



Improvisations on the Theme of an Irish Wall

Roger Bennett

It appears to be some sort of sleeping animal, gray-headed, its long tawny body stretching gracefully across the art gallery floor. Viewers stop, unsure, trying to get its measure.

They climb the steps, approach, and the nature of the beast is revealed. It's a stone wall! Rocks — limestone or granite? — at its tumbling-down end, then lighter ones, difficult to identify, in its sinuous, undulating length.

A typical Irish dry stone wall, its rounded, weathered rocks seemingly gathered from fields, selected for shape and size, carefully stacked and fitted. No foundations, no mortar. Traditional, practical, familiar. About 20 feet long, waist high, strong and

sculptural, a confident presence in the spacious gallery.

A few steps closer, however, viewers realize it is not stone, it's wood, the rocks are made of wood! An Irish dry wood wall! They move in to examine it, smiling at this subversion of the expected. The surprises continue.

Trompe l'oeil rocks merge into wooden rocks, all different shapes and sizes, rugged and sensuous, traces of carvings here and there. At the far end, a gatepost—an ancient “granite” monument incised with ogham markings. A bit of broken gate hangs from an iron hinge. As in real field walls, cracks contain hidden or discarded objects—shards of pottery, a broken bottle, a key, a brooch,

The team gets inspiration from the dramatic Carlow landscape, especially its stone walls.

a lipsticked cigarette, a clay pipe, a feather. It is living and organic, with moss, lichens, and ivy; a snake slithering for cover; a determined snail; a spider poised beside its web. Everything made of wood! Words are scattered on the rocks: history, shelter, posterity. A flash of blue through a crack, it's the ghost of a woman, her arms crossed. A rickety door opens to reveal an extraordinary carving of a horse and dragon on a golden disc.

What was the genesis of this amazing piece of art? The viewers stand back, try to imagine its making, all the intense physical and emotional energy. A video playing on a screen tells the story.

The story began with a meeting of minds and a leap of courage. In 2012, Terry Martin—an Australian wood artist, writer, and curator—spent time teaching and traveling in Ireland. Over dinner with woodturner Glenn Lucas and his wife Cornelia McCarthy, the conversation turned to the question of what woodturners could do to stimulate new ways of thinking about and working with wood. Ideas and what-ifs bounced back and forth. Terry thought it would be stimulating to bring a group of wood artists from abroad to work on a project with their Irish peers. Terry has deep Irish roots and had fallen in love with Irish walls: “When I think of the Irish landscape, I think of its walls—especially in the West. They define Irishness. . . . So I said, ‘Why don’t we build an Irish stone wall?’ It was one of those ideas whose time was right.”

Building a wall would be a collaborative project, but with an essential difference: There would be a single common goal, instead of the usual practice of small groups working on disparate pieces.

The timing was right. Cornelia had recently joined the board of the local (Carlow) Arts Festival, and at their next meeting she proposed the concept. To her delight, director Hugo Jellett and the other members accepted with enthusiasm. A group of wood artists, with Terry as leader and curator, would come together for a week at Glenn’s workshop to build a dry stone wall out of wood and exhibit it during the 2013 festival in the spectacular Visual Gallery in Carlow. Thus began the adventure “Improvisations on the Theme of an Irish Wall.”

Getting started

So much to do, so little time, so many questions! Where to source wood—it

would be impossible to get enough dry wood in less than a year. How to build the wall? There was no blueprint for a dry wood wall. How big should it be? Who would build it? How could it be funded? Was it even feasible to build it in just a week?

Terry, Cornelia, and Glenn remained in constant communication across the globe. They drew on all their experiences, Terry’s as facilitator, curator, and erstwhile stage manager, Cornelia’s as arts administrator and project manager. Ambrose O’Halloran and Brid O’Halloran in Galway became key members of the planning and logistics team.

Glenn sourced wood locally: beech and sycamore, with some oak, chestnut, and redwood. They would make do with unseasoned wood—after all, rocks do crack. Invitations were sent out, applications called for, and the group took shape: twelve Irish and ten international artists. Woodturners were complemented by furniture makers, several of them superb colorists and carvers; grizzled veterans and wood artists building careers; two students; and Xiang Dong Wang, a master carver from China, recommended to Terry by the *Intangible Cultural Heritage* Master Mr. Feng Wentu.

Funding was always on a shoestring. The Arts Festival provided a modest budget, and some sponsors came on board. The Turners Without Borders committee of the AAW contributed generously; Mike Hou’s International Wood Culture Society (IWCS) enthusiastically funded Mr. Wang, as well as a film crew from Taiwan to record the

event. Tool companies lent equipment to Glenn; local businesses helped with food supplies.

