

Townlands: territorial signatures of landholding and identity

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A townland down in Monaghan! Ah surely
This makes me glad. I know these names. I can see
The Garlands and the Rooneys and the Quigleys
Neighbours' children in the field next to me
Playing where a bewitched blackthorn's growing
Beside a pile of fairy whinstone rocks
That no man dreams of quarrying - not knowing
What's hid beneath, who here at midnight walks.
I saw it all not far from Tivadina....

Patrick Kavanagh, *'March is a Silversmith'*¹

My sister, who is a nurse in London, recently visited a hospital in Essex and one of the staff, on discovering that she was from Monaghan, said so was she. My sister responded, 'Well, actually, I'm not from Monaghan town, but from Castleblayney.' To which the other replied, 'I'm from Ballybay.' And my sister said, 'Well I'm not actually from Castleblayney, but a small place outside it called Cremartin.' And the other woman said, 'Well, in fact, I'm not from Ballybay but from Aghnamullen.'

There is a certain territorial logic to our referencing points when we describe where we are from. In the Bronx or Melbourne, or London, there is little point in introducing oneself as being from Ballynahalisk (County Cork), or Drumskinney and Montiaghroe (County Fermanagh).² It is obviously a question of scale. But there is also a latent sense of 'It's-such-a-small-rural-backward-blip-on-the-landscape' that I wouldn't mention it. This was especially true up to forty or fifty years ago, when there was a sensitivity about rural rusticity, reflected in the term 'culchie'. Until the 1960s, for example, there was a notable gap in living standards and lifestyles between rural and urban throughout the country. The rural townlands had no electricity, for instance, and with that came a big difference in living conditions. My mother and her generation lived in houses with oil lamps, candles, and pot ovens; where as a girl she ironed her school uniform with an old smoothing iron and dried her hair at the fireside; where she and the other 'country girls' were regularly identified as being different in the St Louis school in Monaghan town. Thus our emigrants airbrushed these townland places from their identities when they moved away. Now, of course, living standards have converged, and



Townland boundary markers in County Mayo (left) and County Armagh.

there is a new self-conscious pride in the distinctive names and local heritage of the townlands, reflected in the manner in which many of them in different parts of Ireland have their names carved on roadside stone markers.

Patrick Kavanagh, who could in many ways be described as the first poet of the townlands, regularly invoked their names in his writing. Although sometimes he had his doubts, as when he says in 'Epic': 'I inclined to lose my faith in Ballyrush or Gortin...' until Homer's



ghost assured him how important such local places were. Seamus Heaney in a preface to the Federation for Ulster Local Studies publication, *Every Stoney acre has a name*, summarised his own personal discovery of the centrality of meaning of townland for a young fellow coming in from the rural margins, who felt 'the fume of affection and recognition' that came off the word when he saw it written down on official paper in a book in his local library. (It was in John Hewitt's poem 'The Townland of Peace'.) Heaney saw it as an affirmation of the

importance of townland and, a bit like Kavanagh with Homer, 'a premonition of demarginalization' passed over him.³

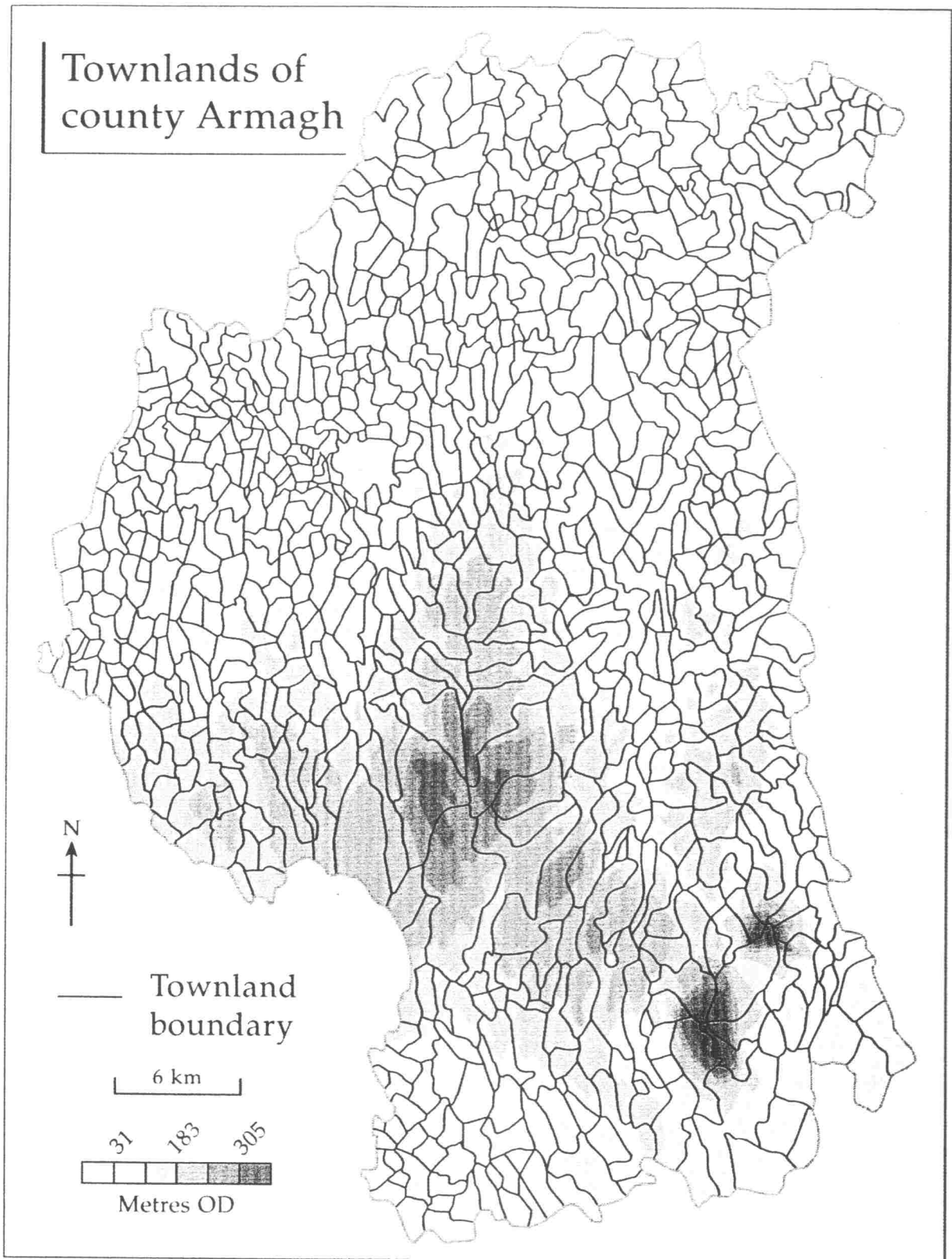
Clearly townlands have enormous social, cultural and psychological importance for rural people in Ireland. For those of us from rural places, we take this for granted. For example, they are a fundamental part of our 'activity space' - the place we know best, where we move up and down, back and forth, every day; where the topographies of place and people are best known; where, for those born into townlands, first memories are rooted and never really forgotten. In the following discussion, I will examine the significance of townland for identity and belonging.

