

Ireland

of the Welcomes

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**The Hunt
Museum's new
home**

**A stone-mason's
house in
Ballycotton**

**Artists' centre
in Mayo**

**Cycling after
Beckett**



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ON THE PERIPHERY OF THE PERIPHERY

The Ballinglen Arts Foundation by Alannah Hopkin

Keys are left in front doors, cars stay unlocked day and night. On the pavement outside the butcher's shop an old, one-eyed sheepdog dozes. In Polke's bar-grocery children choose penny sweets and stout black gum boots are lined up outside the counter. I buy an apple from Brian Polke which is then taken into the back to be washed and dried before wrapping.

Like many another small Irish village, Ballycastle, Co Mayo is an untidy mix of shops, pubs, private houses and solid, grey-plastered buildings dating mainly from the early 19th century. About one third of them are empty. It takes less than a minute to drive down the main street. The Céide Fields Interpretative Centre is five miles west of town, and that is where most cars are headed.



Peter Maxwell and Margo Dolan, curators of the Ballinglen Arts Centre, and below, the landscape of North Mayo looking towards Benwee Head

Photographs by Brian Lynch

The village of Ballycastle on the coast of North Mayo is a quiet place of 350 souls, according to the Parish Priest. It faces due north, and the next stop across the Atlantic Ocean must be Iceland. The nearest town is Ballina, some sixteen miles to the east, four hours from Dublin. Former President Mary Robinson, born in Ballina, dubbed the Ballycastle area "the periphery of the periphery".

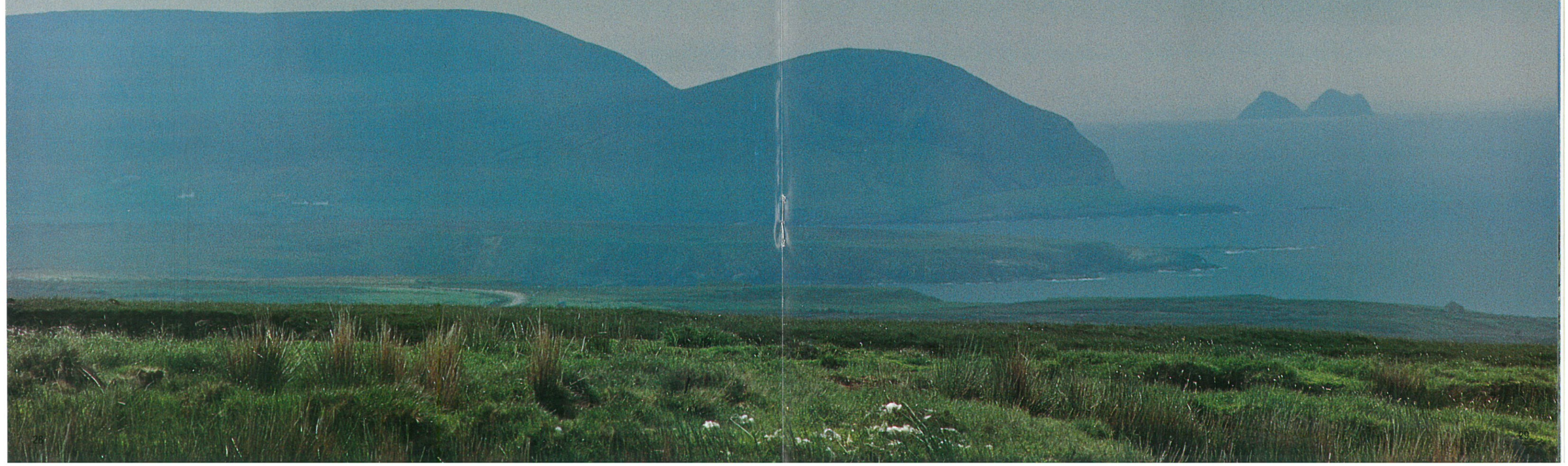
The treeless country on the Céide Fields side of Ballycastle is a bleak stretch of bog and mountain with a long history. Man has farmed this land for five thousand years. Up to the middle of the last century it was heavily populated, but following repeated failure of the potato crop, which formed the staple diet, famine and fever stripped the hills of the small subsistence farmers, starting a process of emigration from the land that continues to this day.

