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URBAN AND RURAL LANDSCAPES IN MODERN IRELAND

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND CULTURE



Introduction: The Urban and the Rural in the Irish Collective Imaginary

The central theme of landscape is a preoccupation that has long been associated with the construction and expression of Irish national identity. This is particularly so in relation to the rural landscape, which traditionally has been regarded as an important source of national heritage and culture. Associated with this preoccupation with landscape is the rural/urban divide which has characterised traditional representations of Ireland, especially since the end of the nineteenth century, with the formation of an Irish nationalist ethos. As Martin McLoone observes, at the end of the nineteenth century, and coinciding with the emergence of Irish nationalism, Britain was associated with the urban and with industrialisation, since it was one of the most urban and most industrial societies in the world (2000: 18). As a consequence, the Irish nationalist discourse, which defined Irish national identity as essentially anti-British, mostly rested on an idealised representation of the rural as the vessel of traditional values and a common culture. As McLoone notes, 'cultural nationalism defined Gaelic Irish identity as essentially rural in character and the culture of nationalist Ireland was correspondingly anti-urban and anti-industrial in its imaginings' (2000: 18). Thus, the Irish imagined community was often constructed on idyllic images of the rural which found their expression in literary manifestations and which have pervaded the political discourse of Irish nationalism until recently. The origins of this politicised representation of nature in Irish literature, however, can be located in the poetic production of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

In her study *Irish Pastoral*, Oona Frawley analyses how nature and landscapes act as signifiers in Irish literature to represent cultural and historical changes. Thus, in her analysis of the pastoral literary tradition in

Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Frawley identifies a distinctively Irish nostalgic mode in the Irish pastoral production. As Frawley contends, this nostalgia is not for a time in nature not lived, as characteristic of other European pastoral poetic productions at that time, but for a lost culture resulting from the influence of Christianity and the invasion of the Normans. This longing for a lost culture, by a community suffering from the effect of exogenous forces, is traceable throughout Irish literary tradition, and it is especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, with W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge and the works of the Irish Literary Revival, that the rural in literature is politicised. Hence, the rural becomes a central image in cultural nationalism and in the construction of an Irish collective imaginary expressed through cultural and political discourses. As Frawley argues, with the literary work of the Revival 'the influence of an Irish pastoral tradition [...] goes beyond simple nostalgia and becomes political' (2005: 6).

The idealisation of the rural is seen especially in the cultural and political discourse of Eamon de Valera, the founding father of the modern Irish nation. In a famous speech, delivered on national radio on St Patrick's Day, 1943, President de Valera expressed his dream for the future of the nation. In this much-quoted speech he envisaged a nation in charge of its own destiny, proud of its cultural heritage, and confident of throwing off the yoke of its former coloniser. The idealised dream was set in a largely rural Ireland, in a countryside 'bright with cosy homesteads', where material wealth was valued only 'as a basis for right living', and people would be satisfied with 'frugal comfort', devoting their leisure time to 'things of the spirit' (de Valera 1943).

The idealisation of the rural world, in both literary and political discourses, and the loss of culture it signifies are inextricably interrelated with the increasingly predominant role of the city and urban landscapes. This is not unique to the Irish case, since as Frawley notes in her analysis of classical pastoral poetry, the work of Theocritus and Virgil was produced against the background of an often complex existence in the court or the city (2005: 4). In the Irish case, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the rural world, which had been idealised as symbolising the loss of pre-Christian, pre-Norman culture, was on the wane. A demographic analysis of

the rural and urban population in Ireland since 1841, when the first reliable census was produced, shows a progressive decline of the rural population, which in 1971 was for the first time recorded as the minority population in Ireland (Central Statistics Office). Thus, the transformation that the rural world experienced, especially since the middle of the nineteenth century, and the increasing loss of its population through emigration abroad and migration to urban centres, intensified the representation of the rural as the symbol of the loss of culture, traditional values and customs as a result of a long history of colonial domination. This transformation accentuated the rural/urban divide, as observed in the literary production and the political discourse. As Declan Kiberd notes in his seminal work *Inventing Ireland*, the independent Ireland of the twentieth century still continued to see ‘the sanctification of rural Ireland as real Ireland by those who actually abandoned it to live in Dublin as members of the ruling élites’, and the effects of their romanticised views of the rural world they had abandoned became progressively evident in state policies, which benefitted those that stayed behind in the rural areas (2002: 495).