Team planning

With the team announced early in 2013, Internet brainstorming ensued: flurries of emails, ideas pinging through the ether, big questions tackled. Should the wall look like wood or stone, or as Jacques Vesery suggested, couldn’t it transition from one to the other? What about shape? John Lee poetically described how Irish walls weave and undulate with the landscape, a concept he uses when curving furniture. How to construct it? Should it be continuous, or could a door, a gate, a stile, or a window breach it? How could it be made to look natural, alive? Will-o-the-wisps, leprechauns, a broken Celtic cross, 3-D holograms, ogham writing, found objects, animals, vegetation—a myriad of ideas, some stillborn, some eventually realized. The possibility of an art-craft fissure was a gnawing worry—the wall must not look folksy.

Ambrose and Brid introduced the non-Irish to the concept of *meitheal*, of neighbors helping each other at tasks such as harvesting. *Meitheal* became the project’s watchword.

On location

On the last day of May, the group assembled in Glenn’s workshop. They ▶

From the tumbledown end, the “rocks” morph into wood.



(Top to bottom, left to right)
 The wall silhouetted against the gallery's expansive window.
 Terry leads a discussion in the marquee.
 Cillian and Brendan position a rock in the wall.
 The "stone" gatepost with ogham inscription and remains of wooden gate.
 Glenn chainsaws under a gloriously blue sky.
 Glenn delivers fresh supplies of wood.
 Jacques embellishes the rusty tailpipe.
 Art, Sharon, and Adam paint rocks.



had all come together for the first time the previous afternoon, to view the gallery and take a guided tour of local stone walls. As if the challenge weren't big enough, they decided the wall needed to be doubled in length to fill the expansive gallery space. Glenn's firewood pile would have to be raided.

Terry outlined the task ahead. A short discussion, then an explosion of action, all that pent-up nervous energy released. Chainsaws, bandsaws, power carvers, belt sanders, hand sanders—a shattering cacophony of noise.

Initially, people gravitated to what they felt most comfortable with: outside, the rock shapers; in the marquee, the construction team; in Glenn's big green workshop, the carvers and colorists, makers of found objects and of flora and fauna. The first rocks were chainsawed, power carved, sanded. Rounded shapes seemed most natural, and in fact are typical of many local walls. In the marquee, a team laid a rope along the floor to define the curving profile of the wall. They drew chalk lines for a plywood base to be jigsawed into shape. The building began.

The impossible deadline focused minds. One by one, the group came to decisions through experiments, urgent meetings, and/or show of hands. They explored several ideas for constructing the wall, but in the end adopted the simple solution to follow the method of stone wall builders: pile rock on top of rock. The rocks would be fastened

with hidden screws, and the capstones secured with epoxy and threaded bars. The wall would be two rocks wide, with a single row of capstones. At one end it would be "stone"; this would morph into wood, with a stone gatepost fixing the far end. The door/gate/stile debate was resolved by inserting a long through-stone to make an inviting stile, and with the inclusion of a small weather-beaten door, inspired by one Christian Delhon had photographed in France.

For seven days, twenty-two artists worked intensely. Miraculously, the sun shone the entire week. The noise of the machines became a familiar background tune, raucous and jazzy. Against it, ceaseless conversations,

discussions, occasional arguments; connections made, friendships forged, skills exchanged; constant joking and laughter. Everybody busy, everybody contributing.

Small work groups

Whenever I wandered around the site, I witnessed a series of mini-dramas. Outside, for example, I saw Liam O'Neill in his element, tirelessly chainsawing; Ambrose and Brid cheerfully black-faced from a session of scorching wood; Michael Brolly finishing rocks on the belt sander; Emmet Kane and Alan Meredith shaping the gatepost; and Liam Flynn carving "Good fences neighbors" in ogham script on the post—an ▶



John sandblasts the wall, late at night.

Photo: Terry Martin



A pile of "rocks," some raw, some finished.



Michael, Christian, Alan, Emmet, and Liam O'Neill shape rocks.



Liam Flynn carves a pattern.

appropriate nod to Robert Frost's line "Good fences make good neighbors." In the green workshop, studies in concentration: Louise Hibbert creating a stippled snail, and Sharon Doughtie carving a Celtic knot on a rock; Art Liestman shaping a door key; Mark Sanger replicating a traditional Celtic brooch; Christian, on the lathe, turning a tube that Jacques magically transformed into a section of old rusty tailpipe; Jacques coloring; Neil Turner carving the imprint of Christian's hands around a rock; Adam Doran engrossed in cutting out a spider's web; Mr. Wang chiseling his horse-and-dragon coin sculpture.

In the marquee, the wall slowly took shape, painstakingly, block by block. Three furniture makers accomplished almost all of the construction, John, Cillian Ó Súilleabháin, and Brendan Hogg. The work was unfamiliar, yet not that different from normal, as John explained, "I'm so used to working precisely, worrying about a half-millimeter gap, but in a way we have the very same problems here, because every block has to be interlocked."