To the east of Ballycastle the land is gentler and more sheltered. A few determined farmers still make a hard

living here. There are rocky strands and the occasional sandy beach, good cliff walks with caves and blow-holes, but this is not a popular tourist destination. It is too exposed to what is euphemistically known as "weather" – a fast-changing combination of wind and rain, often a cutting north wind and sheets of horizontal rain, carried in from the Atlantic. The best thing you can say about such weather is that it is unlikely to last long. Some days you can predict the changes by reading the enormous sky as the clouds roll in across the sea; on other days there is just a steely grey overhead.

Such weather does not favour normal visitor activities such as walks and picnics and swimming. However, there is one kind of visitor who quickly becomes fascinated by the panorama of wild, open skies above the North Mayo coast – the artist.

This was the conclusion that Margo Dolan and Peter Maxwell reached on their first visit to Ballycastle in 1981.



Throughout the art-boom years of the 1980s, the couple were trading successfully as Dolan/Maxwell Inc., running a large gallery in Philadelphia and then a second one in Manhattan. Having fallen for the quiet charms of Ballycastle, they subsequently bought an old cottage, built by the Congested Districts Board at the turn of the century. Peter Maxwell, a self-taught architect, restored it to a high standard of comfort while retaining its simple, practical aesthetic.

Margo Dolan, the younger of the two, has an art history background, while Maxwell, who describes himself as an auto-didact, left art school after two years and worked as an editor and architectural designer. They are a complementary sort of couple. Their cottage is

a television-free zone, with stacks of books and CDs on every available surface. Restrictions of space do not stop them from being generous, enthusiastic hosts. Peter enjoys talking, while Margo likes to listen and throw in the occasional comment, usually a wry one. Peter is big on theory and analysis, while Margo likes to get things done.

The art world was taking its toll. The contrast between Ballycastle, a place they quickly became attached to, as much for its courteous, kindly people as for its spectacular maritime skies, and Manhattan, which they both hated with a passion, was becoming too much. They wanted to move to Ballycastle full-time, but in order to do so, they had to find a way of making a living. Peter takes up the story:

'We had three goals. The first was how can we help the village which has been sapped by long-term emigration? If we were shoe-makers we would have started a shoe factory. But we didn't know anything about that. We do know about the art world, we have a lot of contacts, and we are known and trusted. We looked around and said this may not be a good place for tourists, but artists will like it. That will help the village, boosting the local economy by increasing the number of visitors, and it will help the artist. Our second goal was to introduce artists to an area they didn't know, and hope that it would be good for their work.

'So after a lot of thought and consultation, we set up The Ballinglen Arts Foundation (named after a local river),

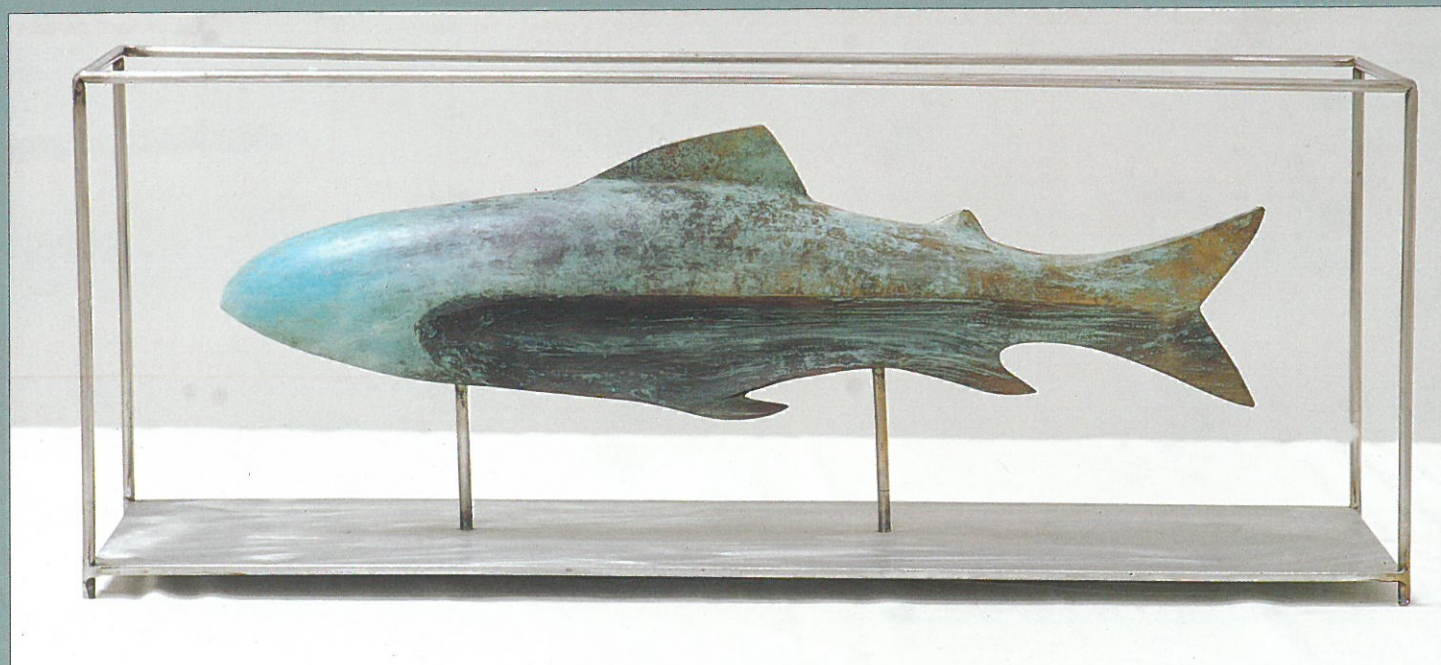
a non-profit making organisation which invites artists to come and live here for three to six weeks, and provides a studio in which they can work. They live in houses that we rent locally, and we encourage them to bring family and friends in order to increase their in-put into the local economy.

