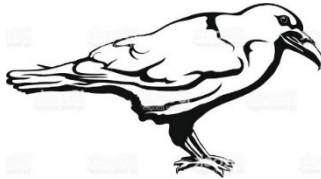


CROW CLEN
The SPIRITUAL UNIVERSE OF AN IRISH VILLAGE



Marella Hoffman

Featuring folk historian Norma Buckley

In association with the Avondhu Blackwater Partnership

For Pat and Johanna Carney
and for my great-grandparents Michael Sweeney and Hanora Martin,
all from Doon, Gleann an Phréacháin

Published on the day of Samhain 2020,
festival of the ancestors

Thanks to institutions and experts

This book is produced in association with North Cork's *Avondbu Blackwater Partnership*. Reflecting their decades of hands-on support for the heritage and development of Gleann an Phr each ain or Glenville, they gave the project warm encouragement, and the local home that it was looking for.

The University of Cambridge and the University of Notre Dame in the USA jointly funded a summer fellowship for me to work on this project while hosted at Boston College, USA. University of Cambridge also funded a summer fellowship for me to work on it in Ireland, based at University College Dublin. Beaufort College at the University of Cambridge provided hospitality, library facilities and moral support.

Norma Buckley speaks Chapters 2, 4, 7 and 11. As a well-known folk historian in Crow Glen, she gave me over 50 hours of interviews for the book. She is also a core character threading through other chapters, and was a long-term associate of the *Avondbu Blackwater Partnership*. Her biography is inside.

Crow Glen Parish Priest Fr Donal Cotter and his colleague Rev Dr Noel O' Sullivan at University of Maynooth's Theology Faculty both gave open-minded encouragement for the project, and trusted me not to make a mess of it.

As well as contributing a Foreword, War of Independence author and historian Diarmuid Grainger encouraged and advised me by correspondence, and corrected the manuscript.

Thanks to individuals

Thanks to all the individuals across the centuries, known about and unknown, who risked or gave their lives to create for us the democratic Republic that we have inherited from them today.

To so many of the older generation in the Glen of the Crow for being unique, quirky characters with the profound gentleness that is the mark of truly spiritual people. To name just a few - there are many others: Johnny Riordan, Jim Barry, Rita Healy, Norah and Jim O' Mahoney, Eily Gowen, Beena O' Callaghan who gave me kind encouragement as a young writer, and May Herlihy, whose soul passed on while I was finishing the book.

To the remarkable Carney family in America, whom I had never heard of. They irrupted politely into my life bringing with them unknown chunks of village history. Without them, more than half of this book would never have been written. Special thanks to Keith Carney of Washington, DC, originally, like all of them, a Glen of the Crow boy from Doon. He's the great instigator.

To my brother, Bernard Buckley from Glen of the Crow townland Glenagoul (site of a famous hurling match in 1741, as you can read inside). He improved the book with his close reading of the manuscript and many helpful corrections.

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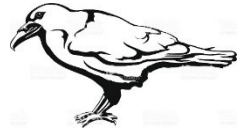
As far as I'm concerned, I walk with God.

~ Mary Carney,
great-grand-daughter of Johanna Carney of Doon, Crow Glen

*You're not meant to bother Saint Michael the Archangel with day to day stuff.
But I do.*

~ Norma Buckley,
Crow Glen





INTRODUCTION



Images at the opening of this chapter:

- ~ Saint Brigid's cross, handwoven from local rushes by Norma Buckley of Glenn
- ~ Holy Water font to hang inside the front door of the home
- ~ This book's signal for when interviewees are speaking
- ~ This book's signal for the author's commentary on what they have said

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT, AND WHO IT'S FOR

The Irish name of the village featured in this book is *Gleann an Phréacháin*, meaning *Glen of the Crow*. The place is twelve miles due north of Cork city, which is on Ireland's south coast. I grew up in a traditional household in the village before emigrating to work abroad at nineteen.