Since the townland is so important for identity, it is obviously also important when we come to understand the past. It becomes a kind of lens through which we can see the past experienced in our local landscapes. Therefore I will look at the townland as a resource for historians, especially local historians, in examining the past in local places, and how it emerged as an important local unit for farming and landholding. Indeed the whole material fabric of the landscape which has been principally generated by farming and its activities took place predominantly within the framework of townlands.

Signatures carry notions of identity, individual character, personality, and thus might appropriately express the way these small territorial units have been inscribed on the rural (and urban) landscape. Townlands are local places which have distinctive characteristics like shape and size, location, names, identity, personality or sense of place. They each have histories, constructed and remembered by their inhabitants, which mesh together to form patterns of regional geography and history.

Townlands, therefore, can be summarised as follows:

- They comprise territories, with shape, size and physical features often reflected in boundaries and shape. Maps of townland networks show them as a lattice of lines and spaces intimately bound up with the topography of the landscape. Apart from variations in size throughout the country, shape and boundaries reflect the historical experience of landscape: in Ulster generally townland boundaries flow with the land, following streams and brooks; in Kildare and other Pale counties, boundaries are more angular, reflecting a greater amount of intervention and moulding by local populations in the past.
- Townlands are extremely local, survivals of a more local world in the past, so that when we travel far away (and up the urban hierarchy) they go out of focus. That they remain a part of people's identity is manifested in the numbers of houses in Dublin, and other cities and towns in Ireland and elsewhere, which are named after such distant and remembered local places - 'the heart's townland'?
- What might be called 'agents of localisation' operate through the lattice of townland spaces and names. Placenames, like surnames and personal



Townlands in County Armagh.
(From: Atlas of the Irish rural landscape, Cork 1997)

names, are very strong markers of identity and belonging. As postal addresses they are labels of locality with families being identified with townlands: the Kellys of Blackhall, the McCabes of Shancoduff. Family name associations with townlands are repeated again and again in all studies, and by anyone who knows anything about rural Ireland. Surname concentrations in different parts of Ireland are a broader reflection of the local townland significance of people and place.⁴ Even though postal workers operate over more extensive districts now from delivery vans, not bicycles as in the past, the townlands are still vital links between national and local. Current proposals in the Republic of Ireland to close more local post offices, and to install postboxes for easier delivery have drawn a lot of fire from local communities. The Post Office's decision in Northern Ireland over thirty years ago to replace townland addresses with road names and house numbers has caused major controversy in rural areas there. Townland addresses are powerfully embedded in local consciousness.

- Churches also operated through the townland and parish network. A generation and more ago the Catholic church (and other churches, as Jack Johnston shows in this volume) had a wide range of services, not only on Sundays, but on evenings and weekdays, when lists of family and townland names were regularly invoked for a variety of community purposes – and the (mis)pronunciation of townland names by visiting clergy always identified them as outsiders! Similarly, the Catholic Church in many parts of the country operated a network of 'station masses' which mirrored the townland network, with townland households being involved in an annual cyclical hosting of church services.
- The network of townlands fitted into the more pedestrian local world up to the 1950s and 60s, when people cycled or walked, or plodded on horse cart through the landscape. The local geography of townland matched such a local scale of movement: my father's daily journey from school where he taught was by bike in the 1930s, and in summer he regularly called into houses, or met and talked with people on the road. Nowadays cars sweep past and have little connection with the texture of this local world.⁵
- Farmers' lives and farm work take place within the townland. In the past, harvest teamwork, *meithealls*, neighbours swapping and joining their labour, and the seasonal and daily grind of ploughing, or harrowing and haymaking, made the townland and its fields and local features intimately known and named. Farms were clearly identified with townlands. This is the ultimate defining feature of the townland because, as historians know, the townland was, and continues to be, intimately connected with landholding and landownership. It was the ultimate territorial mechanism through which farms and leases and agricultural activity were organised for some hundreds of years. Even though farming is not as important as it was, the townland is the greatest legacy of our history of farms and land

- and the boundaries of holdings which make up farms today reflect this older significance of townland boundaries for farm structure. Indeed settlement patterns, both today and in the past, were forged in the moulds of the townlands. Historically, for different parts of the island, they provide an explanatory context for settlement features such as the farm cluster, the dispersed pattern of farmsteads, the 'townland farm' with its ribbon of cottages on the perimeter of the townland, the nucleated village, or the 'Big House' of the landowner presiding over his parkland and townland. Today also, rural renewal of landscapes and commuter settlements echo faintly the more ancient topologies of townlands.

Although the townland is important in many ways, it must be conceded that as the life of the Irish countryside is changing, as more people live in towns or commute to towns, there is declining connection with the land, and knowledge of townlands and their contents is also perhaps fading. A couple of decades ago, the editor of this volume, Brian Turner, undertook a little experiment with three generations of men of similar background in the same parish of rural County Down which illustrated a contraction in knowledge of local topographies. The oldest man, aged 73, could name and place over 150 townlands and his mental map of his locality was one where people and places, townlands and farms were meshed closely together. A younger farmer in his forties was able to name thirteen townlands, and his sixteen-year-old son was sure only of the identity of the townland in which he lived.⁶ Although this reflects the particular impact of the 'official' introduction of road names in place of townland addresses in Northern Ireland, it is a pattern of change that is also reflected in loss of memory of field and other micro names within townlands and their farms.⁷ Farmers and farm families who traditionally worked in the fields day in and day out, up and down the headlands, up and down the roads, meeting neighbours constantly, knew the townlands and their inhabitants. Now farm numbers are falling. Perhaps farmers on tractors have different relationships with fields, farms and townlands, and non-farm newcomers often have even more limited local connections. So therefore these markers of locality and the local are possibly fading from local memory and knowledge? It is no coincidence that it is at such a crucial juncture that conferences such as 'The heart's townland: marking boundaries in Ulster', are convened to celebrate or highlight the townland when it may be in process of fading from collective consciousness.