'The third reason we set up the Foundation is that, eventually, it will provide a small arts administrator's salary for Margo, which will give us enough money to live here. I'm 68, and I am on a small pension, but contrary to the impression some people have, we are not independently wealthy, and we couldn't do this unless it was providing us with some sort of income.'



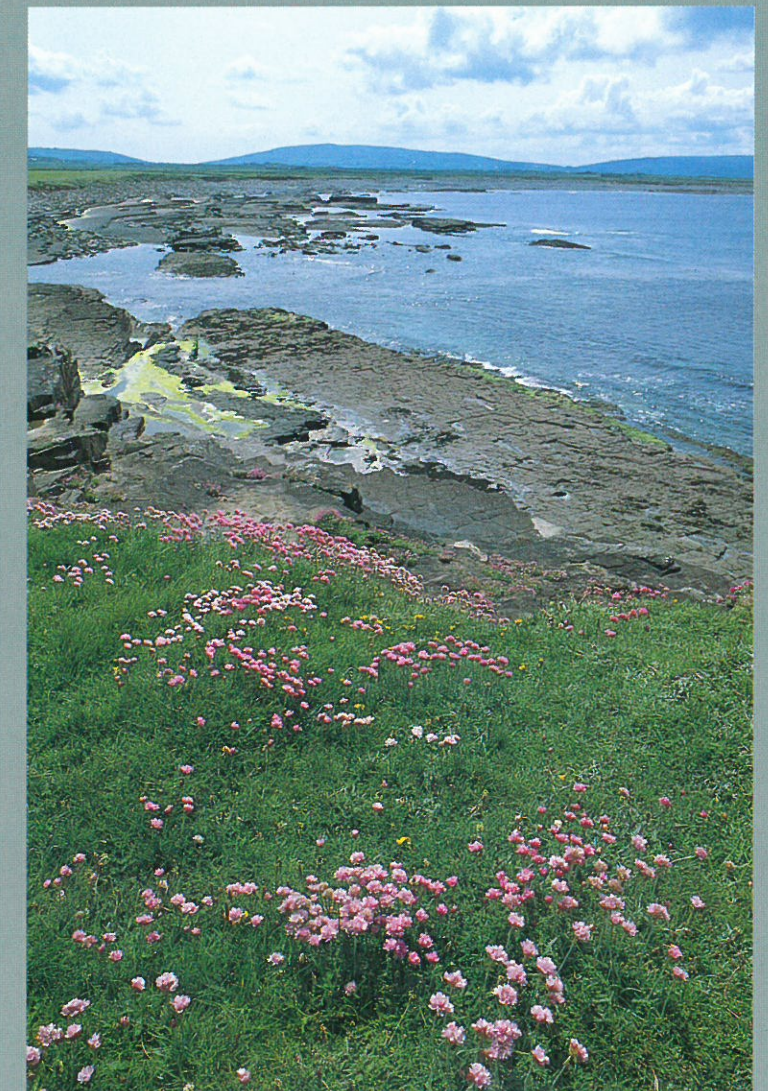
Ballinglen Arts Centre on the main street of Ballycastle. The first building since the 19th century, these houses blend in very well with their neighbours

