

2. Change and Renewal in Issues of Place, Identity and the Local

Patrick Duff

In 1936 my father attended seventy-seven dances in his home parish in Monaghan. Some were impromptu dances at home when neighbours came in or cousins arrived for summer holidays. They were mainly house dances, held in kitchens or outbuildings, with a smattering held in local parish halls.

His diaries chronicled the unfolding daily life of the local community and illustrated the intensity of life at local level from his perspective as a young man in the 1930s and '40s. This was a world of walking and talking, cycling, visiting, churchgoing, football meetings and dances, with people working in fields and farms and bogs – all within a fairly limited range in the parish. There were important local linkages with the outside too – fair-days, football matches and 'the pictures' in Castleblayney, which were accessible by bike, bus or hackney car. For travel further afield in this largely car-less countryside, frequent bus services between Monaghan or Castleblayney connected with the train station and Dublin or Belfast.

It was a world where the intensity of *local* life was in striking contrast with today. Now, the orbit of activity is much more widely

spread out. A degree of what we could call 'de-localization' has accompanied the deepening globalization of recent decades. The house dance in the 1930s, for instance, was one measure of the depth of local space and local allegiance and the connections of family and place. Clearly in situations of such local social life, marriages were still strongly localized. In my grandfather's generation, in the early decades of the twentieth century, most people in the countryside married within a cluster of townlands in their own parish. Jump forward a generation or two and as car mobility increased, so the 'marriage distance' gradually expanded, so that today's national and international marriage and relationship networks reflect linkages with a much wider world.

Anthropologists and folklorists have long recorded all these indicators of the localness of living in the Irish countryside – reflected in things like the céilidhe houses, dances, the 'joins' or mutual aid co-operation and harvest meithealls between farms, and the station masses, all of which dwindled away to insignificance from the 1960s onwards. Beyond these social manifestations of locality, material life also reflected the primacy of local self-sufficiency. Traditional or 'vernacular' houses, shops and outbuildings, for example, were built from local materials (of thatch or slate, stone, clay or timber) in distinctive local idioms and were another measure of localness, which contrasts with today's standardized bungalows, lawns and leyland cypress hedges. The enhanced value that attaches to surviving traditional cultural artifacts today is a reflection of the distinctiveness of such lost local legacies.

The sometime poet of rural life Patrick Kavanagh was the great apologist for the local and his poem 'Epic' is its celebration. Important places, he insisted, were local.

I have lived in important places, times
When great events were decided, who owned
That half a rood of rock, a no-man's land

Surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims,
I heard the Duffys shouting 'Damn your soul'
And old McCabe stripped to the waist, seen
Step the plot defying blue-cast steel –
'Here is the march along these iron stones'
That was the year of the Munich bother. Which
Was more important? I inclined
To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin
Till Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind
He said : I made the Iliad from such
A local row. Gods make their own importance. ¹

Kavanagh's celebration of the local was written about 1930s Monaghan. He was ahead of his time in unashamedly and publicly celebrating local places at a time when the 'City' and urban places either here or overseas were the principal markers of modernity and progress. Ironically, like tens of thousands in following decades, Kavanagh himself abandoned Ballyrush and Gortin for Dublin. It would seem that when local life and culture were most vibrant, pressures to change – from the outside and from the inside – were increasing rapidly. Urbanization was impinging on rural areas from the outside, emigration was haemorrhaging them from within. And local communities themselves were uninterested, indeed ashamed, of any label of localness, which often meant backwardness and deprivation – except for Kavanagh perhaps.

The following discussion engages with the idea of the local in two ways. Firstly, it looks at the meaning of the local through ideas about a sense of place, identity and belonging, memory and home. It might be suggested, for instance, that these local spaces are *placeful*, instead of some localities which might be characterized as *rootless* and *placeless*. Secondly, it examines how this meaning of the local is read and translated through a territorial template of material places. Here we look essentially at local space as *landscapes* – of fields and

farms, roads and houses, townlands and parishes and, indeed, as streets and neighbourhoods, named and claimed by local communities to make sense to them.