Genealogy and geometry of townlands

Much work on the historical significance of townlands in Ireland has been undertaken in the North. It may be that the threat of obliteration of the townland network by the Post Office in the early seventies raised public consciousness of this valuable heritage. Tom McErlean's 1983 paper on townlands in Ireland was an important attempt to seek out and highlight an

island-wide pattern in townland and other territorial units in Ireland. More recent case studies of townlands have been important also in demonstrating methodologies for studying the historical development and significance of townlands.⁸ Mainstream historians have generally devoted little attention to the roots of the townland system.⁹ Geographical information systems (GIS) and computerised databases are also facilitating greater use of the matrix of townlands and townland-based historical information.¹⁰

There are about 62,000 townland units in Ireland as recorded by the Ordnance Survey in the 1830s. A great many in marginal and mountain areas have been abandoned or planted in forestry - in Leitrim and Fermanagh for instance. In these kinds of places, there is little doubt that the townlands will be lost and forgotten. Nevertheless it is possible with the assistance of GIS technology to examine social and demographic changes today and in the past through the framework of the townland. Townland populations and numbers of houses are published for every census from 1841 until 1911. And such information is increasingly accessible for more recent times as well, so that townlands continue to be an important analytical tool for local studies. Donegal County Council has recently produced an atlas, for example, which presents a range of census data such as population change and household numbers by townland for 1996.¹¹ It also shows extensive swathes of the county which are uninhabited.

Many of the poorer marginal districts in Ireland may only have been divided into named townlands relatively late, from the seventeenth century, as population expanded into them. In Ulster, some of the restrictions on Gaelic Irish settlement during the Plantation period may have pushed people into these areas. There was a noteworthy degree of local mobility of population between neighbouring townland units in the seventeenth century, as evidenced in the Hearth Money Rolls.¹² But most were inhabited and even those not inhabited several centuries ago were still named, often in association with lowland townlands. Farmland, mountain commonage, summer uplands and turbary were all linked in a network of economic and social interrelationships.¹³

If one compares a square kilometre in Ireland with other parts of Europe, one will note that Ireland is exceptional in having this unique array of very small local territorial divisions. However, 'uniqueness' can be an obstacle to understanding for historians: most things are connected and valuable lessons can be drawn from comparative studies. Ireland's apparently unique legacy of townland places seems to be a fortuitous by-product of the country's particular experience of land and landscape in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The survival of our intricate network of townlands is essentially a legacy of what might be called a colonial past.

Most rural parts of Europe also had a similar process of territorialisation, or dividing up the land into a range of smaller territorial entities, as exemplified by the 'toun' in Scotland or the 'tref' in Wales. It was associated with land assessment, stocking capacity, local forms of taxes and renders in

lordships and chiefries. The *tricha cét* or hundred appears to have been a characteristic land division across Europe, with a vertical range of diminishing subdivisions underneath. In Ireland, the ploughlands (*seisreach* in Irish) seem to have had English or Scottish equivalents. From such a superstructure, our modern townland sprang. The townships of the Scottish islands and highlands were very similar and lasted into the eighteenth century, to fall into decline following the clearances and radical upheavals of farming communities.¹⁴ All the smaller local entities seem to have evolved into obscurity in most other parts of northern Europe.

Thus, in common with the rest of these islands, Gaelic Ireland had a highly spatialised landscape assessment system, expressed in a territorial hierarchy of large and small units whose boundaries were held in local memories. It might be thought of as a system which emerged from the bottom up, at local level, and which was used from top down by lords and chief landholding families for allocating the burdens of cesses and dues on their kinsfolk.¹⁵ In parts of the country there are early records of this territorial system in twelfth-century listings of names and places. McNeill has demonstrated the existence of many of the modern townlands in Down at the end of the early Christian period, for example.¹⁶ Papal correspondence with Clogher diocese contains references to these units in the early fourteenth century, which might repay further investigation.¹⁷ Ó Buachalla has charted the development of the complete list of townlands in the Fermoy area from *Crichad an Chaoilli* in the Book of Lismore from the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.¹⁸ The coincidence of parishes, established in the twelfth century, with ballybetaghs in Monaghan and other parts of Ulster suggests that the internal subdivisions of these ballybetaghs were fairly intact as early as the twelfth century.¹⁹

The Elizabethan administration in Ireland set out to try to record and map this territorial system, as part of a process of regulating the distribution of lands among the Gaelic lords in Monaghan, and of organising new immigrant settlers in the plantation schemes in other parts of Ulster. Inquisitions were held throughout the counties to establish the boundaries and names of owners and the resultant geometry of units is represented, for instance, in some of Josias Bodley's largely impressionistic maps for the Ulster plantation counties and in the lists of the 1591 divisions of lands for Monaghan.²⁰

Ireland and Europe of five centuries ago was a very local, essentially pre-modern world, with cultural traditions and customs, for instance, such as measures and weights, distance and area, being particular to localities or local lordships. Although they had locally specific names, a geometry of fractions of land was characteristic across Ireland as a whole, reflecting in many cases arrays of local assessments of stocking or cropping capacity.



Names for territorial units in Ireland in the sixteenth century (after T McErlean, 1983).

In Donegal, Tyrone and Coleraine, for instance, there were ballybetaghs - *Baile biataigh* - subdivided into ballyboes - *Baile bó*. Quarters comprised one quarter of a ballybetagh, referred to in some places by four smaller named units, as in the ballybetagh of Strabane, for example, where there is a reference to 'Leck, being halfe a quarter containing two Ballibose'.²¹ In Monaghan and Fermanagh the tate was the equivalent of the ballyboe of neighbouring territories. Gneeves, pottles and pints (using liquid measures as a form of land evaluation) were smaller assessment systems very similar to the pennylands, ouncelands and merklands of the Scottish highlands. They were measures of stocking capacity or land value which could be translated into local renders to the lord. In general, in many parts of the north and west of the country, the ballybetagh emerges as a primary territorial unit, with a fairly regular subdivision from quarters to sixteenths. In subsequent seventeenth-century developments in landholding, the ballybetagh fell out of usage and the more flexible smaller units endured as building blocks of property to emerge by the late seventeenth century throughout Ireland as townlands.