(Below) Conor Fallon's Trout, bronze and mild steel, 1994



Neysa Grassi, from Philadelphia, working in one of Ballinglen's well-lit studios

The vibrant colours of sea-pinks and rock pools of the North Mayo coastline provide inspiration for many of the artists



In retrospect it all sounds so easy; in fact it has taken six years of stubborn determination and considerable risk-taking to reach this stage. Dolan and Maxwell keep a detailed tally of how many 'bed nights' the Foundation generates for the area. This has grown from 190 in 1992, to 2,347 in 1997.

Just how much the Ballinglen Arts Foundation has achieved on the artistic front, was brought home at their first major Dublin exhibition, *Landscape & Recollection*, held last year at the RHA Gallagher Gallery. A full colour catalogue accompanied a selection of 88 works by 29 artists from Ireland and the UK produced in response to their residency in Ballycastle. The show included well-established names like Breon O'Casey, Seán McSweeney,

Conor Fallon and Nancy Wynne-Jones, English artists whose work is rarely seen here like Ken Kiff and Norman Ackroyd, and younger Irish artists. Whether abstract or representational or somewhere in between, all the works, which were of a consistently high quality, testified in some way to the strength of the North Mayo landscape and skies. Thanks to Dolan and Maxwell's international connections, other exhibitions of Ballinglen work have been mounted in Belfast, Paris, Hong Kong, London, New York and elsewhere.

Every artist who visits the Foundation leaves at least one work for the Ballinglen archive. By the end of this year some 70 artists, some directly invited by the Foundation, others selected after submitting a simple application form,

will have taken part in the Fellowships. The archive is one physical aspect of the foundation. The other is the Ballinglen Arts Centre in the main street, which currently houses four artists' studios, administration space, and a gallery. Eventually it will also have a fine art reference library and, in a joint venture with Mayo County Council, the village lending library, which will double as a court room. This is the first new building to go up in Ballycastle since the 19th century, yet it blends in so well with the rest of the village that most first-time visitors drive straight past.

The story of how Dolan and Maxwell reached this point is as much a story of people as of a place. One name which recurs time and again is that of Father Moyles,

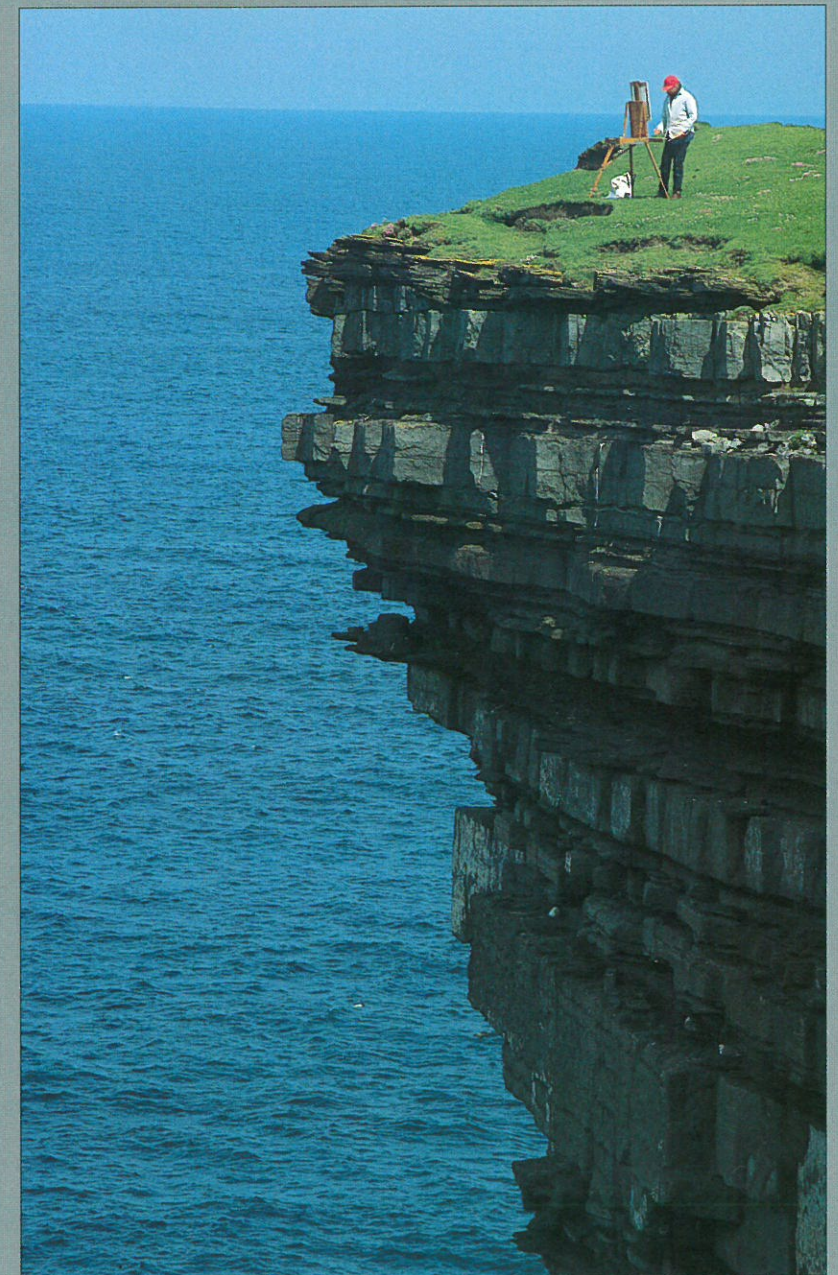
Ballycastle's Parish Priest, now retired. He listened to their plans, and heard about their search for suitable studio space. Instead of dismissing them as lunatics, he led them to the recently vacated school in the main street and said 'Isn't this exactly what you are looking for?' It was, and it was an invaluable stop gap until they were able to build their centre three years later.

