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Townlands: a habitation

a creative exploration of the rural landscape

edited by ALAN COUNIHAN



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Contents

5	Foreword Catherine Marshall
7	Introduction Alan Counihan
13	Fieldwork Alan Counihan
25	A Cautionary Tail Alan Counihan
35	Portfolio 1 Alan Counihan
47	Field Portraits Carmel Cummins
63	Portfolio 2 Gypsy Ray
73	Homecoming Patrick J. Duffy
80	Portfolio 3 Alan Counihan
90	Landscape of Home Kerry Hardie
100	Portfolio 4 Gypsy Ray
110	A River and Me Dervla Murphy
118	Portfolio 5 Alan Counihan & Gypsy Ray
128	List of Plates
132	List of Contributors
134	Acknowledgements

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The Soot Well

Mag Brigid's Haggard

The Cruhoon

High Bullaun

Introduction

The house in which I write these words is perched high on a south-facing hillside, one of the soft, rolling flanks of the Sliabh Margy uplands, and of the Castlecomer Plateau, which separate the plains of County Kilkenny from those of County Laois. The view from here is remarkable and, although the hill continues to rise behind us, there is a sense that we are living on the rim of a great platter or dish.

Eastward, to our left, the slopes of Tullabrin and Knockshanbally townlands blend into those of Ossory Hill which, in turn, form a gentle south-easterly curve as they descend to the floor of the Nore Valley. From behind Ossory Hill the sense of rimmed enclosure continues along the high grounds of Coppanagh and Brandon Hill, blue-grey in the glaze of distance, then arcs west along the Walsh Mountains to the beautiful and dominant form of Sliabh na mBan, some thirty miles from here. Continuing along Sliabh na Mban's soft curves, the line of the rim flows into the Knockmealdown Mountains, returning north-west towards us along the field-patterned slopes of the Sliabh Ardagh uplands, which disappear in turn behind the rounded shoulder of Ned Martin's hill close here to home.

Of course, what I have described is not, physically, one continuous encircling band of high ground. The rim is broken and chipped in many places, pierced by river valleys and passes through which great storms and multitudes of people have coursed over millennia. The sense of rimmed enclosure is more psychic than physical, a visual aid to delineate the borders of the landscape in which I, and most members of this community, live out our daily lives, both on these slopes, and on the floor of the great, broad river plain below. Here, on the hill, there is a sense of being seated high in some great amphitheatre from which we can watch the dramatic light of each day, and of each season, pass across and through the landscape, each night falling like a curtain on the play.

For all its exposure to strong winds and harsh weather, this is a wonderful place to live. All around us, throughout the year, we can encounter the marvellous in nature on

an almost daily basis. Perhaps, as visual artists, both my wife and I have been irresistibly drawn to make a home here so we might witness the daily play of light on surrounding hills and the valley plain, and on their colours, which constantly change as sun and clouds move across the great expanse of sky. After a decade we have learned to foretell the weather from their hues.

Neither my wife, Gypsy Ray, nor I are native here - no family bones or loves are buried in this soil - and, for all the wonderful distractions of the Irish light, it was only after the blinkered work of building studios and home was complete that we began, slowly, to take root in this place. It would be foolish to deny it was a difficult process and, much like the young trees with which we planted the field, we found it a struggle to acclimatize and to establish a pattern in our lives in this high and airy place. At first, growth was slow and difficult. We had left behind us firmly established reputations as artists in the country where we had lived abroad for many years, along with the nourishment and inspiration we had come to derive from its landscape and the community of friends in our local town. It was with some trepidation that we began to work again in what for us was an unknown landscape near the northern border of County Kilkenny,

At first the effort was, for my own part, unrewarding. There were many days during which I would walk into my fine new studio and wonder what on earth I was going to create within it. Gone was the connection with the series of works I had been making abroad, themselves rooted in landscape, and nothing flamed to take their place. A further complication lay in the realization that, as a returned emigrant, my sense of cultural identity seemed intrinsically linked to an imaginary and romantic view of my country and its people, one that seemed rooted in nostalgia for some past Elysium and not in the land in which I now found myself. As a result, the making of objects, or indeed of any creative work, quickly provided a profound challenge. As an artist, if not as an individual, I had lost my bearings.

