



## **Townlands: a habitation.**

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In recent years many wonderful books have been published on the landscape of Ireland. Those that will endure do not consist solely of beautiful images of this small island but instead examine the complex histories that inform the places we choose to inhabit or visit. Most importantly they influence our perceptions of those places and of ourselves as a people. By concentrating their focus on the unique character of particular places, on the myths or histories encoded in their place names and folklore, they reveal to us not only the natural forces that have shaped the appearance of a place but the social and cultural forces that have shaped the lives of its inhabitants. Above all they bring the landscapes of Ireland to rich and vibrant life through the experiences and traditions of past generations.

Recently published, the book '*Townlands: a habitation*' has similar goals. Beautifully illustrated, it is best described by its own subtitle: *a creative exploration of a rural Irish landscape*. The editor, Alan Counihan, - an Irish artist who returned to live in Ireland with his American wife, the artist Gypsy Ray - describes in his introduction the cultural challenges faced by an emigrant after twenty years of a prosperous life in California. The book is an expression of how those challenges were met; primarily through the exploration of the landscapes and communities in which the couple found themselves and seems to be the means by which they have made themselves at home.

In his walks through the landscape of his new locality in County Kilkenny, Counihan learned the names of the fields on all the neighbouring farms. Surprised to discover that every hill and hollow had a name, he then set out to record all of the field names within the entire parish. Two of his essays for this book are based on that research and on names or stories associated with local

fields. One concerns a plot called Parnell's Garden in the course of which the history of the Land War and the demise of a great politician is explored while the other is based on a legend of a man with a tail who was buried upside down. There is certainly a twist in the the end of that one and the essay is a fine example of how a curious local legend can contain the dark experience of national events.

There are several other contributors to this book among them the poet Carmel Cummins who evocatively explores the fields of a family farm through her own childhood experiences. The essay by the historical geographer, Patrick Duffy, while spun from his own family's root in the landscapes of County Monaghan, addresses the importance of the territorial divisions known as townlands in Ireland. Describing them as 'the first place' of rural childhoods and memories he argues persuasively for their celebration. In a short essay which accompanies a selection of her poems, Kerry Hardie writes of how she discovered a love for her landscape slowly over years, its seasonal changes witnessed through the window of a room where she was often confined through illness. Despite her trials the experience drew her to experience '*a denser map/ than those lines and names/ that cartographers leak onto paper*'. The final contribution is by Ireland's best known travel writer, the intrepid Dervla Murphy, who writes about her home landscape of the Blackwater Valley in County Waterford. Her attention to historical facts causes this essay to sit a little uncomfortably with its companions but her trademark style and vivacity make for a fascinating account of a long life lived on the banks of a great river.

What emanates from all of these contributors is the sense of deep attachment to place, of a rootedness in their local landscapes and local communities from which they all draw strength. A similar careful attention to the uniqueness of their locale in rural Ireland is evident in the many drawings and photographs by Counihan and Ray which illustrate the book. While the publication does explore the history of various landscapes the tone is far from an academic one. It is, instead, poetic, rooted in the real and gives a true flavour of life and community in rural Ireland. Recommended!

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