The Foundation received a start-up grant from the American Ireland Funds, and currently receives £25,000 a year from the Irish Arts Council towards running costs. The first grant for the building project came from the Enterprise Board of Mayo County Council. However, there were strings attached, as Margo, who handles all the finances, explains:



David Brewster, from Connecticut, oil painting of a cottage interior is entitled "Chiffonier" 1994

Wendy Prellwitz, from Cambridge MA, takes her art literally to the edge in the gravity-defying setting of Downpatrick Head!



'The £60,000 was the end of the first tranche of European money, and it had to be spent by December 31. We managed to get a bit of an extension, but the problem was we didn't get given the £60,000 until we had spent £110,000. We ourselves lent the project about £12,000, and then we had to borrow. It was an unbelievable juggling act.'

Peter continues the story: 'I went up to Dublin and spoke to our advisers there. Because we are Americans, we're not Irish and we don't pretend to be, we spent a lot of time asking for advice. The people I spoke to in

Dublin said not to start building without having the money to finish. Another set of advisers, including Nick Robinson, our patron, and Des Mahon, the County Manager, said start. If you don't start you'll never get anywhere. Once the building, or part of it, is up, people won't let it die. So we said, okay, it's an Irish solution, but we thought they were absolutely right. When we started we had enough money to get us half-way.

'Then the bank refused us a bridging loan. All we needed was maybe £10,000 which we could pay back as

the £60,000 came in, but they said no. That was the lowest point, but the deciding factor that made us stick with it was a neighbour, Frank Walker, an elderly farmer, who's always shown an interest in what we were doing. He came by on a Friday and asked us what was going on, and I told him about the bank. A couple of days later he came up to us and said I'll give you the bridging loan. He lent us £30,000 at six per cent a year, and we had three years to pay it back, which we did. If it hadn't been for him, I don't know what would have happened.'

The other part of the equation was

the response of the artists. Were Dolan and Maxwell right in their conviction that this place would appeal to artists, or had their own attachment to Ballycastle distorted their vision? Peter still remembers the suspense on the day that he spent driving their first visiting artist, Bill Freeland from Pennsylvania, around the area. 'It was a terrible day, in that there was no storm, just this dull grey sky, and Bill was silent all the way. I was afraid he was hating it, and when we got back to the village I said well? And he said Thank you. This has been one of the most inspiring days of my life.'

