Rural Field Journal: West Cork and Kilkenny, November 2012

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What Is Rural – field trip reflections

Is rural the need for a septic tank, no mains water and being car dependent? Is the countryside a place of backwardness, ignorance and limitation? Is rural simply everything that urban is not, or should it be explained in terms of what it ought to be? Defining rural is much more complicated than I initially expected, and I am unable to provide a definitive response. The reality is that there is no one definition of rural and it is something different for everyone. Academic and policy definitions will be different to the perception of rural inhabitants or visitors to the countryside. Put vaguely, rural is a particular space influenced by culture; it is an identity and a fundamental way of life. Yet, we can ask if this is a social construct? There is a tension between rural and urban and outsiders may view the countryside as a space of leisure and recreation with natural beauty and attractiveness, and may have an idealised perception of innocence and a refuge from modernity and one of peace and quiet. This myth has encouraged tourism and in-migration to West Cork, but the reality is that the same social and economic processes may be identified here, but they get a different reaction.

What is the difference in size between a rural and urban space, and can this be a simple headcount and how can boundaries be drawn to define such areas? Population figures will not explain the socio-economic atmosphere. How can we investigate the relationship between settlements and their function? Will there be an obvious difference in land-use and density and will these characteristics change as we move further away from urban pressures? Will there be an in-between space (urban-rural)? Are rural areas different from each other or is it okay to create typologies as in the National Spatial Strategy (rural under strong urban influence, stronger rural areas, structurally weak areas, and predominantly dispersed settlement areas? Such boundaries will have to be fuzzy and merely indicative and subject to change. How can Northern Ireland have a more strict rural planning policy than that of the Republic of Ireland when the landscape is very much the same?

If a rural person goes into the city, will they stand out as rural? Do rural people have different community values and do they act differently? Can you live in rural Ireland and not belong there?

How do you illustrate what rural is? What is the quintessential symbol of rural Ireland (or West Cork)?

Figure 1: A brainstorming session at the beginning of the rural module, aimed at presenting our perceptions of rural Ireland

Figure 2: Where Have The People Gone?

Figure 3: A Harsh Landscape

Figure 4: The Importance of Fishing at Baltimore Harbour

To be rural, live in a rural place and follow a rural way of life
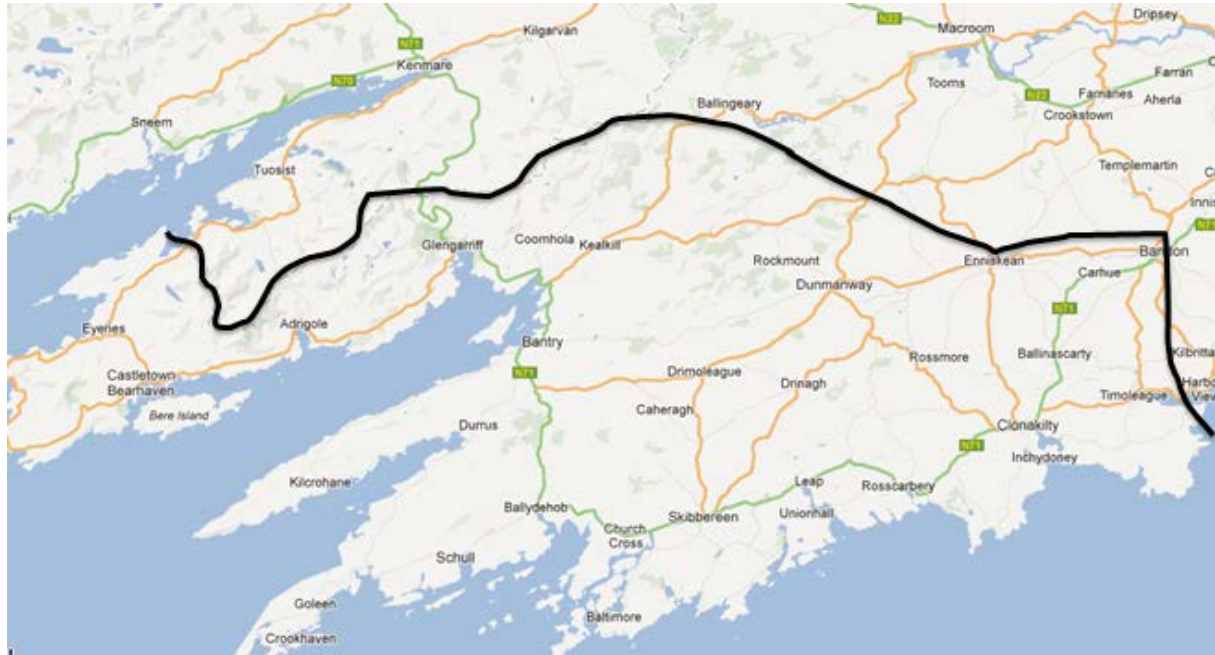
What and Where is West Cork?