We can summarize some meanings of the local in terms that are familiar to many. The local is often our first place, a place of first memories and first lessons in the importance of space and place. Memory is embedded in place, laden with associations for family, neighbour and community. *Here* is where I grew up, *there* is where I went to school, *there* is the last resting place of family or ancestors. Growing old is like climbing a hierarchy and knowing a range of ever more distant locations and places. Earliest memories are of learning the first practical exercises in scale, location, distance, a place-anchored experience that has been described graphically for rural localities by Seamus Heaney:

The rooms where we come to consciousness, the cupboards we open as toddlers, the shelves we climb up to ... the secret spots we come upon in our earliest solitudes out of doors, the haunts of our first explorations in outbuildings and fields at the verge of our security ... At such moments we have our first inkings of pastness and find our physical surroundings invested with a wider and deeper dimension.²

Heaney's is a very particular rendition of the power of place, especially local place, in our lives, and expresses a kind of organic link between people and place, where time and space are inextricably interwoven in memory and experience, 'the replayed shards of feeling arising from a particular place'.³

The local is also about community and belonging, a place 'where everybody knows your name' (the yearning for belonging in the ultimately placeless community of the city pub in *Cheers*), where identity, home, kin and friendship relations are important. As Carson McCullers said: 'to know who you are, you have to have a place to come from'.⁴

Traditionally, and especially in rural communities, there was a high level of familiarity with the topographies of place and people.

Both were known intimately and homely placenames and nicknames were manifestations of this familiar knowledge. This is a place of belonging celebrated in John Denver's song which invokes three powerful words – home, place and belong – in one refrain: 'Take me home country roads, to the place I belong.'

In this way, landscape becomes place through interaction with its occupying community, which helps it acquire a depth of social meaning, and helps to embed it in the community's consciousness and memory. Homesickness and nostalgia are often associated with leaving such well-known places, being displaced to new and unfamiliar landscape associations.⁵

The local is also about roots and continuity in the relationship between people and place, for example, being 'born in the same room as my father and grandfather'. This is a frequent reminiscence of many people born in the Irish countryside in the early decades of the twentieth century. In these cases, past time is important, and memories are handed down, connected to places and landscapes shared with foreparents. Familiar lives have passed through these landscapes, therefore, indeed have helped to build, plant, to make and shape them. This making-and-shaping has frequently featured in the imagery of poets and artists, such as John Hewitt:

Once alien here my fathers built their house,
claimed, drained, and gave the land the shapes of use ...

Or more recently, Willie Doherty's republican reflection on the stone walls of the West:

They represent the blood and sweat of countless generations.
For all this
land is 'made' land, hand made.⁶

And so local place is culturally significant and deeply territorial. It is about material physical space, where activity space or 'taking part in the landscape', for instance, is most intense. This is the space that

we travel up and down, back and forth, every day – routine space where the tangible form and texture of landscape, like houses and buildings, fields and hedges and road networks, are most familiar, most intimately named and known.

The significance of the material landscape is best seen in the search for roots, for personal and family identity, in a physical place – a common quest especially by visiting Americans to Ireland wanting to see where their foreparents came from. RTE's *Sunday Miscellany* some years ago described a journey which two brothers from Manchester made to visit the village their grandmother and her small children had left in Romania at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁷ They were motivated by their father's story about the long journey across Europe and the place he dimly remembered as a child. In describing their return to Romania, the brothers demonstrated the significance of local landscape in our lives: they 'discovered' their identity, for example, by seeing and sensing this forgotten place – their grandfather's grave, the village and its unpaved streets, the railway where their grandmother had started her journey, the roadside villages and the fields where she had worked almost a century earlier, all of them physical expressions of this revisited landscape. It was a feeling akin to meeting long-lost relatives who had lived in and moved through this place. Touching the very stones and earth and the furniture of their ancestral landscape was an emotional experience like people seeing a new-found birth mother for the first time.

In what ways are these local spaces translated into places? We can talk about a territorial hierarchy of places in the Irish countryside – from field and farm to townland and parish, nestling around small towns, up to the county and beyond, which largely remains valid as a spatial frame of reference. We can think of it as a sort of lattice of places that are part of the vocabulary of the local landscape. Just as the text of a book cannot be read until we know the words, so the townland and parish are part of the vocabulary for knowing the

local countryside. How could we survive in this countryside, let alone understand where we live, if it did not have townlands, parishes, counties, not to mention fields and farms?