The book is not just about the village itself, but also its surrounding hinterlands. It uses the original names for the place: the Irish-language *Gleann an Phréacháin* or *Gleann* for short, and *Glen of the Crow* or *Crow Glen* in English. Colonisers anglicised the name to 'Glenville' and it's still called Glenville today. But that anglicisation wasn't a *translation*, in the way that 'Glen of the Crow' is the accurate translation for *Gleann an Phréacháin*. Translation is a respectful carrying over of a word's meaning from one language into another. Instead, the colonisers just flattened down the placename in Irish, and pasted over it any term they fancied in English. There was no attempt to retrieve or carry forward the original meaning. This wisdom and meaning that lie hidden in our old placenames is a rich subject: we'll return to it when we go up into the hills above the Bride River Valley later on.

As well as using the older names for the village, I've also used, with capital letters, the handful of ultra-local terms that we villagers used for naming our immediate surroundings. *The Village*, *The Street*, *The Crossroads Below*, *The Crossroads Above*, *The Wood*, *The Wood Wall* - we who lived in the village had our own little mini-language of place-naming made up of these terms.¹

I wrote this book for two main audiences. One is the local people in Glenville and the surrounding area in North Cork. I hope they will read, enjoy, discuss and debate the book, and make it their own in whatever ways they wish. The other audience I had in mind is the diaspora abroad - people who, or whose ancestors, emigrated from Ireland and especially from this North Cork area, like the Irish-American Carney family through whose eyes we see some of the chapters of this book.

Chapters 2, 4, 7 and 11 are about religious traditions in the Glen of the Crow, told entirely in a local speaker's words. All the other chapters are

¹ Automatically familiar to locals, placenames like *The New Line*, *Leary's Cross*, *The Mallow Road*, *Norry Roche's Cross*, *The Terrace*, *The Cover Road* and *Keame Hill* are other examples of this very local lingo that you won't find on any map.

about historical events there. Readers can navigate between these two main themes of the book, depending on which interests them most.

I've spent my career as a university academic abroad, moving across disciplines and then working extensively for government with communities, before ending up as an ethnographer. As a branch of anthropology, ethnography is about spending long periods in specific places listening to how the people there see their own world and - with their permission - writing up their worldview in book form.

As a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute, my books examine the differing lifestyles and worldviews of people in specific places and times. I've written books about the attitudes of the permanently unemployed White underclass in an English town; about refugees' experiences of nationality and identity in their adopted homeland; about the rural practices and ecological lifestyle of an 87-year-old hermit shepherd in the French Mediterranean mountains...

Now I wanted to turn that lens back onto the culture I grew up in. This book was originally going to be just about religious practices in the Glen of the Crow, past and present, because our religion was such an intense, all-encompassing activity when I was growing up there.

But once I arrived on the terrain, the interviews I was recording quickly started to stumble onto other things - historical facts that I had never known about Gleann an Phrícháin and about my own family's role in its history. These were things worth knowing, things that - once I started to hear about them - I couldn't let go of.

I had made the cardinal mistake, unforgivable in an ethnographer, of believing I knew Gleann inside out. Ethnographers must approach every site of study with fresh eyes, assuming they know nothing about it and letting local people initiate them with their local knowledge.

I quickly discovered that there was much, much more to be known about Gleann. Historical facts to be proud of, things that shouldn't be forgotten. The telling of those histories doubled the size of the book I had intended to write. Now the religious practices and the historical events twine around each other in alternating chapters.

It was the eruption into my life of the Carney family - originally from Doon in Crow Glen and now from America - that gave this book its other half. I'll let the chapters tell you their story. The Carneys led me to stumble upon acts of breath-taking heroism and altruism done here in

Gleann an Phrácháin by people of such calibre that I couldn't bear for their stories not be told out loud, right here and now.

The revealed facts of those heroes' lives also shifted my own identity and my sense of what my own history was, like an earthquake lifting up great chunks of the ground beneath you. It was dramatic, but what lay beneath was much richer, more valuable and more inspiring than the covering that had lain over it. I had to see these people's stories told.

I considered doing two separate books - one on the religious practices and another on the historical events. But you will see as you read this book that in Ireland in particular, history cannot be separated from spiritual life. Across the centuries in Crow Glen they interwove, like branches growing out of the same trunk. Any initial efforts I made to separate them seemed as artificial as if I were trying to cut them apart with scissors.