There is, fortunately, a great deal more to art than the production of works or objects. The essential part of the practice, the creative way of being in the world, resides in the core act of enquiry and the process of seeing. As most of my practice is based on explorations

of place and of the human relationship to the natural world I realized that the best way to reinvigorate my creative process was to make the landscape and the community in which I now live the hub and subject of my art. Daily life itself was to become the work. And so, in search of instruction as much as inspiration, I began to walk the fields and hills around our home enthused by the reflection that each engagement with the landscape, and each conversation with a neighbour, could become part of a creative process.

Beginning along the high rim of the hill, these exploratory walks became a ritual of sorts and, with two large and energetic dogs, I was never short of encouragement for my perambulations through the countryside. Quite apart from the natural wonders which might be discovered on any given day within the physical geography of the place - the cock pheasant's red mask, the lark's sky-blue song, a winter-whitened hare - I was slowly admitted to its psycho-geography as revealed through conversations with the families who granted me access to their lands. It seemed from these encounters that each farm was a territory unto itself and that while the names of the parish's landmarks - its cross-roads, bridges and mile-bushes - were familiar to the entire community, the lexicon of names within each farm's boundaries was known only to those who worked inside of them, or more startlingly, to those who still held it in their memory. The Cruhoon, The Soot Well, Mag Brigid's Haggard, such named fields, springs and wells of the farms with which I had grown familiar, and which were identified in response to my questions, suggested or revealed the psychic strata of each particular place, adding a great richness and sense of intimacy to any experience or imagining of them.

Through its appellations a named landscape is revealed as an inhabited world, the named elements of which celebrate not only human engagement and presence over centuries in any given place but also often enshrine the physical nature of its topography. This is especially the case with place names in Irish. Through the names of a landscape we can often read the nature of a people's relationship to their place in the world and of their presence within it. It is as though human presences accrete upon the land, clustering around and within the physical remnants of erstwhile activities or the monuments and ruins that once expressed or housed their conscious hopes in this world. It was these ghostly resonances that I hoped

to sense and stir on my rambles along the hillsides and from what was left of their presence to learn more about my own.

The historical geographer, Kevin Whelan has described landscape as a matrix of memory, and an accumulated repertoire of historical narrative. Certainly, as I learned to recognize by name the hills and hollows of my local townlands, I soon realized how intimately and intricately they were known by the older members of the community and how that knowledge, that celebration of the local, was inextricably linked to language, and was impossible without it. As I have read somewhere, language is to place as dye is to cloth; it imbues each local landscape and place with its own specific history. It seems clear that, in this or any other parish landscape, place-names serve as anchors for particularities of the past. It is also clear that, if forgotten, the psychic sediment they contain of previous events and lives will be forever washed away. In the case of townland names their loss to memory is as yet unlikely given their longevity and the territorial and social identities that they provide. Field names, however, being rooted in the more ephemeral process of personal possession, and with little relevance beyond the boundaries of the farms to which they provide identity, are far less enduring. Modern farming practices also work against their retention through removal of field hedgerows as does the Department of Agriculture's new preference for numbered grazing blocks, paddocks and pastures. It might well be stated, as it was by John O'Donovan during his ethnographic work for the Ordnance Survey of Ireland in the nineteenth century, that the disappearance of field names would prove no great loss for they have only a very localized significance. While that is undeniable, it was this very localized significance, a quality unique to each parish, which I hoped to discover and to celebrate.