Agents of 'localization' work through this territorial lattice: postal addresses, for instance, are by townland. There are more than 60,000 townlands in Ireland – there are 1800 in Monaghan, 1000 in Armagh and so on, a vast and complex geometry of little local places. The Post Office and the postman or woman continue as important agents of local social interconnection. The postman on his bicycle used to be a daily presence linking every household in the community. In 1936 he was even delivering the mail on Christmas Day. Today's deliveries are more impersonally made by van over more extensive postal districts. Current proposals to close local post offices, in the interests of efficiency, are popularly perceived as hitting at the very heart of locality. The post office is regarded as the vital link between the local and the national.

The Church operates through the townland-parish framework. In the 1930s the Catholic Church played a fundamental role in cementing the local community together, with a multiplicity of well-attended services throughout the year – benedictions, holy hours, novenas, devotions, stations of the cross. And Sunday masses, where lists of names of people and townlands, regularly intoned as familiar badges of identity, were public affirmations of the primacy of local place and people. These were especially highlighted in funeral 'offerings' and quarterly collections of monies for the parish, and the mispronunciation of the dialect of local placenames by visiting clergy was an amusing demonstration of the 'outsider' status of visitors. Social studies of rural communities in the 1940s-'70s frequently zoned in on the significance of class and gender relations expressed within and outside the church: Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn* was a perceptive observer of these geographies in the 1930s. The modern decline in churchgoing must have important ramifications for the meaning of locality in this sense.

Fair days and markets in towns were the traditional meeting places of localities engaging with the outside world of dealers, buyers and sellers on a regular, but sometimes infrequent basis. Of course, towns play an even more important role today in the social and economic life of the local places surrounding them, one which reflects a more diversified rural community and urban economy, as well as a convergence of urban and rural lifestyles.

But the primary template of locality in the Irish countryside must be the farm and field. Even though the numbers of farms (and farmers) are rapidly reducing, the reality is that almost all of the space of rural areas is still owned by farmers – and their farms are subdivided into the most familiar feature of the local landscape – the tens of thousands of fields. The look, shape and texture of local places are very much a product of fields and their hedges, walls and fences. All the changes taking place in rural housing today, all the growth in ‘non-locals’ or ‘blow-ins’ in rural populations, are happening within the landscape spaces of farms and fields. What is a new house site in the countryside but part of a field sectioned off, sold on and built upon?

An important measure of localness is the way in which local places were and are named, intimately and in great detail, by their occupants. This process applied equally to city areas, though here street naming was usually the prerogative of developers or Local Authorities. Children in city neighbourhoods, however, were adept at naming the minute local spaces where they played: in Ballyfermot, before the city engulfed many of the open spaces, there were the Backers, the Gaels, the Naller, the Ranch, the Californian Hills, the Farnac, many of which over time were absorbed into the official lexicon of placenames.⁸ Such informal local naming practices were an expression of the closeness of links between people and place at the local level.

Apart from the 60,000 plus townland names, there are tens of thousands of minor names in the countryside, mostly ‘unofficial’

names known only at the local and familial level, many of which are now slipping out of local memory. Probably the most universal process was the naming of the fields by farm families, usually labelling the landscape by its location *vis-à-vis* each farmhouse or farm. Thus, for example, common patterns would be the Far Field, the Top Field, the Bottoms, or we find them named by local qualities – the Furry field, Well Field, Brick Field, the Three-Cornered Field, the Sixteen Acres, Above-the-House, Below-the-House and so on. In parts of the West of Ireland, many are in Irish, like *Garraí Mhór*, *Garra Lochtar*, *Lug na Miscéain*, *Poll na Hinse*, *Páirc an Tobar*. Field names can be seen, perhaps, as representing a key to reading and understanding a very local world, which is largely inaccessible to outsiders, where the shape and aspect and size and individuality of the fields, intimately known to their owners, are identified at this grassroots spatial level.⁹ Along the seashores and lakeshores, where local agricultural land uses blend into marine or estuarine activity, there is a rich legacy of names on every rock, inlet and local landmark. The townland of Portacloy in north Mayo, for instance, has dozens of such names: *Barr na Spince*, *Leac na mBáirneach*, *Cladach na Cathaoirreach*, *Na Gearrachai Beaga*, *Silis na gCríosach*, *Uaigh na Madaí*, *Gob a' Chóthra* etc.¹⁰