So the two threads now alternate through the chapters like a braided plait. The historical chapters are full of escapades and lively derring-do. There are misplaced bodies, secret hide-outs, kidnaps, miracles, daring escapes and rescues. They alternate, thankfully, with chapters of quieter reflection on spiritual matters over cups of tea by the fire.

In those quieter chapters, a local person tells the long story of the spiritual practices of the community in the Glen of the Crow. But while the tape recorder listened, her casual revelations of dramatic historical secrets regularly sent me running back into the archives again, to uncover and verify the next layer of exploits by the village's amazing ancestors.

At the beginning of each chapter, photos that are captioned on the ensuing page show key people, places or objects from that chapter. Sections that are marked with a microphone show where my interviewees are speaking, and the pages where I comment briefly on their interviews are marked with a photo of my own clipboard.

Research methods used

You'll see in the course of the book that I spent a lot of time researching it in libraries and archives. That's a strange lifestyle: sitting for days on end in one far-off place (for instance, in the library of the Royal Anthropological Institute at the British Museum in London) in order to find out about another place hundreds of miles away (my own parish of Gleann an Phrácháin in Ireland). But I was richly rewarded by those dusty old

papers. I was amazed to discover how many layers of important *writings* and literature had already been laid down in Crow Glen centuries before I ever thought of writing about the place myself. I was mainly amazed that I had never been taught about any of them in the course of my own schooling and living there.

Like an archaeologist carefully lifting away layers of soil to reveal hidden treasures, I found now that the lands of Crow Glen conceal layers of intensely *local* writings that reach back over centuries, and even millennia. This book introduces them for your entertainment. For instance, there's a 234-page manuscript, handwritten in beautiful calligraphy and partly in Irish, from a hundred years ago. There's an important anonymous letter sent from Crow Glen to the British government in the 1920s, with one strategic mis-spelling in it. There are songs and poems of love, revenge and landscape composed and sung by Gleann farmers in the nineteenth century. There are beautiful, moving poems in Irish by famous Crow Glen Bards of the thirteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And there are exciting oral sagas that historians date back to the third century AD.

In Chapter 8, 'The Bards of Crow Glen and the Nagle Mountains', the landscape itself will speak to us like a freshly opened book. It will walk you through its small roads and boreens, in places like *Lyrenavarrig*, *Lyrenamon*, *Mullanabonree*, *Toorgariffe*... These extraordinary placenames are like exotic jewels that stud our landscape. But here they will get up out of their rich soil and speak their native Irish meanings back to us, handing over the messages they contain about how our ancestors lived in those places.

For the chapters on the War of Independence too, I did a lot of research in academic libraries and archives. The works I consulted are listed in the chapters' footnotes and in the bibliography at the back of the book. It was important that all those historical events be verifiable as documented facts, especially as some may be news to some readers who think, like I did, that they already know the Glen of the Crow in full. (But I suspect that few of the 'secrets' revealed between these covers will actually be news to real Crow Glenners - it's just that they wouldn't tell you about them! I had to go and find out them out for myself.)

Those dangerous, dramatic events actually happened for real in the lives of hundreds of people around the Glen of the Crow, and many who were later dispersed abroad by emigration. Shards of these events remained, of course, in the memories of the people but they almost never spoke about them afterwards. It was as if a pact of silence had been agreed.

Once, in the 1990s, a researcher made an appointment to come and see my grandmother Nell in our house in the village, when she was in her late 80s. Tea was laid out beside the fire, ready for his visit. But after leaving them alone, my mother was surprised to see the researcher drive away in his car three minutes later. It turned out that he was writing about the War of Independence in County Cork and had wanted to interview Nell about events in Gleann an Phr each ain. *'It's too soon'*, was all Nell would say about it when my mother asked her why she had sent him away.

