem can be used to support an international wildlife charity. When penned by a poet, a conservation management plan can reference Hopkins and Carson. When a campaign aims to save 'Heaney Country', this is evidence that poetry creates a sense of place that is powerful enough to pause the bulldozers. Writing can play a part in protecting the peewit, the curlew and the whirring snipe.

Notes

1. Heaney judged the Arvon Foundation's poetry competition with Ted Hughes in 1980. See Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney, editors. 1980. *Arvon Foundation Poetry Competition 1980 Anthology*. Ulster Museum. A *Personal Selection: Seamus Heaney*. August 20-October 24 1982. Ulster Museum Publication Number 248. Seamus Heaney, author, and Tim O'Neill, designer. 2004. 'Columcille the Scribe' limited edition poem. Royal Irish Academy library. Seamus Heaney, poet, and John O'Connor, engraver. N.d. 'The Earth House'. National Library of Ireland Seamus Heaney: Listen Now Again exhibition, 2021. Limited edition marked LO P 592. Heaney opened the 'Face to Face with Your Past' exhibition at Silkeborg Museum, Denmark, where he'd seen the Tollund Man bog body, 2nd Aug 1996. 'The Man and the Bog', corrected proof, Silkeborg Museum. Emory Rose Library, Seamus Heaney papers, collection 960, box 86, folder 19. Seamus Heaney. 1985. 'From the Republic of Conscience'. Dublin: Amnesty International Irish Section. Seamus Heaney. 'The Wishing Chair' 1990. (Later collected as 'Squarings xxxix' in *Seeing Things*). John F. Deane, ed. *Thistledown: Poems for UNICEF*. Dedalus. Brandes and Durkan 218.
2. Heaney writes on a draft of his poem 'Belderg' that he donated a page of the manuscript to the Irish Peatland Conservation Council to raise funds via sale at an auction in 1989. National Library of Ireland, Seamus Heaney manuscripts. MS 49,493/39 Fol 1 Manuscript draft of 'Bogland' beginning '26 July 1974 (1) Contributed to Auction, May 1989'

Manuscript on cream A4 paper, p. 135 (digital catalogue numbering). See also my analysis below. The 1989 anthology *The Orange Dove of Fiji: Poems for The World Wide Fund for Nature* contained Heaney's poem 'The Road at Frosses'. This was later collected as 'Squarings' xxxi' in *Seeing Things* (Brandes and Durkan 215). 1991 saw Heaney contributing to a series of posters for the Ulster Trust for Nature Conservation, which paired artwork by T. P. Flanagan with sections of his poems. For example, T. P. Flanagan's 'Where Sheep Have Passed' is paired with two stanzas of Heaney's 'Bogland' for the 'Peatlands' poster. National Library of Ireland EPH F1089. Sections of Heaney's poem 'The Peninsula', from *Door into the Dark* (1969), features on the 'Wetlands' poster, an excerpt from 'Exposure' (1975) on 'Woodlands', and an extract from 'Fieldwork' on 'Meadowlands'. I am thankful to Siobhan Coyle from Ulster Wildlife for images of the posters. In 1999, Heaney's poem 'The Child That's Due' from 'Bann Valley Eclogue' was printed in a limited edition broadside by the Bank of Ireland Group Treasury, with some signed copies for Irish Peatlands Conservation. The Bank of Ireland Group made a donation to the Irish Peatland Conservation Council's 'Save the Bog' campaign in recognition of Heaney's contribution (Brandes and Durkan 158). The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds' Northern Ireland branch notes that 'Lough Beg near Toome is part of a landscape that Seamus Heaney called "the country of the mind". The much-loved poet wrote about his experiences growing up in the area in poems like "The Strand at Lough Beg" and lent his support to a management plan from the RSPB to improve the site'. Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. 2010. I am thankful to Catherine Heaney and the Estate of Seamus Heaney for bringing this to my attention.

3. Email from Catherine Heaney at the Seamus Heaney Estate to Yvonne Reddick. February 16, 2022.
4. C. B. Cox, 'The Painter's Eye', *Spectator*, 20 May 1966, 638. According to Blake Morrison, Heaney belonged to 'post-1945 nature poetry – an imprecisely defined genre, but one presided over by Ted Hughes' (1982, 17). Blake Morrison (1982). *Seamus Heaney*. London: Methuen.
5. Specifically, 'Belderg' for the Irish Peatland Conservation Council in 1989, and 'Exposure' for the Ulster Trust for Nature Conservation (1991) – a selective quotation that cuts the Wicklow setting from the latter poem. The term 'Ulster' was controversial: Seamus Heaney, interviewee, and Mark Carruthers, interviewer. 2011. 'Seamus Heaney: 'If I described myself as an Ulsterman I'd have thought I was selling a bit of my birthright''. *Irish Times*, January 23rd 2011. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/seamus-heaney-if-i-described-myself-as-an-ulsterman-i-d-have-thought-i-was-selling-a-bit-of-my-birthright-1.2077002>
6. 'The Road at Frosses' was published in a World Wide Fund for Nature anthology whose contributors included British royalty (1989); 'The Child that's Due' from 'Bann Valley Eclogue' supported the aforementioned 'Save the Bog' campaign in 1990, as the Bank of Ireland Group treasury made a donation to the campaign in recognition of Heaney's permission to print the poem. Brandes and Durkan 158, 215.
7. It is important to note that Auden's 'In Memory of WB Yeats' goes on to say that a poem is 'a way of happening, a mouth'. Auden's and Heaney's stances on the role of poetry are elaborated in an article by editor Neil Astley about his anthology *Earth Shattering: Ecopoems* (2007). Neil Astley. 2008. 'Something in nothing'. *Guardian*, February 28, 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/feb/26/poetry>
8. For work on the impacts of *Silent Spring* on ecocritical studies, see for example Richard Kerridge, 2012. 'Ecocriticism and the Mission of "English"'. In *Teaching Ecocriticism and Green Cultural Studies*. Edited by Greg Garrard. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Pp. 11–24. For information on how the scientific community views *Silent Spring*, see *Nature, Ecology and Evolution*. 2022. 'Editorial: *Silent Spring* at Sixty'. *Nature, Ecology and Evolution* 6 (26 Sept 2022): 1399–1400. For the impact of *Silent Spring* on Hughes and Plath, see Reddick (2017), p. 118. Heaney's poem 'On the Spot' was written in response to a commission by poets John Burnside and Maurice O'Riordan for a volume marking the fortieth anniversary of the