This emerging geometry of territorial units provided a framework for landholding, with kin groups slotted into an architecture of tates or ballyboes (or equivalents such as polls in other areas), quarters and ballybetaghs.²² In Farney in south Monaghan in 1612, five ballybetaghs (of eighty tates) were divided among nineteen tenants, all of 'these being of one sept,' resembling the tacksmen discussed by Dodgshon for Kintyre and Harris, where kinsmen of the chief held the land in clusters of townships under whom numbers of subtenants worked.²³ In the 1591 division of the lands of Monaghan, the ballybetaghs of Balledrumgowla and Ballymcgowne showed clear evidence of kin relations in the names of their freeholder tenants, McHugh Roe McMahons, McShane McMahons and McBreine McMahons being most common. In Balleglaslagh, two tates each were held by Patrick McCabe, Arte Boy McQuaide, Tege McQuaide, Nele oge McQuaide, Patrick McGillegrome McQuaid, Rosse McMahan McPatrick and Melaghlin McMahan. Patrick McQuaid McPhelym and Art McQuaid both held one tate each, making a grand total of sixteen tates, mostly held by McQuaids. The ballybetagh of Balleglanka (in present-day Castleshane) consisted of sixteen tates held mostly by O'Clerians. In all cases the tates were individually named and are identifiable with townlands today.²⁴ It is likely that these small divisions existed as a territorial structure independent of demographic factors. Many tates in Monaghan and Farney in the early seventeenth century, for instance, were composed of untenanted grazing lands, held by larger 'gentlemen' farmers, as a Farney survey called them. If and when population increased, these units could be more intensively farmed as the need arose. Tates were amalgamated into groups of two, three or more and held by a freeholder tenant. As more tenant kin became available, they could be broken up again. In the barony of Trough in the north of Monaghan county, and in other lordships in the west of the country, these small units were even fragmented into halves, as with half tates in Monaghan.

In other areas, many townlands which emerged into the light of day (through

the maps and records of the seventeenth century) had earlier been subsumed in larger quarters, which may have contained up to four smaller units: John Cunningham's study of Drumskinney and Montiaghroe in Fermanagh suggests such a process.²⁵ Sandra Millsopp's case study of Bangor refers to the Five Quarters, which disappeared from local usage early on, with one quarter continuing as a townland.²⁶ In Clontibret parish in Monaghan, there is an area still known locally as the Black Quarter, which refers back to a portion of the original ballybetagh, and which loosely refers to four townlands. Quarters were much more common divisions in Connacht and it was mainly these which translated into modern townlands in the west of the country.

In the Pale counties of Meath and Kildare, ploughlands, or plowlands (and half ploughlands), were the units of assessment which may have roughly approximated to the townland.²⁷ Any pre-Norman hierarchy of territorial units appears to have been subsumed into a structure of ploughlands within manors. *Seisreach* was the Gaelic equivalent of ploughland, and was reckoned by John O'Donovan to be the equivalent of a quarter of a ballybetagh.²⁸ Many of the records of manorial Ireland from the late medieval period up to the mid-seventeenth century surveys also refer to 'town and lands' separately from ploughlands (also called carucates in earlier records). Ploughlands continued as a local rural measure of land assessment up to the nineteenth century in Kildare, though the Civil Survey referred to 'towne and lands' in its tabular data.

The usage of 'townland' would appear to have been part of a gradual transition to standardisation by administrators who were dealing centrally with these recurring territorial entities, which appeared to share common patterns and antecedents but had different local nomenclatures. In some of the counties in the Civil Survey, such as in the new county of Londonderry, 'towne lands' are used for land denominations. Inquisitions in 1626 to do with the Ulster Plantation referred to 'townlands' in the barony of Strabane, though in the Civil Survey ballyboes are the units used.²⁹

It is difficult, therefore, to summarise what we might characterise as the genealogical origins of townland. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it had a convoluted evolution from a mishmash of local regional territorial denominations, in a range of Gaelic and feudal manorial lordships, in a variety of termon and church lands, other monastic lands, and far-flung Gaelic territories which may have had some superficial cultural similarity but had developed largely independent of each other. In other words, here was a medieval world where political and social authority was regionally fragmented. Only with the arrival of 'modernising' tendencies, in our case the British state with its administrative bureaucracy, did central authority emerge to consolidate these fragmented margins into a unified entity.

Monaghan is a good case study because it has a fairly clear record in 1591 and subsequently. Airghialla was one of several Gaelic territories in south Ulster which was 'shired' as county Monaghan in 1575. It had internally distinctive experiences of landholding and lordship, but there were patterns of similarity

with other parts of Gaelic Ireland in the geometry of their territorial structures, in terms of fractions of a quarter, half and sixteenths of a ballybetagh - a range of small and very small local territorialisations.

The problem for historians, scholars (and English administrators at the time) has been that a great many of the units and names were measures of assessment rather than area, reflecting the capacity of a place to produce the 'the grass of so many cows' or 'so much corn' rather than a definite number of acres. They did, of course, have boundaries, which could be recited and mapped. The confusion has perhaps arisen from attempts to assume a standard acreage equivalent to these units. Elizabethan records showed the ploughland acreages as follows: 'Meath about 600 acres; in Louth about 300 acres; in the County of Dublin about 200; in Kildare about 200 acres.'³⁰ This kind of irregularity irritated civil servants and revenue gatherers who wanted some kind of equitable taxation scheme and often went for a standard quotient of 60 or 120 acres of arable land, which caused many problems in setting up estates during the plantations. In retrospect, it was futile for the colonial administration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to seek a standard acreage. These attempts at translation, usually referring to 'arable' with the acreage of waste excluded, hinted at the economic reality behind the old assessment system. McErlean has summarised it well:

... area measurement is of limited value as an index of agricultural worth. An acre of bog, for instance, is not equal in value to one of arable. An estimate of the content of each land type such as arable, pasture, meadow, turbary and wood provides the basis for an accurate evaluation of land potential. It is certain that the assessment systems took this into consideration.³¹