Almost thirty years later, this book is timed to honour the centenary anniversary of those events. I believe that the story of the War of Independence in the Glen of the Crow is being published here for the first time. And I hope that now, at the centenary, even Nell would agree that it is right that those people's incredible, selfless deeds on our behalf be told. With amazing modesty, the families involved never spoke about it again. Many local families fought or took serious risks on behalf of the armed Irish effort but this book focuses around the Bride River Valley where three families - the Hickeys, the Hegartys and my own ancestors, the Sweeneys - organised for the IRA to have their main headquarters, strategy meetings and weapons store. Before publication, I asked Hickeys and Hegartys for permission to publish their grandparents' stories, and to publicly celebrate their bravery for the first time. They happily gave it. As the present-day Willy Hegarty put it, standing in the doorway of Teresa Barry's shop in the village: *'It's time. It's time now to honour those good people, and the way they stuck their necks out for us.'*

I hope that this book will raise at least as many questions as it answers, and I really hope that others in the Glen of the Crow - families, school groups, associations - will pick up and pursue the very many threads of history that are still lying around there waiting to be told. There is much more yet to be unfolded out of Gleann about all the layers of history addressed in this book - more about the oral sagas on Fionn Mac Cumhaill, the archaeology of our sacred sites, the details of the War of Independence, the Irish-language names of all our townlands... It's not difficult to do what I have done, and I will always be happy to advise anyone who's interested in doing more.

For the chapters on spirituality, I used only oral history interviews that I recorded locally in Gleann an Phr each ain. I wanted to hear practitioners' own spiritual experiences directly, without them being framed or defined in any way by the Church or by me or anyone else. So those interview

chapters on spirituality involved no archives or libraries: the local speaker is the only expert there, and I only listen and record.

Whether you are a local or an outsider, there are two different ways that you can read the chapters on religion. If you feel, as I do, that life does have a spiritual dimension, you can appreciate those chapters as the efforts of one culture to step forward and engage directly with those spiritual realms. Or if you have a purely secular view of life, you can stand back like my anthropologist colleagues would and just appreciate the sheer complexity of the symbols, rituals and practices that people developed in this culture that was otherwise, in material terms, quite simple.

Perhaps other young people disliked it all but as a child, I really appreciated the material beauty of those ritual practices and objects: the pictures and statues and stained glass windows, the candles and red lamps, the singing and chanting and processing, the incense and flowers, the special outfits, the coloured glass Rosary beads, the lace cloths, the hand gestures, the sky-blue of Our Lady's cape, the gold chalices and silver candlesticks, the polished dark timber seats... I could go on and on. It was all very lush and elaborate compared to the simplicity of our homes, clothes and possessions at that time. At the very least, I wanted in this book to celebrate those elaborate aesthetics of rural Irish Catholicism that I had found so magical as a child.

There is a significant lack of ethnographic writing on rural Irish Catholicism, and I wanted to contribute to filling that gap. In 1995, Lawrence Taylor of Maynooth University wrote *Occasions of Faith: An Anthropology of Irish Catholics*, a study of Catholic practices at that time in a Donegal village.² But it is very much a book for academics only. In 1998, an academic PhD thesis was written at University College Cork on Catholic folk practices in Cork city, but it was never published.³ I believe that *Crow Glen - The Spiritual Universe of an Irish Village* is the only ethnographically-minded book for a broad audience that listens to rural Irish Catholic practices as they are done today in 2020.

Many who live in Gleann an Phrácháin now are secular people who either no longer, or never did, practice the religion. A few may practice other religions, as was always the case in Gleann. But I hope that all will

2 Lawrence Taylor, *Occasions of Faith: An Anthropology of Irish Catholics*, Pennsylvania University Press, 1995

3 Joseph Feller, *Roots and Wings: Orthodoxy, Tradition, and Creativity in Irish Folk Catholicism*, unpublished PhD thesis, University College Cork, 1998

find it of some interest to overview in this book this aspect of Gleann's traditions. Catholicism is certainly not all that went on there, and it's not all that's going on in this book, but it is one of the deep threads of the locality's history. And I hope it will be interesting to hear it told in a new way - from practitioners' own viewpoint rather than from the perspective of the Church or the media.