Figure 5: Is This the West Cork Border?

Figure 6: The significance of place is evident at Kilmichael, where the IRA ambushed the British Army

It has become clear from the fieldtrip that West Cork has fuzzy and mobile boundaries and is many things to different people (social and cultural groups). Perhaps West Cork is more a character than a specific place. Officially, West Cork stretches from Courtmacsherry, Bandon, Enniskeane, Gougane Barra, to the Kerry bounds and the Beara Peninsula (Smyth, 1989).

It has already been established that you cannot just try to draw a precise boundary around rural areas, and you cannot simply identify essential characteristics of a rural society, and this is certainly the case for West Cork. It can even be said that West Cork stretches beyond West Cork, as Cork City has received so many West Cork families for labour and it has taken West Cork produce, but also, Cobh has significance as it was the farewell point for so many West Cork people who emigrated. Cork Airport is the contemporary equivalent and although these places are not of West Cork, they are part of the narrative.

West Cork is the meeting point for a group of overlying worlds that together form a polynuclear rural region. Places, objects, traditions, practices, and people come together and are acknowledged as being of West Cork, and this has influenced the way people of the region live their lives and identify themselves. These symbols vary from the colourful fuchsia, to the deep harbour at Bantry Bay, to the rivers and valleys, and the historical railway lines.

So what about the influence of the British Empire? West Cork has been the set for historical events and has witnessed war, violence, poverty, deprivation and emigration, as well as peace and prosperity. The landscape can be read and is a treasure-trove of ruins and anecdotes, and this set has recently been used for film.

West Cork seems to claim everything good and proud, and as Crossbarry has significance for the West Cork Flying Column, it seems that West Cork can stretch as far as Cork City's suburbs to collect its Free State militaristic memorabilia, to complement other sites of great victories and defeats, such as Kilmichael and Beal na Blath.

This seems unusual considering that Bandon (further west of Cork City) appears to be a mere gateway to, but not completely of, West Cork.

There is internal rivalry too, and the competition is so fierce that it is impossible to identify the capital of the Region. This conflict of administration and identity is joined by other conflicts or rivalries such as that of Gaelic games, linguistics in the Gaeltacth sub-region and also the sectarian divisions (which settlements are Protestant Towns?). While the later scuffles may not have the bite they once had, the landscape allows for the reading of these historically significant clashes (the juxtaposition of Catholic and Protestant churches for example).

West Cork is a patchwork of imagined social spaces that occupy the same area

Reading the Landscape

The Landscape As Visual

Gougane Barra is a spiritual place that will strike any visitor by its sense of serenity and natural beauty. Aside from this, there is archaeological and heritage significance. Today it is an attraction for tourists, yet it is difficult to read this on the landscape as there is no hotel with a promenade to take advantage to the setting, there is no interpretation centre or gift shop, but it is obvious that man has impacted on, and conquered this place. You can drive a bus up as far as the lake and turn comfortably and there is car parking facilities. Saint Finn Barr even built here. The landscape seems to carry on in ignorance. This place needs the protection of a planner.