What we can say, therefore, is that out of this *pot pourri* of units, the modern state in the seventeenth century, and its associated new landowning estate system, forged a more homogeneous and universal standard of territorial structure which eventually came to be called a townland. Because of their regionally specific historical roots, it is probably pointless to seek an average national profile of a townland. The variety of townland sizes reflects not only development within separate medieval territories, but also variable expressions of land assessment and agricultural potential and diversity in the physical landscape. There is, therefore, an evident environmental logic in the geography of townlands. Broadly speaking, townlands appear to be smaller in the better lands, for instance in north Armagh and neighbouring parts of Monaghan, and much larger in the hill and mountain uplands of south Armagh and the parish of Aghnamullen in south Monaghan. Townlands average 104 and 135 acres respectively in Tehallen and Donagh parishes of north Monaghan; 255 and 276 acres in the hillier and poorer lands of Aghnamullen and Muckno parishes. In the hill country of Newtownhamilton and Creggan parishes in south Armagh they average 563 and 376 acres respectively. McErlean points out that townland size throughout the island may also be related to the size of the original Gaelic lordships, with smaller lordships tending to have more fragmentation and subdivision of their ballybetaghs to accommodate population pressure.

physical landscape, such as streams or mountain features. In the barony of Strabane, the Civil Survey describes the bounds of the manor of Downelonge (consisting of thirty-two ballyboes or two former ballybetaghs):

... from the top of the mountain [named Cullen] it goeth southeastward, to the head of a bogge name Oskekoran which bogge is the meare between the said lands and the Churchlands of the said parish untill it fall into a brooke name Ishland which brooke is another meare between the said lands until it fall into Dennett water, and upwards by this water untill itt cometh neere under the olde Castle of Downemanagh, where it leaveth the water and goeth southwestside, thereof streight upp a stone ditch till it come to the foote of the Mountayne from which it goeth streight upwards to the topp of Laate Mountain from which it desendeth by a green sward, to a rise of a little waterbrooke ...³³

Part of the parish of Ardstraw's boundaries repeat this pattern:

... from thence to ye brooke of Dusertragh, thence downewards to a stone ditch on ye other side of ye brooke, thence to ye forde of Bellinamallogh, thence by a gutter to ye Mountayne glennmc wch devideth betwixt ye lands of Sr. Wm Hamilton in ye parrish of Bodony and ye lands of Sr Wm Stewart in this parrish, wch meares bounds it on ye East, from thence by a litle stream of water wch runeth into ye brooke of Altochall wch brooke...runneth into ye Ushanogh water ...³⁴

While there are references to stone ditches, which are presumably man-made, it is mostly rivers and streams, bogs, fords, or other permanent landmarks such as large stones or rocks, which demarcate the boundaries, as in the parish of Errigal Keeroge:

... by the river Blackwater, ... thence runs along the river Ballimaken ... from thence to Grangegh, ... by a brooke called Owen O Quiggerie, from thence westward ... to brooke of Glanegarragh and from thence runs along to brooke called Ruckan ...³⁵

We can assume that the territorial order of baronies, parishes and interlocking townland units have endured fairly tenaciously down through the last millennium. One of the characteristics of boundaries in the landscape is that when they acquire a social, cultural or economic significance (as with landholding properties or estates such as ballybetaghs or churchlands or termons) there is an inbuilt inertia in their location which makes them remembered and lasting. And all other modifications to the landscape such as settlement, housing, fields and farms and fences, drainage and the general 'improvements' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, occur within the stable network of these pre-existing territorial units.

Names

Seamus Heaney, John Hewitt, Patrick Kavanagh, and John Montague, to name four poets of Ulster, have regularly invoked the names of these little local distinctive places lying at the heart of community. They have identified with the musical rhythm in lists of townland names, like Hewitt's 'Drumbo,

Dungannon or Annalong'. Even the first few townlands in the parish of Iniskeen in south Monaghan have a ring to them: Aghaglass, Annagerril, Aughrim Beg, Aughrim More, Ballakelly, Ballintra, Ballyrush and Blackstaff. Local song writers, balladeers and musicians, for generations signifiers of vibrant local identification with place, have mentioned townland names by the score: 'The cliffs of Dooneen', 'The rocks of Bawn', 'The boys of Carrigallen', 'Slieve Gallen brae'.³⁶

It is a fundamental part of human instinct to name places, to put the stamp of our community and culture on the landscapes we inhabit and own. Townland names (as well as field names, and to a lesser extent street names) are especially significant local signatures inscribed on the landscape, incorporating in most cases our former native language or regional dialect. The critical event in the history of placenames in Ireland was the seventeenth-century consolidation of its land and landscape in the modern (British) state, accompanied by an extensive array of maps and legal records. Naming practices by local communities from three hundred to one thousand years ago were probably constantly evolving and being modified until they were finally recorded and 'fixed' in documents, land grants, confiscations, surveys, maps, wills, indentures, assignments, and other transactions from the sixteenth century onwards. The townland names continued to evolve down to the nineteenth century in local usage, many becoming corrupted as the Irish language faded. It was in the 1830s, as Myrtle Hill writes elsewhere in this volume, that John O'Donovan and the Ordnance Survey embarked on a last big enterprise, imposing standard anglicised forms on the pronunciation and spelling of the placenames, a process about which O'Donovan expressed himself somewhat diffident. His remarks from Fermanagh in 1834, on the unfavourable reaction of locals to new spellings of their townland names, support today's contentions about the deep-rooted identities embedded in the names, as well as prefiguring the controversy generated by the later cavalier disregard of these placenames by the Post Office, aided by local authorities, in the North.³⁷

While this article is not concerned with linguistics it is obviously useful to know what names mean, and to try to understand what gave rise to them. In general one could say that the Gaelic Irish names usually tend to be descriptive of local environmental or topographical conditions in the past, and indeed today, such as names incorporating references to the hilly landscapes of the drumlins, as in *Druim*, *Cnoc*, *Cabhán*, *Tulach*, *Lurga*, *Mullach*, *Ros*, *Tón*; or the quality of land, like *Eanach*, *Cluain*, *Móin*. There is also a numerous range of names which refer to human settlement of the landscape, such as *Lios*, *Rath*, *Gort*, *Achadh*, *Baile*, *Dún*, *Carn* and *Leacht*.