I had intended to do shorter interviews on religion with a wider range of people in Crow Glen. But I ended up instead doing a series of long interviews with just one. Once or twice in their career, an ethnographer may be lucky enough to stumble upon what is called in the trade an 'ideal anthropological speaker'. This is a grassroots individual who has a rare eloquence for and interest in describing the society that they are a part of. If you find one of them, you stick with them and let them narrate a whole book to you. So that is what I did with my Crow Glen informant on spiritual matters.

But good ethnographers always add that 'Further research is needed'. The best ethnographies open up a whole world to explore in one small locality, where people may not have noticed before that there are such treasures lying around waiting to be examined. And once the treasure chest is opened, it can seem that lifetimes wouldn't be long enough to get to the bottom of exploring it. After reading this book, I invite you to imagine how rich it would be to also interview many other practitioners of the religion in Crow Glen, setting their diverse accounts and experiences into dialogue with each other and with the ones told here.

The only thing I have added to the chapters on spirituality is a *Glossary* at the back of the book explaining about fifty technical terms that the interviewee uses to describe the spiritual practices done in the Glen of the Crow. This specialised vocabulary or mini-language of Irish Catholicism is of course second nature to practitioners. But to non-Catholics, some of it would be as obscure as medieval Gaelic. The *monstrance*, *special intentions*, *favours granted*, *plenary indulgences*, *the Communion of Saints*... Like any other language, it's easy when you know how, but double Dutch if you're not initiated.

That language was as intense as the incense and the stained glass artworks in the windows: *'Turn then most gracious advocate thine eyes of mercy towards us and after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Oh clement, oh loving, oh sweet Virgin Mary'*. As a small child I bumbled away, reciting that whole prayer with enthusiasm while understanding as yet only four words of it: 'eyes', 'fruit', 'loving' and 'sweet'. The rest - 'advocate', 'mercy', 'exile',

‘womb’, ‘clement’ and ‘virgin’ - were words I didn’t know yet even in ordinary English, not to mind in their specifically Catholic meanings.

Young people today may have heard the Glossary’s terms before, but how many really know what a *plenary indulgence* is, or how their ancestors went about getting one? Or what a *scapular* does? Or what exactly *First Fridays* are?

Even to those for whom that spiritual tongue holds no secrets, I make no apology for including a Glossary, if only for the sheer enjoyment of it. Standing back and seeing those fifty technical spiritual terms listed together can help us to view our own culture from a distance, as if we were studying the culture of a Vietnamese hill-tribe, or that of a laboratory of computer programmers in California’s Silicon Valley.

The Glossary reminds us just how complex, intricate and learned this particular set of religious practices was and is. And that it is a universe away from the secular, scientific-materialist worldview that’s mainstreamed in the Western world today.

I wanted to hold up a mirror to the sheer complexity of that spiritual universe that I was raised in until I emigrated at nineteen, in the late 1980s. For me, stepping from that worldview into the secular worldview of the universities where I worked abroad was a leap like growing up in an Amazonian river-tribe and being dropped into the Chinese Imperial Court of the fifteenth century.

That is why Crow Glen’s religious practices seemed to me a genuinely fascinating story in anthropological terms. They are as dense and complex a religious culture as any you could seek to study anywhere on earth. Now I finally had the time to go and use the tools of my trade on my own people. I would go back to Gleann and research this matter on the ground, by listening at length to people’s local accounts of their own spiritual practices.

SPIRITUALITY

I’ve just described my intellectual motivation. But I had also felt for some time that there may be more *spiritual* truth - more spiritual accuracy and reality - to the traditional Gleann practices than they tend to be given credit for nowadays.

Today, Ireland's ordinary secular culture is comfortable with 'New Age' practices and ideas. Notions like personal development, inner relaxation, healing vibes, attuning to one's higher self, listening to one's inner life and intuitions... Even angels or spirit guides may be acceptable along with your acupuncture or Pilates. Those things are casually fashionable at the moment, an easy-going norm. But the notion of *novenas*, *transubstantiation*, *the Glorious Mysteries* and *mantillas* - maybe not so much! Although they're still practiced by many, these symbols and practices are not 'fashionable' right now.

