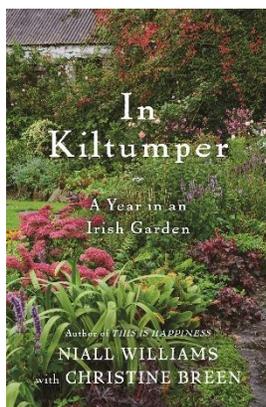


'In Kiltumper' Review: A Garden Grows in Ireland

On a hillside in County Clare, a garden marks a near-lost function of the landscape.

By Dominique Browning
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The idea that we should retreat from the world to cultivate our own gardens now seems thoroughly inadvisable. Even on our tiny patches of land, we are inextricably enmeshed with one another; there's no escaping global sorrows. This is one of several thorny dilemmas novelist Niall Williams tangles with in a moving and surprisingly provocative new memoir, "In Kiltumper: A Year in an Irish Garden." Its byways are as meandering as the garden, winding through meditations on soil, tea, varieties of rain and, this being Ireland, wandering into the mystic. Mr. Williams's wife, Christine Breen, offers brisk, often witty, running commentary; she is a knowledgeable gardener; her illustrations lend a delicate touch. This memoir won't teach you to garden, but it will show you a way of living in and through a garden. As Mr. Williams puts it, "Home is where you dig."



This couple's narrative is more than a January-December chronicle, it is the result of decades of care, "a rich and precarious" 34 years. The authors have previously collaborated on four nonfiction books about a townland where Ms. Breen's ancestors go back to the mid-18th century. Kiltumper, a "lumpy hillside" in County Clare, has fewer than a dozen houses. This is a place where a neighbor will share water when your well runs dry, or watch your dog—for a year. "In Kiltumper" was written just as Mr. Williams's seductively lyrical novel "This Is Happiness" was being published in 2019. They await its reception nervously. They have reached their 60s, the fall of life. Ms. Breen has struggled for years through cancer treatments. Two

children are grown and gone to New York; their parents long for their return and wonder who will carry on.

The Williams-Breen garden sounds like a romantic affair, blowsy in the best ways, despite copious efforts at staking. Paths on their property carve through meadows and groves of trees, and there are colorful beds full of the old beloved beauties: poppies, delphiniums, lupins, helianthus, peonies, roses and more. Mr. Williams is at once helpful and shambolic, absent-minded about herbs. “I would never have thought of adding lavender to potato salad,” Ms. Breen slyly remarks when he shows her which plant he thought was rosemary.

He can’t remember the names of anything, they are X and Y in his “poverty of names.” There is one name, though, that, like a thread of silver, glints through this tapestry of treasures, and that is “Chris.” “In Kiltumper” is as much a book about the cherishing of a marriage as it is about the love of a place. If gardening is mostly about noticing, Mr. Williams writes, “I notice *because Chris noticed it.*”

The book opens at the New Year, “when time past and time future are present in the same moment.” Mr. Williams’s intention is to “live with purpose.” He is a readerly writer, as I think of it; one of the joys of his prose is the generous thrum of other voices—T.S. Eliot, R.W. Emerson, even, in the occasional lilt of a sentence, the King James Bible. Writing about how gardeners grow into the shape of their gardens: “Our bones are become like the branches of the tree peony.”

“In Kiltumper” is a heartfelt paean to a disappearing way of life. Dread clouds these pages. Mr. Williams reads the latest United Nations climate reports with a feeling of “self-recrimination, and then loss. A sickening feeling of loss. The world is losing.” But to the crises we have created by burning fossil fuels, Mr. Williams insists, we must add the thoughtless depredation we are inflicting on our landscapes in order to *fix* the problems: “How much of the world do we have to spoil in order to save it?” Two massive wind turbines will be sited on a hill less than a third of a mile from Kiltumper, joining some 300 wind-power stations across Ireland. The planners have

deemed that the town is an area designated as “not of scenic value—a surprise to us, and I have to admit a little hurtful.”

While Mr. Williams is too thoughtful to veer onto the off-ramp of climate denial or despair, he sincerely laments “the frailty of everything.” In Ireland, bird and hare and bee populations are crashing. He worries that nowhere in the calculation of the cost of green energy are there lines in the budget for the irreparable damage done to precious habitat.

Before long, ancient winding roads are straightened to facilitate the one-day delivery time of the turbines. A healthy old ash tree, over 50 feet tall, is cut down. Ireland has one of the lowest percentages of forest in Europe, Mr. Williams notes, clearly but a matter of head-scratching among government officials. Bulldozers lay waste, in 30 minutes, to centuries-old stone walls, the bones of ancestral farmers’ fields. (It is impossible not to think of the perilous state of Ms. Breen’s bones, embrittled by chemotherapy.) Mr. Williams tries to rally, but his spirit is “exhausted from trying to find positives.”

Are this couple’s losses too small, their accommodations to change too personal, to be worthy of consideration? The gardeners hear and feel the ceaseless whump of the blades; their night sky is reddened by a cordon of turbine-area warning lights. Ireland’s regulations governing proximity of turbines to dwellings are lax compared to those of Germany or Denmark. But land-based wind and solar “farms” have become contentious everywhere, dividing even environmentalists with the sacrifice of farmland and forests to escalating demands for power. Mr. Williams makes no mention of Moneypoint, 23 miles away, or its attendant pollution and emissions; once Ireland’s largest coal-burning power plant, it has been displaced by wind and gas. But then again, he has not yet gotten used to the pylons of crackling power lines installed 30 years ago.

Mr. Williams worries that he has a miserable case of NIMBYism, an affliction of the elite the world over. He thinks that turbines should be offshore, in no one’s backyard. He parses out a more complicated answer—to which I will not do the disservice of a summary—over the course of the year, circling and snagging and

untethering his arguments, ultimately arriving at an important question for our times: “What is the countryside for?”

We seem increasingly unable to decide communally how to proceed thoughtfully, even as we know, individually, that we must do *something* (if not, how soon will we be forced to do *anything and everything?*) to protect our children, our homes, our planet. Can’t we be more deliberative, honoring the entangled nature of our lives in the natural world? “In the rush to embrace a greener way,” Mr. Williams concludes, “it is the actual green places that count least.” Each reader will have her own arguments with Mr. Williams. But we ought not pretend there are easy answers. So many of us, these days, are rightly fearful for the future. In Kiltumper, things turn out “not so bad.” Not yet, anyway. The garden remains a place of solace—the “oneness of all of us, gardeners, everywhere, tending to plant and soil, fills me with a real and tangible hope.” We can only hope all of our gardens continue to be places that, as Mr. Williams writes, we can fill “with an immense gratitude that is another word for love.” And that this love finds ways to envelop all who can ill afford shelter from the coming storms, much less the pleasures of a garden.

—*Ms. Browning is the director of Moms Clean Air Force, an organization of more than a million parents fighting air pollution on behalf of children’s health and well-being.*