The significance of townland names in English is often overlooked, possibly because it is assumed that Irish names are more 'authentic', and certainly more exotic, in a largely English-speaking society. Townland names in English, concentrated in the Pale regions, have an antiquity as well, often telling a story of active settlement, colonisation and environmental change for hundreds of years. *Burntfurze* (two each in Kildare and Kilkenny), *Blackditch* (ten

instances, mostly in Kildare and Meath), Blacktrench in Kildare, Redbog (six in Louth, Meath, Kildare, and Kilkenny) reflect the process of reclamation of the land in the middle ages. The Kildare Civil Survey recorded the townlands of Thornberry, Thornhill, Furryhill. The numbers of Moortowns throughout the Pale represent in most cases reclaimed marsh or bogland. Blackwood, Shortwood, Allenwood, Broadleas, Whiteleas, Wheatfields, Newland, Loughtown, Kingsfurze, Kingsbog, Ironhills all contain land use references. Newhaggard (four in Meath and Dublin), Pollardstown (in Kildare in 1331), Bleachyard (Mayo), Bleachgreen (two in Kilkenny and Sligo), Bleachlawn (Westmeath) refer to occupation and settlement of the land: curiously the extensive linen industry of Ulster failed to displace older Gaelic townland names. Although the Irish townland names sometimes incorporate family names, many pre-date modern surnames or the names do not transfer well into the 'Englished' renditions, as reflected possibly in Maghernakelly, Tanmacanally, Tullycumasky, Tonyfinnagan in County Monaghan. Ó Ceallaigh refers to numerous townlands which incorporate family names in Ulster: Ballyquin, Ballyfatten near Urney (which refers to Pattons), Tamneymullan (near Maghera, referring to O'Mullans - *Uí Mhaoláin*).³⁸ English and Welsh family names are common in townlands of the Pale, many dating from the fourteenth century and long since faded from local memory: Punchestown, Blanchardstown, Nicholastown, Sherlockstown, Jenkinstown, Guidenstown, Gormanstown, Tankardstown.

Townland geographies are ultimately imprints in the landscape determined by past interlinkages of land, population, settlement and tenants. Why did they endure? Mainly because of the unique interaction of 'agrarian capitalism' as reflected in landed estates and accompanying estate management. Townlands became the templates within which estates managed to improve and modernise their landscape through the agency of the tenant populations associated with the townlands. The new emphasis on commercial rents and market economics which came with the modern state in the seventeenth century meant that estate properties and their territorial subdivisions survived by record. Property assets had to be protected, managed for profit, and handed on. Lands were leased, rented, regulated and recorded for posterity in lists of townland and family names. Griffith's printed mid-nineteenth century valuation is one of the most comprehensive information databases of any European country, with the townlands and their tenant farmers at its core.³⁹ There was an enormous regional and local variation in the way estates were directly involved in the nuts and bolts of landscape change and 'improvement'. Some estates, like the Marquis of Downshire's, maintained a great deal of interest in the details of housing, holdings, enclosure and drainage, while others left much of the internal arrangement of townlandscapes to the tenants. In general, estates like that of Kenmare in Kerry, or of Bath, Farnham or Shirley in south Ulster, were interested in the way tidy and orderly landscapes reflected a tidy and orderly tenantry.⁴⁰ In many west of Ireland townlands in the post-famine period, landowners and state agencies like the Congested Districts Board were directly

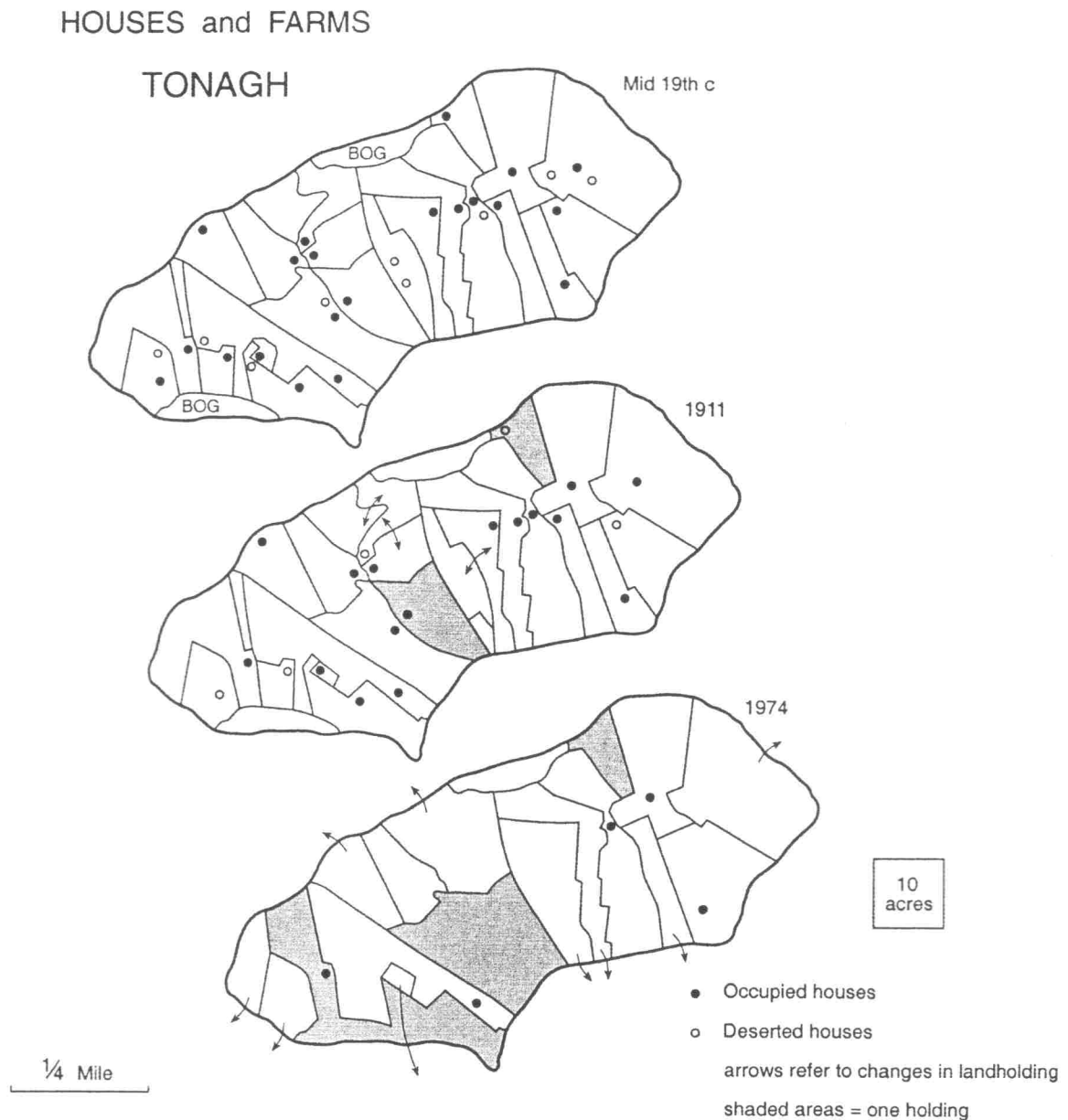
involved in squaring fields and re-arranging rural housing accompanied in many instances by assisted migration.