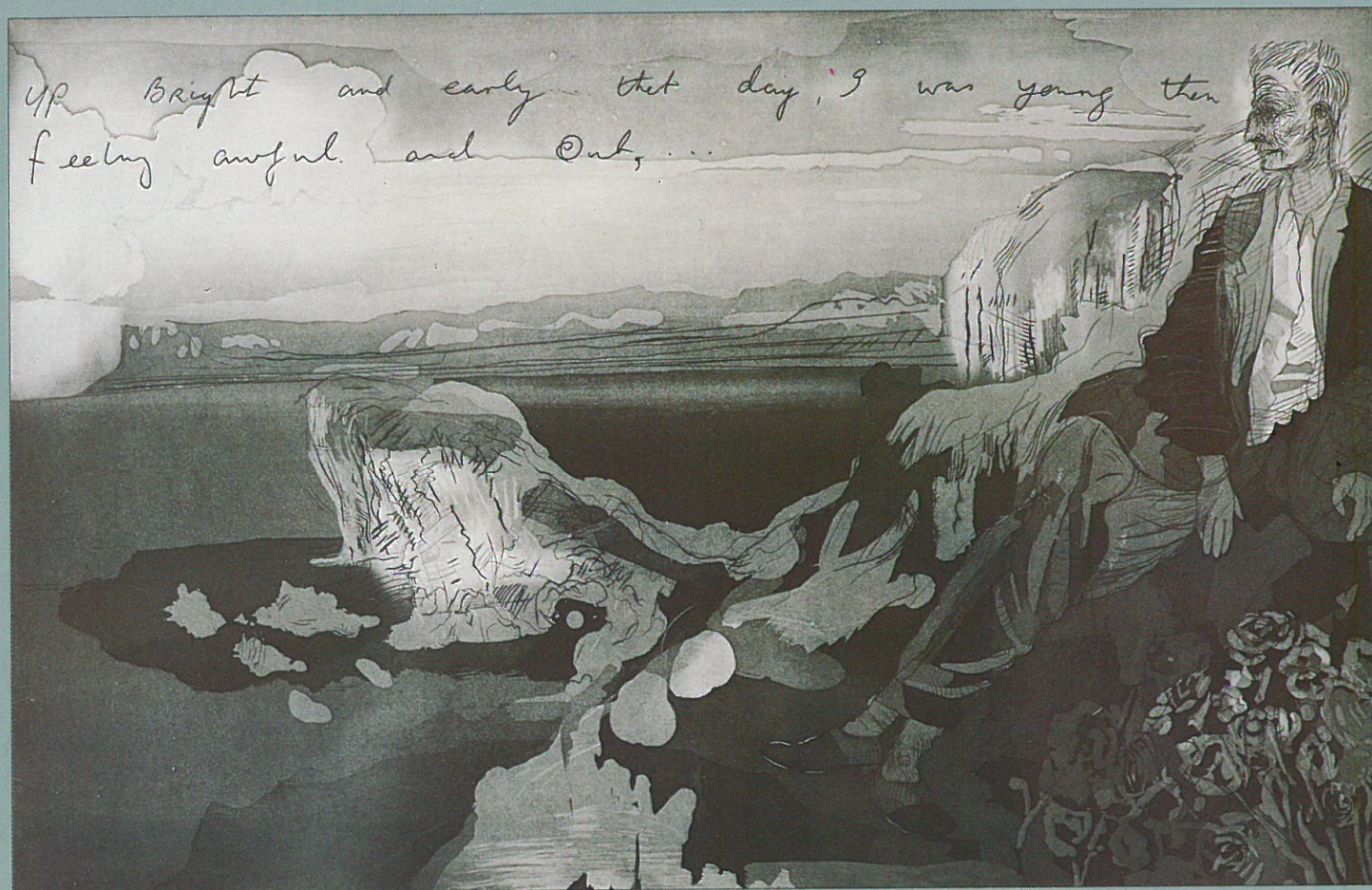
Freeland and his artist partner Magda Vitale subsequently bought a ruined farmhouse which they have restored. Bill is now an Irish resident, spending at least six months of the year in Ballycastle. They are just part of a phenomenon that is making an unobtrusive but significant contribution to the revitalisation of a remote rural community.



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Co. Antrim artist Diarmuid Delargy created a series of engravings based on an unpublished work by Samuel Beckett. This one is entitled 'From an Abandoned Work I', 1996



Peter Brooke, from Vermont, visited Ballinglen in 1997 when he painted Stralagagh Bog

Below, the light and expanse of cloud and coastline gives visiting artists ever-changing vistas

