

Letters from the Trees: Mysteries and Devotions of the Irish Tree Alphabet

Miles Lowry *CSRS Artist in Residence*

The Irish Ogham alphabet has been lost, found, saved from obscurity and disputed for centuries. The original alphabet is thought to be based on the ancient Irish language, honouring sacred trees and plants of cultural and symbolic significance. Its marks are constructed using a vertical baseline (the tree), with perpendicular marks (the branches) stemming from or crossing over this line horizontally or diagonally. While all surviving Ogham inscriptions are on stone, it was likely also inscribed on sticks, stakes and trees. Many stones were inadvertently damaged or fragmented by farmers who anchored their fences and tethered their flocks against stormy weather. Some excellent examples have been cloistered in museum collections such as those held at University College Cork.

As a multidisciplinary artist, I have a history of drawing from the wealth of mythology and storytelling of my Gaelic and Pre-Celtic roots. I have for several years been seeking refuge and retreat at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Ireland, a large wooded estate on a lake flanked by farmlands. My paintings of this landscape have formed a significant part of my Irish-themed work portraying trees and their visual impact on the land. It didn't take long to find myself collecting lore from the locals who have a strong sense of the ancestral memory inherent in the landscape.

My devotion to mark-making and the invention of ciphers has expanded in recent years while working in collaboration with calligrapher Georgia Angelopoulos. Her own love and connection to Greek texts provided a ground for me to take a new look at how the Irish Ogham alphabet shares a connection with calligraphy, has been used for musical notation and has a history of use expressing prayers, protective spells and significant names and places.

I am fascinated by the notion that trees, their symbolism and their distinct personalities can be used to portray ideas, inspire hidden communications and reflect spiritual investigations. For my fellowship, I will research a meaningful contemporary expression of the Tree Alphabet by enlisting the possibilities of painting, drawing, sculpture, media, the written word and any other intersections of thought available in the university setting. So I welcome you to the School of Ogham, a laboratory investigating the ever-evolving language of the trees - past, present and future.



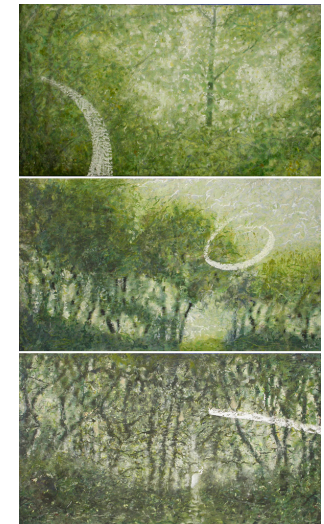
Ogham, the White Book (2017)
ink on paper-bound volume



Amfora (2016)
sculpture and painting by Miles Lowry,
calligraphy by Georgia Angelopoulos
cast and painted cotton fibre, silver leaf, mineral pigments



Naming the Light (2007)
paper pigment wax and wood



Nature Ecstasy (2005)
- triptych -
paper pigment wax and wood



Parrish Yews (2015)
- diptych -
paper pigment wax and wood