While one can provide neutral descriptions of the central role of townlands in estates, R J Scally has attempted to subvert this by highlighting their contested nature, especially in the west of Ireland, in the nineteenth century.⁴¹ He has observed the manner in which their apparent disorder - represented in complexities of lanes, houses, townland names, fieldnames and nicknames - was exploited by their occupants to confuse, baffle and resist the impositions of 'official' order on the landscape and society of the townlands.

Using combinations of the Valuation lists, the Ordnance Survey, censuses of population and local field work it is possible to see the way in which townlands formed a territorial context for the waxing and waning of population and settlement patterns at the local level. The landed estates in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries essentially represented bundles of these small units. From being vehicles for the transfer of ownership, townlands subsequently became mechanisms through which the management of estates functioned. This could have all kinds of long-term side effects. For example, the leasing by estates of whole townlands to new settlers resulted in ethnic sorting processes occurring from the beginning: thus swathes of townlands around Newbliss on the Ker estate in west Monaghan, for instance, were 'Protestant' townlands, cheek by jowl with 'Catholic' townlands. In Clontibret parish, the Scotch Corner is located in the midst of 'Presbyterian' townlands. This ethnic checkerboard pattern was repeated in many parts of Ulster, and surfaced as sectarian rural landscapes from early in the nineteenth century, which transferred into the urban townlands along, for example, the Shankill-Falls divide in Belfast.⁴²

Estate policies and practices relating to leasing, subdivision of holdings, and subletting to cottiers were inscribed in the landscape of townlands, and these processes invariably occurred with surnames also being mapped onto the townlandscapes. Often today residues of such earlier contrasts in practice from one estate to another echo in the landscapes of modern townlands.

The accompanying map of Tonagh shows the association between farms and houses in one townland in Monaghan, with the inevitable clearing out of farms and houses since the mid-nineteenth century. With consolidation of farm holdings came declining family linkages to townlands. But in spite of such changes the link between the family names and the land of the townland still persists in many places. Narratives of farm holding changes throughout the twentieth century still reflect the outlines of townlands, sifting out the Brannigans and Woods and Kerrs of Annagh, the Carraghers of Mulladuff, the Hughes and Morgans of Annaglogh (in County Monaghan) and so on. This persistence of family, kin, and townland networks was bolstered by localised marriage patterns until a couple of generations ago. As noted earlier, the townland represented a very local world, where movement and interaction was inward-looking, reflected, for instance, in house dances and other forms of socialisation organised almost exclusively on townland lines. Some Sundays



Houses and farms in Tonagh, mid-Monaghan.

in the early twentieth century saw a choice of four or five kitchen dances within a two-mile radius. In my grandfather's generation, in the opening decades of the twentieth century, marriage 'fields' in rural Monaghan were determined to a great extent by the townland geography. Thirty-two marriages contracted between 1911 and 1930 in three townlands in a corner of Clontibret parish were highly concentrated, most of the marriages linking several contiguous townlands. The years after the second world war especially, saw a speeding up of change and a compression of distance which eroded the localness of townland worlds, together with emigration or increasing social isolation, accompanied by increasing mobility as cars were acquired. And a new picture has emerged in recent decades as many former holdings in the townlands have provided a template for a population renewal as new houses are peppered across the landscape.

The townlandscape of Northern Ireland was subjected to major upheaval in the early 1970s with the Post Office's attempted obliteration of this legacy and its replacement with rural road names which angered so many people across all communities. Of the twenty-six local authorities in Northern Ireland, only Fermanagh had the confidence to reject the road-naming system which so clearly damaged a valued cultural inheritance. Some of the anger, dismay and depth of feeling is captured in the following local reaction soon after the change was implemented:

Roads are now to be given arbitrary names by faceless officials, who attach arbitrary numbers to them. For example, the old Corbally road [in Dromore parish], according to the Post Office, is to be known as 'St Dympna's Road' on the specious argument that St Dympna's Catholic Church is situated near it. But St Dympna herself never stood on this road, and those who do not attend this church must feel at least nonplussed at this arbitrary action. Those who know the value of these ancient names as badges of personal identification will continue to use them, because they have served our people well for so long, and any change now will surely baffle those who come after us.⁴³

The Townlands Campaign in Northern Ireland, fostered by the Federation for Ulster Local Studies, has been focussed on the singular objective of saving townland usage and identity from being lost. This concern may have diverted some attention away from studies of our historical townland legacy and its great significance, to focus more on the nature of the loss and how it can be resisted, a problem which is not yet an issue for the rest of Ireland. However, it should be noted that the fate of the townland at the hands of a modern bureaucracy in the North may very well contain lessons for the future in the Republic of Ireland.

Townlands remain as important places, distinctive local contexts within which the history of landscape and people can be studied, and within which the human need for belonging and community can be expressed in Ireland, north and south.

Notes and references

- 1 From Peter Kavanagh (ed.), *The complete poems of Patrick Kavanagh* ((New York 1972).
- 2 These particular townlands are examined in Brian Ó Dálaigh, Denis A Cronin & Paul Connell (eds.) *Irish townlands* (Dublin 1998), and W H Crawford and R H Foy (eds.), *Townlands in Ulster* (Belfast 1998).
- 3 Seamus Heaney, 'Preface' to Tony Canavan (ed.), *Every stoney acre has a name: a celebration of the townland in Ulster* (Belfast 1991), p xi.
- 4 For discussion of such localized name concentrations see Brian S Turner, 'Notes on family names in Lecale' in *Lecale Review*, 2003, pp5-14.
- 5 See P Duffy, 'Change and renewal in issues of place, identity and the local' in Jim Hourihane (ed), *Engaging spaces: people, place and space from an Irish perspective* (Dublin, 2003), pp13-29.
- 6 Brian Turner, communication, 9-2-02. See also Brian S Turner, 'Mick Taggart's

Townlands', in *Lecale Review*, 2004, forthcoming.

