

Over the last ten years or so stewardship of natural and cultural heritage has been pitted against economic prowess, as though representing contradictory aspirations. The unchecked attacks on the Irish landscape by the Celtic Tiger were fuelled in part by the belief that heritage is, by its very nature, an impediment to progress, to wealth, and to the modernisation of Ireland. This is a fallacy. Genuine, confident modernity is founded upon wisdom that runs much deeper; wisdom that is as comfortable looking to the past as it is gazing into the future. Genuine modernity embraces and values the mosaic of peoples and places, and recognises how vital and yet how delicate a blending it is. Genuine modernity is based on generational experience, investment in knowledge, and the courage and confidence to act on what we know to be right and not simply what is politically expedient or will turn a quick buck. It acknowledges that our surroundings are a reflection of ourselves and a measure of how we are pulling together as a society. We know better than to destroy our surroundings, pollute our waters, landfill our natural habitats, swamp our villages and seaside resorts with carelessly designed housing estates, and wipe out the relics of our history. Turning a quick buck at the expense of our environment is a form of cultural bankruptcy because it flies in the face of *our* common sense and destroys the very things that sustain us.

A tremendous amount of academic thinking has been devoted to investigating senses of place; the ways in which people associate themselves with places and are in turn associated with those places. Cultural geographers, psychologists, anthropologists and so on, all agree on the unique importance to our species of place. Places are where identities are forged, proclaimed *and* sustained. Our lives are woven through places, turning them into rich tapestries of social and historical remembrance. They are our reference point. Asking the question 'where were you when John F. Kennedy was assassinated or when Elvis Presley died?' is not just using a place to trigger memories, but is also affirming harmonic cultural and historical responses - what we are really saying is this event means the same thing to both of us, and therefore we are as one. Some places echo with the resonances of our reflections on the mysteries of human existence and our place in the cosmos. These ancient monuments and landscapes represent the earliest chapters of human thought and understanding. We sever ourselves from them at our peril for to do so is to cast ourselves adrift from the historical and intellectual continuum, from our heritage, from value systems that have passed the test of time.

This sentiment is captured succinctly in the title of an award-winning book by Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*. While Basso's book is about toponymic wisdom in Apache New Mexico, we have our own word for it, *Senchas*. *Senchas* refers to the patina of age and history that attaches to places and gives them historical meaning. The keys to unlock the wisdom that sits in places, however, are not always ready to hand. Through its grants scheme the Heritage Council funds research which helps us all understand our cultural and natural heritage so that we can better manage it and draw wisdom from it in a responsible and sustainable way. As the economic Tower of Babel collapses around us it is more critical than ever that we retain our compass. A good place to start is to remind ourselves of George Santayana's paradigm: 'those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'. We have to imagine a new and sustainable future and this is a journey that starts by reminding ourselves of what is really valuable.

Conor Newman *Chairman*

