Conclusion: creative legacies

Stripping the earth

It gets you every time ... they were there, so close, just below the surface, as if beneath the membrane of life ... present and invisible, like the strange world of layers and walls interspersed with cavities, canals and tendons that live beneath our skin. And in fact, within a few hours, just as a wound might, the stripped earth will have lost colour and dried out, or else darkened and filled with water. (Olivier 2015: 39)

In his study of The Dark Abyss of Time Laurent Olivier conjures the emergent power of the past as it resurfaces into our lives. His point is that archaeology is not some neat, systematic endeavour uncovering history in a sequential manner. It is messy, confusing and disconcerting. It comes at us in the midst of our own lives where we must make sense of it; thus the past is always in dialogue with the issues and concerns of the present. This book has taken that moment of irruption as its starting point, following the afterlife of the bog body: how it was reburied or revived, investigated and interpreted. It has followed how the meanings of these remains have changed through time, relating them to the fears, beliefs, aims and ambitions of those who handled these corpses. Saints and sinners, cowards and priests, muggers and murderers, victims or heroines: we have written into those lives a set of stories that tell us as much about ourselves as they do about the past. They have been a lens through which we can examine our own prejudices and desires. While the most thorough studies discussed here are rooted in exemplary analysis, employing the very latest in scientific techniques, the best remain interpretively open; we may never be able to resolve whether some of the most iconic bog bodies were accidents, executions, sacrifices or self-offerings. We should not be too concerned: Charles Sanders Peirce himself used the bog to evoke the ever-provisional nature of scientific enquiry that is not 'standing on the bedrock of fact. It is walking upon a bog, and can only say, this ground seems to hold for the present. Here I will stay till it begins to give way' (in Hartshorne and Weiss 1994: V: 589).

What we can do, however, is contextualise our bog bodies, in place and in time. Throughout, the book has sought to examine not just the landscape of the moss
itself but the wider environment and its consequences for contemporary human inhabitation. It has brought to light the other objects and animal remains found alongside these remains, to consider how we conceptualise deposition, tempering the notion that these were offerings to the gods with a new emphasis upon deposition itself as a way of creating value (after Fontijn 2020), as well as a way of dealing with the end of things that were often complex pieces of crafting, well used and redolent with life. Taking that idea back into the study of the death of people has enabled this book to posit a rather different approach to sacrifice and fertility, emphasising the dramaturgy of violence as both a trope of power and a way of capturing those vitalities that fuelled the regeneration of these prehistoric worlds. By setting the bog bodies back in wider archaeological evidence for Iron Age remains, we need to acknowledge that what appears to be a common phenomenon is of our making: we have created the concept of the Moorleiche as a distinct being, deciding on its boundaries, ruling bodies in or out, fumbling around the edge of moss, mire, bog and fen, when these bodies and the violence done to them need to be seen within wider cultures of both conflict and deposition in a suite of watery places.

In offering up a new ‘cold case’ examination of Worsley Man, the study has been able to follow what happens to these practices as Rome enters the scene. It suggests a longevity of indigenous rites in the north that were not simply outlawed by these conquerors but co-opted to ‘speak back’ to the colonised, in an idiom of injurious humiliation they understood. After exposing the particular power of decapitation in this study of violence, it has sought to explain the peculiar and ongoing fondness for the skull (and ancient human remains in general) in this area of the north. This has led to a deeper understanding of the sense of ownership and responsibility for bog bodies that leads us into the curatorial stage of their afterlife. Through an examination of exhibiting practices, the book culminates with a critical consideration of whether bog bodies should be on display, and if so, how we might do this well. In this final chapter I want to briefly explore the creative aftermath of bog bodies. This has been perceptively and authoritatively scrutinised across literature, art and material culture in the work of Sanders (2009) and I will not attempt to re-cross that territory. Instead, I want to return to one example: the work of Seamus Heaney and how he used bog bodies to speak to the present.

**Digging: poetry and conflict**

Seamus Heaney's bog body poems span two key collections: *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975). The very first of these studies, ‘Bog Oak’, captures the ambivalent provision of the moss, as he imagines other-worldly beings seeking out its ‘watercress and carrion’. From the start, the bog is both cleansing and fetid, life-giving and life-taking (Finn 2006). ‘The Tollund Man’ continues to evoke this ambiguous power: winter seeds and germination, set against hanging and the necessary demand of sacrifice. ‘Nerthus’ conjures an ash bog figure and its enduring presence, but even within this short poem a subtle sexuality is felt, in the ‘long grains
gathered to a split’; an eroticisation of archaeological remains that became a fecund evocation of damaged matter in ‘The Bog Queen’, ‘Strange Fruit’ and ‘Punishment’ (Finn 2004). In ‘The Grauballe Man’ the bog man’s own cut throat is echoed in the ‘hooded victim, slashed and dumped’ of young men taken for extra-judicial execution. The last line of ‘Tollund Man’ troubles the reader with an apparent understanding, if not exact sympathy, for the ‘old man-killing parishes’ where he feels ‘lost, unhappy and at home’. This is prehistoric territory he feels he knows.