The Borlin Valley was a durable and coarse landscape that was able to facilitate a variety of activity along its challenging road to Kilgarvan. Houses and agricultural buildings sunk into the landscape here. Forestry – not native but commercial – climbed up steep hills in a subtle way. Stubborn stone and rock refused to move out of the roads way and water seemed to flow in whichever direction it pleased. There was an almost ironic sense of a return to nature.

The rugged Beara Peninsula and the Healy Pass were similarly naturalistic. One would wonder if there was a reason to erect a fence here, but there was, and people have claimed these landscapes for particular land uses. There were conflicting interests here just as there are in a city centre or on the outskirts of a metropolitan area. If you had no map, you would not know you crossed a border, twice in one day.

The Landscape As Cultural

When we arrived at places such as Beal na Blath and Kilmichael it was asked of us to consider the landscape in broader terms. Yes, the landscape is a visual and tangible entity, but can it be cultural or historic and how does folklore impact place? If you really look, you can read the landscape differently, and you can almost hear gunshots ring out from the more strategic and defensive positions in the hillside. Yet, you wonder if that is because you read the plaque and saw the films, and you question whether these places need something more concrete for civil-war enthusiast and tourists.

What made Inchigeelagh and Ballingeary different? Did the water and wind have an Irish accent or is the Gaeltacht an imagined and socially constructed concept? It is certain that policy and intervention can positively discriminate in favour of our language, by drawing a virtual line of protection around it, but this was not obvious from the landscape.

Figure 7: Beal na Blath

Figure 8: The Bolvin Valley

Figure 9: Kilmichael

Figure 10: Gougane Barra

Lough Hyne

On our visit to Lough Hyne it became apparent that European Directives have impacted the landscape of West Cork. Lough Hyne is heavily controlled and its level of protection is second to none. The natural beauty of this place is unquestionable and it is no surprise that visitors and tourists are attracted to the area. This is an example of good planning, and the evidence is not in what has been built or developed here, rather it is the way development has been prohibited to keep this place successful. While the area is somewhat away from more utilised circulation routes, there is activity here. The recreation and leisure value of this amenity stands out at a first glance, and the evidence is a slipway for boats, a hot-blooded swimmer, walkers, and kayaks. The ecological value is more significant, and this was seen with the presence of birds, plants and notice boards indicating that so much more is happening in the water. Also the interpretative centre is off site in nearby Skibbereen town. The planner has to delicately balance competing interests for this area and it is probable that the demand to build homes to take advantage of the setting is an on-going call that has to be refused with a presumption against development that will impact the area's unique environment.

Figure 11: One of the Few Houses of Lough Hyne

Figure 13: A distant View Showing the Scarcity of Homes at Lough Hyne

Figure 12: An Earlier Example of a House at Lough Hyne

Why Did They Settle There?

In Baltimore we discussed how a small fishing village became efficient and organised enough to land fresh fish at the pier, move it by freight train and have it exported to London. Facilities including an ice plant at the harbour made this possible, and boatbuilding was another activity here. Baltimore is still a working pier, but new uses have also been introduced. Baltimore is a leisure destination for sailors, it is a commercial pier for ferries, and there is an associated land-use conflict at the water's edge as a result. True to its maritime history, Baltimore is a station for lifeboats. Baltimore is an example of a settlement where the reasons for settling there went with the last train out of the village. The question is how it ought to develop in the future? The village is under pressure today for residential (second homes), as well as other tourist demands such as accommodation and recreational and leisure uses.

While there is no obvious evidence of pirate pillaging or the effects of the famine (which hit the area badly, as we saw from our visit to "Spain"), heritage is important for the village's function and identity, and this issue can rise as high as UNESCO statutory level.

The relationship with the sea must be somewhat bitter-sweet: the sea was the reason for settling at Baltimore and gave its inhabitants food, a mode of transport and dreams. The sea was also a threat that saw pirates come to shore and instilled doubt in those who moved inland , and it was the sea that was used to transport loved ones away forever during the famine. Even today, the sea attract s tourists and activity but presents a danger for those who use and depend on it.