If words are vessels, containers of memory and meaning, then secreted within some of these field names might lie the histories of a landscape I now wished to make the subject of a work: the creative exploration and expression of a place in the world. However, given the potential scale of the work necessary to address the landscape in all its resonance, it soon became clear that I would not be able to carry it out alone. The scope of this process would have to engage not only with a landscape but also with the lives and community of its inhabitants. And so, what had begun as a very singular and personal process quickly developed into an

essentially communal, public and very rewarding one perhaps best described as a form of commonage, a collaborative process where the privately owned and the privately imagined are being communally shared.

The title for what has become an on-going multi-disciplinary process, this exploration of memory's matrix in a north-Kilkenny parish, is The Townlands Project. Along with the gathering of over four hundred and fifty place names the process has, since its inception in 2009, involved both Gypsy Ray and I working on separate visual and written documentaries of the landscape and its people. It has further involved the presentation of this documentary by means of exhibitions in our local community hall and in art galleries further afield, as well as through public talks, magazine articles and other publications.

Given the work that we have chosen to carry out in the world, it has been clear from the outset that art must remain central to our explorations. At an early stage we set about a creative engagement with the young of the parish, not only because these children might some day, hopefully, become the future guardians of our landscape, but also because the shared process of local discovery might serve to enrich this first world of their childhood. Naturally, we were delighted when the teachers and pupils of the local National School in Johnswell village enthusiastically agreed to work with us and, for a designated time, Gypsy was their artist-in-residence charged with the development of a collaborative work based on the local landscape and its folklore. The work that grew out of this process comprised a large, primed canvas that had been divided up into sixty-four separate squares. Each pupil was given a square or 'field' in which to visually describe their special place and the finished 'landscape' they collectively created now hangs permanently in the school.

The children were further engaged through the collaboration in this adventure by Barnstorm Theatre Company which has a long history in the creation of exciting theatre for, by and with young people. Barnstorm collaborated with the pupils in the devising of three plays based on folklore gathered in this same school seventy years previously under the aegis of the then Irish Folklore Commission's Schools' Initiative. These plays proved a poignant

bridge between the generations; grandparents watching their grandchildren bringing their past back to life. Most importantly, the process enlivened the local landscape for these young participants. There have also been other outgrowths of The Townlands Project, among them a series of oral history recordings, Conversations around the Home Place; a short film entitled Field Song; and the publication of a Field Name Research Handbook more about which can be learned elsewhere.

Another landmark in the process took the form of a public conversation held in Johnswell Hall in the late summer of 2010. Entitled The Landscapes of Home, its goal was to explore and to discuss what it is that makes a local landscape unique. As part of this conversation two poets, (Kerry Hardie and Carmel Cummins), a travel writer, (Dervla Murphy), and an historical geographer (Patrick J. Duffy) were invited to address that question, ideally in the context of the landscape of their own homes. Each shared with the parish community many rich and rewarding insights into what are very personal relationships with particular places. These thoughtful and refined contributions are included within the following pages and their individual exploration is best left to each reader.

Considered collectively, these essays and poems remind us of the sustenance that mindful habitation of a landscape can provide. An awareness of our own particular place in the world can teach us of the rich and complex resonance of all other places. As John McGahern has written: The universal is the local with the walls taken away. A sense of place is central to all of McGahern's work and the following quotation has long been an inspiration to our own: I think that the quality of feeling that's brought to the landscape is actually much more important than the landscape itself. It is the light or passion or love, if you like, in which the landscape is witnessed that is more important than whether it contains rushes or lemon trees.

While Carmel, Dervla, Kerry and Paddy are all linked to their place by what Kerry has described as the elusive connection of love none of them have avoided showing us some of the harsh realities and legacies that all inhabited landscapes embody. They have been true to their places which all lie far beyond the boundaries of this small parish yet each of their contributions expresses, albeit in very different ways, the same sense of belonging to

a landscape that can only grow from lives lived fully within it. Their generosity and honesty has greatly enriched this process.