Heaney’s work would eventually win him a Nobel Prize but critics were divided, arguing this ‘mythical method’ of mobilising the past had two consequences: it failed to write explicitly about the present (‘Whatever you say, say nothing’), amounting to a ‘dither’ and a ‘blather’ (‘Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces’), opting for the ‘more private ardors of poetry’ than direct action (Hart 1989: 389). Through the bog body poems, he revealed his own ambiguous disposition: ‘conniving’ in ‘civilised outrage’ at the public shaming and tarring of women yet admitting he would understand this ‘exact, and tribal, intimate revenge’. His stance would be read by others as covert support for Irish resistance to British rule: a historicist relativising of conflict (Hufstader 1996: 61) that risked an elision of Iron Age and nationalist ‘sacrifice’ (Lloyd 1985). Yet as Heaney (1999: 3–4) himself argued, by the late 1970s–1980s ‘both sides were ready to die, in a more or less religious self-sacrificing way for the preservation of their land’. Some saw this as mere apologist verse, ‘a symbolic partaking of bloodshed through “silence”’ (Sanders 2009: 89)? Heaney (1980: 56–7) refuted this, arguing that he instead sought ‘to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and intensity’. The bog bodies gave him every example of violence he was seeing around him or had heard of through folk memory: execution on the basis of religious and ethnic difference; for sexual liaison with that which was banned – fraternisation bound up with betrayal and thus due a death; for sheer bloody-mindedness or youthful rule-breaking; disruptive behaviour or rivalry that needed suppression by both (para)military and martial law. Heaney’s work does not provide ‘solidarity’, Sanders (2009: 85) suggests, nor answers, recognising how even small-scale violence has the capacity to render us mute, to enfeeble us. At times, we sense a guilt in his voyeurism of violence, similar to Sontag’s (2003) torment, attending to the ethical and aesthetical complexities of images of suffering. Heaney (1999: 3) uses his language to capture this ambiguity of feeling, of how ‘the atrocious and the beautiful often partake of one another’s reality’, just as he captures the paradoxical quality of the bogs: ‘they kill and they preserve’ (Sanders 2009: 85). Hart (1989: 393, 395) ultimately defends the cycle, arguing that Heaney was experimenting with how to ‘approach and mourn atrocities’ through art, garnering ‘sobering lessons for his own bellicose culture’.

Archaeologists and curators have embraced Heaney’s ambiguous exposition of violence in the bog bodies, hopeful that the past has this capacity to ‘suture’ – the ‘drawing or joining together of two worlds’, as Moshenska (2009: 92) puts it. What we seek is not an elision between past and present but a conversation. Time has moved on (we hope), yet some of the violent traces of the Troubles have yet to be recovered. As I write, Britain stands on the edge of redefining its relationship
with Europe in ways that may yet have profound consequences for both Northern Ireland and the Republic. It is a timely moment to reread Heaney’s work and open up that discourse again. We also need to talk more of the dead (see Chapter 6), of mortality, of ways of dying, of loss and remembrance (Croucher et al. 2019). The final conversation we need is one that re-enchants us with the bog. Prehistory gives us a story of an extractive relationship with these locales (the taking of fuel and ore) balanced by the giving up of things. The bog bodies have an irruptive potential to lead us back to these places and rethink our relations with them. As the introduction has made clear, never before have we needed the moss and the mire so pressingly: our own future lies entangled with the bog.

‘Stay, awaken the dead …’

In 1921, Walter Benjamin bought a small painting by the Swiss artist, Paul Klee: an oil transfer drawing entitled Angelus Novus. What did he see in this brown-and-gold stained figure, with feathered fingers lifted as if in blessing or appeal? It was, he said, ‘how one imagines the Angel of History’, an image that allowed him an insight into a ‘humanity which proves itself through destruction’ (cited in Jeffries 2016). He was a German and a Jew, forced to flee his homeland in 1933, without this painting and without his library. He committed suicide in 1940, before he could be handed over to the Gestapo. In no. IX of his Theses on the Philosophy of History he explained his vision of the Angel:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing … [it] irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 1969: 249)

Benjamin believed that although we could not change the past, we could be appalled by suffering that we witness in it. We could, through action in the present (of research, analysis, writing, artistic production) change not the fate but the meaning of their lives: ‘making a difference to their stories’, as Eagleton (2009) puts it, ‘rewriting their narratives’ and thus ultimately being ‘impelled to move forward’. We should not feel shame or guilt for being interested in those who died violently in the past; this book has arisen out of the urge to attend to these lives over others and to tell their stories well – they matter. Yet as this conclusion has proposed, its wider aim is to use this archaeology to speak back to issues that will not disappear: the current fate of our environment, the way in which we categorise humanity and what other people think can be done to it, as well as the way we fail to talk of the dead, past and present.

Figure 9.1 is another image from David Farrell’s Innocent Landscapes sequence (no. 18). It shows an exposed bed of peat, cracked with heat, drying out. In its
midst a figure seems to emerge, with the rounded shape of a scalp, an eye, lips even, square shouldered and seemingly pinioned in the bog. Is it one of the more recent ‘disappeared’ that Farrell was tracing, a new bog body perhaps or even the peat’s own conjuring of a mortal presence: an emissary sent back to haunt or enchant? This very ambiguity makes it a fitting image with which to end. My mother might have found inspiration on the moss: a quiet space of growth at the city’s edge. I find inspiration under it, in the archaeopoetical and political power that these emergent remains have to both appal and impel.

9.1 *Innocent Landscapes* sequence entitled ‘Bragan’, David Farrell, 2000. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.