But my studies around the world had shown me two things. Firstly, that the various maps of the spirit world, worked out separately by people on different continents in different eras, are in fact remarkably similar. And secondly, that the differences lie mostly in each religion's degree of sophistication and maturity. At one end of the spectrum there are rigid, dogmatic religions that offer primarily *group* activity and identity. They have a narrow code of group practices that are policed with severity and punishments, both on earth and in heaven. They tend to rule most brutally of all over the two aspects of human life that seem to haunt them the most - sexuality and freedom of speech. Extreme examples would be the cruel 'Spanish Inquisition' run by the Catholic Church from the fifteenth century, or the present-day religious fanatics issuing a death-sentence against a British author for writing a novel.⁴

By contrast, spiritual activity at the other end of the spectrum tends to emphasise the *inner* prayer life of diverse, thoughtful individuals. That tends to yield *direct* personal experience of spiritual beings. And they in turn - when encountered - tend to communicate above all compassion, forgiveness and kindness, not condemnation. Genuine familiarity with these spiritual beings tends to yield a religion that offers a wide diversity of practices, and a palette of gentle wisdoms and insights rather than one severe truth laid down by the religion's '*one book, one law*'.

Of course, even individual religions - Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism - can and do contain within them these two extremes. They have all at times been expressed as militant, aggressive, repressive regimes, while at other moments producing gentle mystical traditions that encounter spirit directly and welcome the diversity of life.

4 This death sentence was issued against novelist Salman Rushdie in 1998 in response to his novel *The Satanic Verses*. He was moved around the world in hiding under international police protection for the next 20 years, with regular attempts on his life.

For some reason, it seems that religious systems that encourage individuals to cultivate their own direct, inner experience of the spirit world tend to yield a very diverse set of spiritual practices, like the different plants growing in a wildflower meadow. *Inner* seems to equate with or yield diversity. Whereas more ‘outward-focused’ religions, where mobs shout out the supremacy of their *one god*, seem allergic to diversity.

Over the years, when I used to weigh up my memory of the Gleann an Phréacháin practitioners against this spectrum of world religions that I met during my work abroad, it always niggled at the back of my mind that the practices that I remembered Crow Glenners doing seemed quite sophisticated on all the counts described above.⁵ Yet that was not how I saw rural Irish Catholics depicted in the media or in literature, where they seemed more like a flock of naïve victims led around passively by dominant priests.

Far from being passive or nostalgic, the local speaker in this book, unprompted by me, stands back and points out many ways that the religion practiced in Gleann has evolved and matured over time, partly through the influence of practitioners themselves. She sees it as having changed in many ways for the better, even over the last couple of decades.

Another criterion for assessing the maturity of a religious practice is to what extent its forms and symbols are just empty material habits. Many religions use statues, sacred objects and images, chants and recitations. But there is a spectrum of spiritual maturity around these too. On the one hand are people of any religion who, even if they hardly realise it themselves, are just ‘going through the motions’ as they mutter prayers absentmindedly and bow to statues.

But on the other hand, there are people for whom prayers and sacred objects are just triggers or trampolines that catapult them into intense inner experiences of spiritual energies, or encounters with higher spiritual beings. The Crow Glen speaker herself evokes this perennial ‘problem’ with religion - how it can veer between those two extremes even for an individual practitioner at different moments. Few human beings in any culture can maintain a state of mystic exaltation the whole time. Striving to keep one’s practices fresh must surely be a daily task for even the most accomplished practitioners - even for the Pope or the Dalai Lama.

⁵ This book doesn’t discuss the Irish Catholic Church as an institution at all. That is a different matter outside the scope of the book. I’m talking here about the actual spiritual life that I saw Crow Glen practitioners elaborating for themselves, albeit within the Catholic Church.