However, the dominance of the rural in the Irish collective imaginary, which had been reaffirmed in the post-independence period by de Valera’s vision of Ireland as ‘independent, rural and self-sufficient’ (Kay 2011: 25), started to experience a noticeable transformation in the 1990s, with the dramatic socio-economic changes effected by the now defunct Celtic Tiger. As critic Fintan O’Toole contends, ‘the Irish boom was a tale of post-modern globalisation’ in which Irish society went from an almost pre-modern economy, not having undergone a proper industrial revolution, to the post-modern (2009: 100). In this context, and following the trend of postmodern societies, the urban locales gained a dominant position in representations of contemporary Ireland. As noted in postmodern social theory, the postmodern society is par excellence located in the urban centres rather than in the rural spaces. As Gerald W. Creed and Barbara Ching argue, ‘in much postmodern social theory, the country as a vital place simply doesn’t exist’, and they note how contemporary philosophical and sociological analyses of the postmodern society automatically assume the urban space as its natural location:

The influential French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1970: 7), for example, simply asserts that the contemporary situation is one of 'complete urbanization' [...]. Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson (1991) feels no need to justify his equation of the postmodern with the urban, and although cultural geographers have argued that the postmodern condition demands more attention to space, in practice their focus has been almost entirely urban. (1997: 7)

Similarly, the urban centres, and especially Dublin, came to represent the postmodern Ireland of the Celtic Tiger era. The dominant concern with the transformation of Ireland as embodied in Dublin came centre stage in contemporary literature, with, for instance, Dermot Bolger and Roddy Doyle in fiction, and Paul Durcan, Eavan Boland and Paula Meehan in poetry. Besides, a number of the physical spaces of Dublin, especially Temple Bar, were turned into signifiers of the Europeanised and postnational new Ireland driven by market forces, which symbolically overcame 'the worn-out nationalism that held Ireland down in previous decades' (Kincaid 2009: 47).

The Celtic Tiger era, nevertheless, maintained the rural/urban divide as a form of communal identification in the Irish imagination. However, these symbols changed their definitions and came to signify the dramatic socio-cultural transformation of Ireland. The city was not the Joycean location of paralysis, or the Gothic setting where Dubliners Bram Stoker and Sheridan Le Fanu staged 'Protestant reflections on guilt, loneliness and decay' (Kincaid 2009: 41); the urban spaces were the sites of a thriving, dynamic economy and limitless optimism in the future possibilities of Ireland and its well-educated population.¹ Concomitantly, the rural has

1 It must be noted, however, that in the currently buoyant Irish crime fiction the urban space is often the locale for the criticism of the pernicious effects of capitalism, such as increased social differences, corruption, crony capitalism, drug-dealing and increase in murder rates (see the work of, for example, Ken Bruen, Tana French and Declan Hughes). This dark underside of the urban is already manifest in Northern Irish fiction of the Troubles (see the work of, for example, Glen Patterson, Bernard MacLaverty and Eoin McNamee), and most recent Northern Irish crime fiction, although this type of urban representation tends to originate in the peculiarities of the Northern-Irish socio-political context rather than on a criticism of the effects

also experienced a deep transformation under the forces of the free-market economy, and in line with postmodern trends in which ‘the countryside disappears from productive labor and lived experience except as a place for a diverting stroll’ (Creed and Ching 2009: 12). During the Celtic Tiger years, the countryside became ‘the place urbanites visit, not the place where poor people eke out a living’ (Creed and Ching 2009: 20). Romantic images of rural Ireland were still maintained, but in a commodified form. With the economic affluence of the 1990s, many of the romanticised green hills of Ireland were turned into golf courses, most of them at the upper end of the market. By 2009, Ireland had over 400 golf courses and, as Arthur Kincaid observes, ‘the country is now third for land dedicated to the game’ (2009: 39). Part of the Celtic dream of the ‘nouveau riche’ was also to acquire exclusive country estates, often built in the rural-urban fringe. One more significant element of this commodified rural dream was horse ownership, which became one more symbol of being *in* the country though not *from* the country, and a sign of economic wealth. As Suzanne Campbell notes, commenting on a UCD report published in 2010 about the welfare problems in the horse sector in the post-Celtic Tiger era, ‘in the boom years everyone wanted to be part of the sport of kings’. As a consequence, horse ownership soared during the Celtic Tiger, with Ireland having the highest horse population per capita in Europe (McDonald 2010).² In a sense, the

of capitalism. As Scottish crime fiction writer Val McDermid notes in her analysis of the Dublin noir, this genre was mostly inspired by the dramatic socio-cultural, economic and political changes, north and south of the border:

The incredible economic boom of the Celtic Tiger years and the still more spectacular bust; the clerical abuse scandals that saw the Catholic Church’s hold on the national conscience shattered; the Good Friday Agreement that rid Northern Ireland of terrorism for the first time in decades. The times brought new problems, too: gangsters, drugs wars, a rocketing murder rate and the ‘crony capitalism’ that led to the devastating EU/IMF bail-out. The world turned its eyes towards Ireland, and Irish writers – never a rare species – responded with stories as big and bold as the backdrop they played out against. (McDermid 2011)

- 2 In autumn 2010, the way in which the effects of the post-Celtic Tiger economic downturn had affected the horse sector hit the newspaper headlines in Ireland and abroad. As Henry McDonald remarked writing for *The Guardian*, in a much