7 P Duffy, 'Unwritten landscapes: reflections on minor placenames and sense of place in the Irish countryside', in H Clarke, M Hennessy, J Prunty (eds.), *Surveying Ireland's past* (Dublin 2004).

8 T McErlean, 'The Irish townland system of landscape organisation' in T Reeves-Smyth and F Hamond (eds.), *Landscape archaeology of Ireland* (Oxford 1983); Ó Dalaigh, *Irish townlands*; Crawford and Foy, *Townlands in Ulster*; see also Angelique Day and Patrick McWilliams (eds.), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland* (Belfast 1990-98), forty volumes.

9 See the recent edition of Kenneth Nicholls' *Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland in the middle ages* (Dublin 2003), pp138-9.

10 See Griffith's *Valuation* published by Eneclann in Dublin:

<http://www.irishorigins.com/> . Other townland databases can currently be accessed such as at <http://www.seanruad.com/>

11 Donegal County Development Board, *County Atlas 2001*, Maps 16-18.

12 See S T Carleton, *Heads and hearths: the hearth money rolls and poll tax returns for County Antrim 1660-69* (Belfast 1991).

13 See Jean Graham, 'Rural society in Connacht, 1600-1640' in N Stephens and R E Glasscock (eds), *Irish geographical studies in honour of E. Estyn Evans* (Belfast 1970), pp192-208.

14 R A Dodgshon, *From chiefs to landlords: social and economic change in the Western Highlands and Islands, c1493-1820* (Edinburgh 1998), p141.

15 This was envisaged for Scotland by Dodgshon, *ibid.* pp40-42.

16 T E McNeill, *Anglo-Norman Ulster* (Edinburgh 1980), p89.

17 The renditions of the names, however, are extremely difficult to reconstruct according to Bishop Duffy, Monaghan.

18 Liam Ó Buachalla, 'Placenames of north-east Cork' in *Journal of the Cork historical and archaeological society*, LIV (1949), pp31-34 and 88-91.

19 P Duffy, 'Social and spatial order in the MacMahon lordship of Airghialla in the late sixteenth century' in P Duffy et al (eds), *Gaelic Ireland: land, lordship and settlement, c1250-c1650* (Dublin 2001), pp 134-6.

20 See J H Andrews, 'The maps of the escheated counties of Ulster, 1609-10' in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, lxxiv, sect.C (4), 1974, pp 133-170; 'Survey of Com. Monaghan' in *Inquisitionum in officio rotolorum cancellariae Hiberniae asservatarum, repertorium* (Dublin 1829), xxi-xxxi. P J Duffy, 'The territorial organisation of landownership and its transformation in county Monaghan, 1591-1640' in *Irish Geography*, 14, 1981, pp1-26.

21 R C Simington (ed), *The Civil Survey: counties Donegal, Londonderry and Tyrone*, Vol III (Dublin 1937), p403.

22 Duffy, 'Social and spatial order', *op. cit.*, pp128-9. In north Meath, lands belonging to the See of Armagh were divided into four and eight 'poles', though many of them emerged later as fewer townlands; see R C Simington (ed), *The Civil Survey: county Meath*, vol V, xxii, and p335.

23 Bath papers, Longleat, Irish box 1, William Smith's survey, 1612; Dodgshon, *Chiefs to landlords*, p125.

24 See P J Duffy, 'Patterns of landownership in Gaelic Monaghan in the late sixteenth century', in *Clogher Record*, X, 1981, pp306-310.

25 In Crawford and Foy (eds), *Townlands in Ulster*, p139

26 Sandra Millsopp, 'A townland study: Bangor, Co Down' in T Canavan (ed.), *Every stoney acre has a name*, p42.

- 27 Simington (ed.), *The Civil Survey: county Kildare*, Vol VIII, pp xxv-xxviii.
- 28 *Ibid.* p xxvii
- 29 Simington, *Civil Survey: Donegal, Londonderry and Tyrone*, p xviii.
- 30 Quoted by Simington, *Civil Survey: Kildare*, p xxvii.
- 31 McErlean, 'The Irish townland system', p322.
- 32 P J Duffy, 'Farney in 1634: an examination of Thomas Raven's survey of the Essex estate' in *Clogher Record*, XI, 1983, pp245-56.
- 33 Simington, *Civil Survey: Donegal, Londonderry and Tyrone*, pp398-9.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p382.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p310; 'Owen O Quiggerie' is most likely *Abhann coig chríoch*, marking an important historic boundary in the diocese of Clogher.
- 36 For a multimedia reflection of names and places in county Mayo, see the CD-rom *Dún Chaocháin, landscapes, seascapes, placenames, stories, songs* (Belmullet 2000). For a comprehensive collection of traditional songs and stories from south-east Ulster, see Padraigín Ní Uallacháin, *A hidden Ulster: people, songs and traditions of Oriel* (Dublin 2003).
- 37 See John B Cunningham (ed.), *The letters of John O'Donovan from Fermanagh* (Belleek 1993), p56.
- 38 Séamus Ó Ceallaigh, *Gleanings from Ulster history* (Draperstown 1995, first edition 1951), pp56-7.
- 39 See the well-executed reproductions of valuation lists and their accompanying maps of townlands and farms in Crawford and Foy, *Townlands in Ulster*.
- 40 See W H Crawford, 'The significance of landed estates in Ulster, 1600-1820' in *Irish Economic and Social History*, XVII (1990), p61; J S Donnelly, 'The Kenmare estates during the nineteenth century' in *Journal of the Kerry Archaeological and Historical Society*, (21), 1988, pp5-41:16; P J Duffy, 'Management problems on a large estate in mid-nineteenth century Ireland: William Steuart Trench's report on the Shirley estate in 1843' in *Clogher Record*, XVI (1997), pp101-122.
- 41 R J Scally, *The end of hidden Ireland: rebellion, famine, emigration* (Oxford 1995), pp12-16.
- 42 My grandfather had a story about his grandfather working with horses in a field in Cornabroc in Monaghan (around the 1830s) when an Orange band from nearby Creighanroe marched through. He asked them not to bang the drum or they would frighten the horses. This had the opposite effect, so he let go the reins, jumped over the ditch and put his spade through the drum, which was a signal for a general riot. 'There never was an Orange march through Cornabroc again', he said.
- 43 P Ó Gallachair, 'Notes on Dromore parish, County Tyrone' in *Clogher Record*, IX, 1977, p268.