publication of *Silent Spring: Wild Reckoning: An Anthology Provoked by Rachel Carson's Silent Spring*. 2004. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

9. First published in *The Listener* in 1969 (Brandes and Durkan, 299) and collected in *Wintering Out* Heaney (1972), London: Faber & Faber, 50.
10. National Library of Ireland, Seamus Heaney archive, MS 49 493–12 fol 1, labelled pp. 1–54 by archivist, manuscript and annotated typescript drafts of poems, many of which were collected in *Wintering Out*. TS with MS amendments, cream A4 paper, p. 46 (digital catalogue numbering), 'A Pollution'. Typescript with handwritten amendments.
11. For further discussion of past environments, the carbon cycle, and 'deep time' in Heaney's bog-poems, see David Farrier. 2019. *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 34–47. See also Yvonne Reddick. Forthcoming. *Anthropocene Poetry, Place, Environment and Planet*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
12. Threats to boglands occur in an unlikely place, early in Heaney's career: his 1972 review of a 1933 novel by an Anglo-Irish lord that features the Peat Development (Ireland) Syndicate as an antagonist, and that ends with a tidal wave of bog. Heaney reviewed a 1972 reprint of Lord Dunsany's novel *The Curse of the Wise Woman*. The Peat Development (Ireland) Syndicate threatens a bog in the novel (1980, 205).
13. Seamus Heaney, interviewee, and Mark Carruthers, interviewer. 2011. 'Seamus Heaney: "If I described myself as an Ulsterman I'd have thought I was selling a bit of my birthright"'. *Irish Times*, January 23rd 2011. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/seamus-heaney-if-i-described-myself-as-an-ulsterman-i-d-have-thought-i-was-selling-a-bit-of-my-birthright-1.2077002>
14. The National Library of Ireland's catalogue entry for the Ulster Trust for Nature Conservation 'Peatlands' poster reads: 'Poster featuring two verses of Heaney's poem 'Bogland for T.P. Flanagan' (1969) printed on sheet beneath an reproduction of a painting 'Where Sheep Have Passed' by the artist Terence Philip Flanagan, RHA, PRUA. This poster is autographed in pencil by T.P. Flanagan on sheet. At bottom of sheet, printed underneath poem: 'The printing of this poster was generously assisted by the Bass Ireland Limited Community Awards Scheme. A short paragraph concerning peatlands relating to the work done by the Ulster Trust For Nature Conservation is printed at lower right of sheet'.
15. Emory Rose Library, Seamus Heaney papers Collection 960, box 89, folder 4. See for example 'The Moving Bog', Bord na Mòna, undated booklet, T. A. Barry's 'Origins and Distribution of Peat-Types in the Bogs of Ireland', undated article funded by Bord na Mòna energy company, and Leslie Gardner, 'Bogland Harvest', Blackwoods, 1974.
16. Emory Rose Library, Seamus Heaney papers Collection 960, box 89, folder 4. 'The Moving Bog', Bord na Mòna, undated booklet.
17. National Library of Ireland, Seamus Heaney manuscripts. MS 49,493/39 Fol 1 Manuscript draft of 'Belderg' beginning '26 July 1974 Contributed to Auction, May 1989'. Manuscript on cream A4 paper. The grainy quality of some of the lettering suggests that this is a photocopy of the manuscript that Heaney contributed to the auction.
18. National Library of Ireland, Seamus Heaney manuscripts. MS 49,493/39 Fol 1 Manuscript draft of 'Bogland' beginning '26 July 1974 (1) Contributed to Auction, May 1989'. Manuscript on cream A4 paper, p. 135 (digital catalogue numbering).
19. Emory Rose Library, Seamus Heaney Papers collection 960, box 89, folder 19, two word processed or faxed letters from Mogens Schou Jørgensen headed 'Wetlands Archaeology Research Project', regarding Heaney's essay. See also <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/prehistoric/past/past25.html#Bog>, which details the discussion of wetland environments and archaeology at the 1998 conference.
20. Email from Seamus Burns to Yvonne Reddick, February 16, 2022.
21. See for example Laurel Prize for Ecopoetry winner Pascale Petit's 'For a Coming Extinction'. 2020. Extinction Rebellion: Writers Rebel. July 23 2020. <https://writersrebel.com/tag/pascale-petit/>

22. Change.org. N.d. 'Stope [sic] Ecocide in Heaney Country'. <https://www.change.org/p/save-heaney-country-ecocideinheaneycountry>.
23. The document's title cites the 'everyday miracles and the distant past' that the Nobel Committee found in Heaney's work when they awarded him the Prize in 1995.

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