But in my opinion, there is another, even higher, measure of a religion's maturity. That is whether its practitioners can tolerate a degree of gentle humour around it, whether generated by themselves or by others. I was not prepared for how much we laughed during the time that I spent working with my Crow Glen interviewee on this book's spiritual chapters. The recordings are peppered with moments where she has us both creased with laughter while she talks about her own sincere religious practices and the doing of them. ⁶ Some of that humour you'll see in her chapters. But some of it was so witty, and told in such an *Irish* way, that I was unable to squeeze it down into words on the page afterwards. No-one will doubt the depth or sincerity of the speaker's spiritual practice, but she was so funny about it. To me that is a rare and unfakeable sign of a mature spiritual practice.

Different worlds

Whether we're talking about local religion or local history, the fact will always remain that I don't and can't ever really know *your* Crow Glen, and you can't ever know mine. There *is* no 'one' Crow Glen, just as there is no 'one' New York and no 'one' London. That is the rich mystery of place.

A place is a prism. Every individual who is living out their life in it is having a different view, experience and perspective on it. Even if they live in the place in the same era, right next door to each other, one person may be the most privileged, dominant individual benefitting from all of the place's resources while their neighbour may be entirely dominated, exploited or enslaved.

Even in one village at any given era, people can have radically different experiences of poverty and of privilege, as we will see in this book. Some will have right-wing, and some left-wing, politics. Some will decide to take

⁶ This is a rare and special quality, but unfortunately the opposite is not so rare. An extreme example in recent years was when religious fundamentalists broke into the offices of the humourist Parisian newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* and executed 12 journalists at their desks, as well as injuring 11. It was because they had drawn cartoons that the attackers found disrespectful towards their religion. That event may seem almost laughably extreme but it had the desired effect. Since then, such gestures of terror have successfully narrowed the scope of freedom of speech, debate and satire even in Western democracies (Sam Berkhead, 'How the *Charlie Hebdo* attack has changed free speech in France and the US', *International Journalists' Network*, 8-1-2016).

direct political action to try to bring change, and others will keep their head down hoping that the winds of history will blow over them. Across the chapters and centuries in this book, we will see all these dynamics playing out in Crow Glen.

Like a honeycomb, a place contains as many versions of itself as there are people who have ever lived in it. Each has experienced it uniquely through their own eyes and circumstances. Each person holds inside themselves a microcosm that is *their* version of the place, at their unique moment in time. For some, it's a lovely place where they had a great time. For others, they had a terrible time there that they want to forget. As you will see repeatedly in this book, those two people may have lived in the same place 300 years apart, or they may have rubbed shoulders there at the same time. (So there is, of course, no one '*Spiritual Universe of Crow Glen*', as this book's title goes. There are as many 'spiritual universes' in Crow Glen as people who have ever lived there.)

A recent philosophy called postmodernism claims that all versions of places and everyone's account of their experiences are equally valid. But in today's climate of dangerous fake news, we've learned that we can and must also safeguard any verifiable facts that are available.

Proper historians stick with the facts. Forensically, like police detectives, they try to record: what actually happened here for certain, regardless of what anyone thought or felt about it? It's those kind of facts in the Glen of the Crow that the chapters of this book retrieve from under the blanket of forgetfulness.

But remember, it's still true that one person's Gleann an Phréacháin will never be another's. Yours is your own to tell. And my precise, personal version of the religion will never be the same as your version of it. But what we can do is to build bridges across those distances by being interested in each other. We can listen to each other's descriptions of how we see the world.

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Crow flies in

Crow flies in and settles with a little jump onto his nest in the Beech canopy that runs the length of Crow Glen Village. Crow and his people have lived up here since time began, in the ancient forest, long before the two-leggeds moved in.

His black liquid eye is ringed with yellow. On its shiny surface are reflected two dozen centuries that have played out down below, where the two-leggeds live their days. Things forgotten, things remembered, things much sung about, things never yet told. Sitting above them, Crow has witnessed it all.

Today, Crow senses that someone is coming from the South. Crow knows these things, as sure as wind and rain. A returner, someone who's been away a long time. A listener. One who stirs the pots of stories.

And he sees that others are coming too - from the West, from farther away. A dozen other returners.

Things are going to happen because of these returns. Layers of time are going to be stirred up.

Crow will keep one eye half-open tonight, looking on.



Chapter 1



RETURN TO CROW CLEN