The sea is perhaps the community base too; not only is it the venue for the activities already mentioned, but it is also a rallying point when the lifeboat is deployed. What is striking here is the comparison with the city, and I wonder what it is that drives people to risk their lives for those of their community. If there was a fire in the city you would call the fire brigade, but you would not expect a response from a voluntary organisation, and this is special quality that is unique to the maritime community.

Figure 14: A Link to the Past

Figure 15: Cork's "Spain"

Figure 16: A Contemporary Baltimore

Figure 17: The Remains of a Community

Figure 18: A Working Pier

Settlement Hierarchy

A trip through the Irish countryside will be filled with the sight of one-off homes and catalogue bungalows that stretch between formal settlements. The urban pressures of the metropolitan city have caused these units to dot the landscape in a linear pattern along all routes, and the same goes for access routes into towns and villages. One-off homes were also visible along linear routes in more remote locations such as Adrigole, where it was difficult to define where the settlement began or ended.

On the N71 Cork-Kilarney road, we stopped at Churchcross to survey a settlement that was not quite a village, but a collection of one-off homes and we considered the challenges such as services and design issues of this place in the context of future development. it was clear that this area was at the bottom of the settlement hierarchy. There had been a recent closure to the combined shop and post office and we realised that if homes were built in a cluster around this nucleus, there is a good chance that they would now be vacant. Further, we considered if the settlement could still be called a nucleus. On closer inspection, we realised that there was more to this place, and learnt that the GAA had facilitated the building of sheltered housing for the elderly, so there was a sense of community but it also made us appreciate the demographics of rural society. This is a place where agriculture takes precedence, and there was also a religious layer as the area was of Saint Matthew's Parish (a Church of Ireland establishment), and we considered this in the context of the name *Churchcross* and wondered how such a community came to the area in the first place.

Adrigole and Churchcross are both classified as Village Nuclei in the settlement hierarchy and they must offer a limited range of services to the local area. Further, they should have a permanent residential population and one other offering (a shop, pub, post office, primary school, church or other community facility). While both of the above mentioned settlements do qualify as Village Nuclei under these conditions, their relevance and future prospects sparked debate among the group, and while it was easy to trace the origins of these nuclei (to grow up around a church as an example, or a defensive point such as Kilkenny or Lismore Castles), it was more difficult to decide the appropriate future for them. In the context of settlement hierarchy, it was probable that these places serve bigger villages and towns with a commuter function, dependent on bigger settlements for employment and services. Adding homes to these areas will compound the situation and put pressure on services and infrastructure, yet the Churchcross LAP states a vision to encourage development within the village boundary. Again, the planner must return to first principles and ask if there is a local rural housing need for agricultural labourers for example, or if new homes will contribute to the commuter trend (urban generated development pressure).

On our group visit to Stonyford, County Kilkenny we surveyed a settlement that was higher up the hierarchy and was defined in the Smaller Towns and Villages category. The aim is to develop these places so as to strengthen their role as a local service centre in a way that respects the existing character of the settlement. The scale, design, layout and character of housing should fit well with the receiving town or village to contribute to a high quality living environment.

The wording of policy was at odds with the situation on the ground and our survey discovered suburban housing estates at the edge of the village. The new homes were not in keeping with the character and charm of the settlement, and the layout seemed to double the footprint of the overall village area. While the homes seemed physically independent of the village, it was probable that they functioned likewise, and the residents commuted into Kilkenny for employment (given that there were no obvious employers in the village). Our group questioned the appropriateness of the homes that had been build and criticised a planning application for further housing development in the village (which appears to have fallen through due to the economic climate). This worrying trend seemed to be present in most of the towns and villages we visited on our trip and our class wondered how the planning system justified such development, considering that policy was materially contravened.

While it was relatively easy to spot development that we agreed was inappropriate, it was more difficult to agree on a development typology that ought to have been built. A trip to Licketstown gave us an insight into the past and a visual reminder of the Irish vernacular. The clustering of agricultural workers' farm houses and outbuildings reminded us the past can provide guidance for the future and not all of rural Ireland is on a national primary route.