They carefully selected from the growing pile of rocks, examining each one for size and shape, discarding unsatisfactory ones or adjusting others with

the bandsaw or belt sander. Developing a rhythm, they anticipated each other's requirements. The team became "Hogg and Sons," their slogan "like clockwork."

Throughout the week, Terry moved from group to group, cajoling and suggesting. He led group discussions and usually addressed the entire team over lunch. Dillon and Jerry tirelessly filmed, building up material for their video, and Harry Reid quietly, courteously photographed it all. Glenn, high up on his fork-lift, shifted wood or trash, and checked that everything was in order. In the kitchen, Cornelia, her friend Ann, and Neil's wife Suellen performed daily miracles, preparing memorable gourmet lunches.

Gradually, people moved out of their comfort zones, learned from each other, tried new techniques and tools. Everybody worked on rock-making at different times. Glenn did his first carving, a double-bowled pipe; Liam O'Neill carved a bunch of ivy; Mr. Wang put down his hand tools and had fun with a power carver; turning tips were swapped. Jacques shared his coloring and texturing techniques, continually encouraging others to have a go. Several people talked about how they had been in a rut with their own work, and how this interaction was shaking them up. People surprised themselves. Louise found herself "ordering people about," her experience of house-building giving her the confidence to take charge of the rock shaping. Cillian's communication skills defused a potential row.

As the deadline approached, the pressure grew. The wall had to be installed in the gallery Thursday afternoon. Late Wednesday night, the builders declared it ready for sandblasting. The sections of wall were fork-lifted to the floodlit blasting area, their interiors sprayed black. John the master-blaster, hooded like a beekeeper, meticulously worked over all the exposed wood, softening the edges for a weathered look. Ribald hilarity erupted from the team of helpers, giddy with exhaustion.



The rusty tailpipe in the wall.



Sharon releases the snail.



Finished! Group photo before the wall is moved to the gallery

(L. to R.: Glenn Lucas, Brid O'Halloran, Michael Brolly, Mark Sanger, Ambrose O'Halloran, Sharon Doughtie, Alan Meredith, Louise Hibbert, Art Liestman, Terry Martin, John Lee, Xiang Dong Wang, Roger Bennett, Emmet Kane, Brendan Hogg, Adam Doran, Liam O'Neill, Cillian Ó Súilleabháin, Christian Delhon, Jacques Vesery)



A spider, a brooch, a skull, all made of wood, "found" in the wall.



A feather, carved and colored, lies on a rock.



Xiang Dong Wang's carving: Irish horse, Chinese dragon

Photo: Roger Bennett

In the morning, the final frantic push. The last capstones in place, the tumble-down area assembled, Jacques and his team colored the stone end using a delicate feathery brushing of light over dark. Decisions about which of the found objects and creatures would be included, and where to put them. Lichen and moss applied—of sawdust and glue, painted and dried. Louise and Sharon airbrushed stenciled words, selected from dozens submitted by the participants to convey what the wall meant to them.

Delivery and installation

Early afternoon, with the wall finished, a team gently lifted the sections into three vans and drove them to Carlow. In the gallery, last-minute problems were solved with fitting the sections seamlessly together, and coaxing the electrics into displaying Michael's hologram woman.

Opening night was an emotional affair. There was sadness that it was over, new friends scattering away. Everybody felt a bursting pride at the sheer achievement of it all, like a parent showing their new baby to the excited guests. The process was as valuable as the product. The experience had been deeply enriching, personally, culturally, and professionally for everyone. As they hugged their goodbyes, everybody spoke of their hope that this would not be a once-off, and that it could inspire similar events in other places, at other times.

The wall is currently installed in Dublin Airport, where it will be on view for much of this year.

Photography by Harry Reid, unless otherwise noted.

Youtube video link: [youtube.com/watch?v=UND1bkq4VIs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UND1bkq4VIs)

Roger Bennett is an Irish woodturner; he specializes in bowls, vessels, and jewelry that he colors and inlays with silver. He is a former teacher of English and French. rogerbennettwoodturner.com.

Participants:

Artists: Roger Bennett (Ireland), Michael Brolly (USA), Christian Delhon (Fra), Adam Doran (Ire), Sharon Doughtie (USA), Liam Flynn (Ire), Louise Hibbert (Wales), Brendan Hogg (Ire), Emmet Kane (Ire), John Lee (Ire), Art Liestman (Can), Glenn Lucas (Ire), Alan Meredith (Ire), Ambrose O'Halloran (Ire), Brid O'Halloran (Ire), Liam O'Neill (Ire), Cillian Ó Súilleabháin (Ire), Mark Sanger (Eng), Neil Turner (Aus), Jacques Vesery (USA), Xiang Dong Wang (Chi)

Video team: Lin Cheng Hui and Chang Chih Yuan (Dillon and Jerry)

Photographer: Harry Reid

General Manager: Cornelia McCarthy

Curator/Artistic Director: Terry Martin