The night of public conversation was also remarkable for the contributions from members of the audience. Many people spoke of particular fields and their associated tales, and all mentioned their enhanced sense of place as a result of what they had heard. Some felt that the recording of field names, especially of those in Irish, was a valuable exercise, for these often refer to the historical presence of lost monuments or to older agricultural practice. Others found the process a nostalgic and romantic folly given the ephemeral nature of field names and farm ownership. These latter voices also challenged the human urge to name each field, each hillock and hollow in our landscapes. In response I suggest that this urge arises out of a desire or need to consider the land our own, to tie an indifferent nature to our purpose, to navigate our way in the boundless course of time. On the hilltop behind our home there is an old landmark known as the Cúinne Mór, the Big Corner. It marks a sharp bend in an ancient roadway that long predates enclosure. From there, on clear nights, there are spectacular views of the night sky and its constellations, and especially of the Milky Way or, as it is known in Irish, Bealach na Bó Finne, the Way of the White Cow. As below, so above.

Following the conversation the audience gathered eagerly around the large format Ordnance Survey maps with all of the newly gathered field names inscribed upon them. It was clear that this Project, and in particular its integral strand of field name research, was less a celebration of the privately owned than one of sharing for the common good. In hindsight it seems that the Project, through its various disciplines, has served, metaphorically, as a mass path across the parish landscape, one that allows imaginative access to each farm so that each field can open and merge with others, and that this process has encouraged the further flowering of community.

There are two words that seem essential ingredients to the Project: generosity and integrity, and both have been supplied in abundance by all concerned. What seems to make the process so popular is its synthesis of art on the one hand and heritage on the other, of sowing and gathering, of the enrichment of each field through forms of creative cross-pollination. The various processes of art allow the community to engage collaboratively

in their own celebration of a unique place and in the associated enrichment of their own heritage.

Within these pages we have brought together all of the Project's various strands of work, some of which were fleeting and ephemeral, so that they might be experienced together as part of an overall process. Each strand has shared the same ingredients of local engagement and creative activism, of exploration and discovery, of respect and trust. Each has also been inspired by opposition to what the historian Simon Schama has described as a world... where measurement, not memory, is the absolute arbiter of value...and by a desire to share in an art-driven process that is rooted in the real.

A.C.2012

Field Work

Some time ago I sat in the kitchen of a small farmhouse in Rathcoole Parish, talking with the elderly brother and sister who have spent all of their lives in this particular place. The small comfortable room feels like the hub of their world, much as it has always been. The farmhouse itself is modest with its roots in the local vernacular form of three rooms and a central hearth. It has been much "improved", but its form is essentially unchanged from the period it was built some time before 1842. I used to wonder how large families might have coped within such small and often congested spaces in years gone by; parents, grandparents, children, all coming and going, to and fro, across the thresholds. It seems the threshold was most times clear and the door rarely barred, so that the inner space flowed to the fields outside as though they were other rooms, extensions of the living space and just as essential to the whole of home. If the sense of claustrophobia became oppressive, there was always "room" outside.

As we chatted in that small, comfortable kitchen a short time ago our talk was of those outer rooms, the surrounding fields, and of their history. The purpose of my visit was to learn whether either Paddy or Cathy could recall any of the field names in, or the folklore about, the landscape that surrounded them. I was not to be disappointed for not only did they recall the majority of the names of their own fields but they could also name many of those from neighbouring farms about which the present owners were ignorant.

One hundred and seventy years ago when this landscape was first surveyed, Paddy and Cathy's farm, apart from some outliers, was comprised of twenty fields. The number is now fourteen as hedgerows were removed and fields were merged. Those that remain all have appellations variously describing their history, character, topography or location. The Rath Field, Blanche's Garden, The Hill Field, High Bullaun, Low Bullaun, Páircíns. Within the names there reverberate resonances of other times, ghostly presences that haunt our experience of place enabling us to imagine it as other than our own.