Figure 19: Churchcross
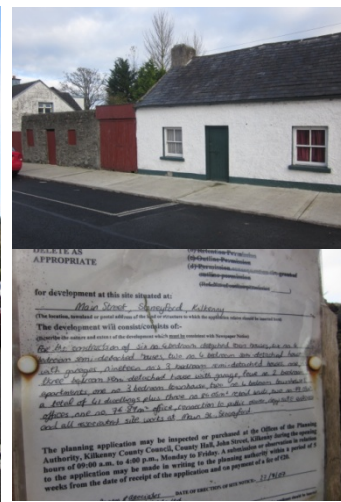
Figures 20,21: Stonyford

Figure 22: Irish Thatch at Licketstown

Figure 23: Introducing Suburbia

Conflicting Interests at Bantry Bay

There were various layers of industry and economic activity visible on our journey. Some of these activities appear to be of the landscape (such as agriculture and forestry), while others are given away by their manmade intervention (built form) and demand on land (fishing had a large presence on the waterside for storage, plant and repair items). At Bantry Bay we saw how there can be many uses in a single area and how these can cause conflict and tension.

Whiddy Island had an industrial base where activity relating to the oil industry required shipping and specialist equipment and plant (with bespoke engineering from Saudi Arabia, and facilities for large ships to moor off the island on a platform with an underwater connection pipe).

The peppering of pods for shellfish farming on the water seemed at odds with the oil activity as the muscles are subject to strict standards and controls for high quality water and a demand for little post-harvest treatment. Of course, it can be viewed from the other side by saying that oil activity could easily damage a vulnerable shellfish industry that requires a delicate eco-system, backed by voices of opposition (strengthened by safety and pollution concerns after a fatal explosion in 1978, and a strong environmentalist lobby). Tension escalates when a super quarry is nearby and logistical vessels can carry micro-organisms that upset the delicate eco system.

Then there are those who can say that the pods are visually obtrusive for those who use the area for its amenity value and for tourist promotion. The same can be said of the associated large scale harvesting and packaging plants which locate close to the water's edge so that the products can be washed in sea water before deportation. Such activity can then be defended for the role played in diversification from traditional agriculture, taking advantage of food opportunities (energy is another example) and for giving the area a new identity and food culture for quality shellfish that is well reputed internationally.

Bantry Bay demonstrates the limitations of planning legislation (which stops at the water's edge), and reminds us that conflicting policies of multiple governmental departments (for example the marine), which can be centralised and seem non-transparent, can meet in local areas such as Bantry Bay. The main point is that the planner has to delicately balance competing interests of stakeholders, build consensus and deliver a plan to resolve conflict, and it is a good idea to start this process by returning to first principles.

Figure 29: Whiddy Island

Figure30: Fishing Pods Float on the Water

Figure 33: A good example of mixed land uses including agriculture, forestry, energy, and residential. These all give new layers to the landscape and have various impacts.

Figure 32: Fish Processing Plant

Figure31: A Vessel at Bantry Bay

Landscape Evaluation

Figure 36: Gougane Barra Lake

Figure 37: Naturalistic Isolation

Figure 38: Another View of Tranquillity

Gougane Barra: A Glaciated and Forrested Cradle Valley

This is a highly sensitive landscape of national importance.

Gougane Barra is a unique natural heritage and visual amenity of high scenic value and is an important visitor attraction for tourism, as well as historical and archaeological interest

Saint Finnbar's seventh century stone buildings remain at Gougane Barra. A nineteenth century stone chapel is one of the only structures in this remote and naturalistic landscape.

Steep mountain sides fall towards the valley of Gougane Barra Lake and this is the source of the River Lee that flows onwards to Cork Harbour via Cork City. Intense glacial erosion formed armchair-like forms that are scooped out from the side of the mountain and give a bowl-like sense of containment and enclosure. The horizon is not visible from inside the valley but the eye can follow the watercourse.

The landscape has a jagged appearance of layered red sandstone rock and strips of green vegetation. This gives the landscape an ecological value (plants and nesting sites). Flora includes gorse, broadleaf trees and shrubs and there is rush and willow nearer to the water's edge.