Townlands, which are fossilized property units from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries whose evolving names were recorded as ‘official’ places by the Ordnance Survey in the 1830s and ‘40s, are fundamental spaces of identity. There is a poetry and rhythm in their names, which is redolent of local dialect and place, frequently reached for in Kavanagh’s writing and aptly summed up in the words of the poet John Montague:

Beragh, Carrickmore,
Pomeroy, Fintona –
placenames that sigh
like a pressed melodeon ...¹¹

The question is, how many of these expressions of locality are still valid? How relevant are they for many of us and for many places today? How have they been altered? To what extent have we been 'de-localized'?

These broad expressions of local space show variations in meaning and significance from place to place in different parts of the country. While a universal process of globalization has been taking place, there is also variety in the way local places are experiencing change, especially with the arrival of more and more 'non-locals' to open out places — which must be one of the biggest contrasts with the 1930s, '40s and '50s, when 'local worlds' were dominant and largely self-sufficient socially, culturally and perhaps economically.

So there are different manifestations of 'locality' in the West, the Midlands, and areas of open countryside, which contrast with other areas like the commuter zones around towns and suburban areas which are more open to outsiders, more fluid socially and less integrated locally perhaps. The population census for 2002 shows Dublin's commuter belt expanding far into the midland region, with assumptions being made about long commuter trips to work in the capital and limited linkages to localities. But emerging evidence suggests that a re-localization of these new communities is taking place. Ratoath is a rapidly expanding suburban community 30 km north of Dublin city centre. Its 'village character, country feel, friendliness and sense of community' endure as strong components in its emerging sense of place and the local orientation of its population. Most of its social, recreational and shopping activity is focused on a fairly constrained local area, though one that is strongly car-based.¹²

One of the easiest ways to understand the significance of locality and place and its importance for identity is to contrast social and economic patterns and processes today with how they were a couple of generations ago. Looking back helps to provide a kind

of benchmark against which to measure the nature of change and the meaning of something like local place and identity today.

In what ways has the organic connection with place and locality decreased over the decades? The widespread housing in rural areas today (nearly half of all new houses, for example, are being built in the countryside) would seem to indicate living, thriving localities, bustling and bustling with people. Indeed this is the case that is made by localities seeking to open up planning processes. But how many today in such local areas have a local allegiance or a local commitment? To what extent are 'dormitory' suburbanized countryside developing in many areas?

My father's daily journey to the school where he taught was by bike in the 1930s. During severe winter weather he came, in his own words, 'straight home'. But during the spring and summer months, his return journey frequently took a longer and more roundabout route, as he 'called into' houses, or more often, as he met people on the road and stopped for a chat.

In fact, it was very much a pedestrian world as it had been for centuries, where the scale of community was defined in walking distances, 'shank's mare', where meeting and talking were an important part of the connectedness of the local. The world of *Tarry Flynn* in the 1930s, or any other novelist's representation of the rural at that time, is one of local sounds, of people, animals, horse carts trundling along roads and lanes, with time to talk. It was also, of course, often a world of intolerable intrusion by watching and gossip, a notable feature of literary representations of the time.

The hand wave or salute to passing traffic in remoter rural areas today is a remnant of the passing greeting and leisurely chat of the pre-car era. The car and later the television isolated people in their local spaces. More than a quarter-century ago Hugh Brody commented on the significant growth of 'privacy' in rural households: the traditional role of neighbours' comings and goings was being

replaced by a modern emphasis on individually private, isolated and socially independent households.¹³

Today, at another extreme in time and space, we can see how motorwayed landscapes signify the altered relationships between people and place, cutting through or sweeping across the grain of the local, where instead of walking or cycling or driving in and through local spaces, we are swept by and over them. In these instances, there is increasing disconnection from local spaces, which are unrecognized places on a blur of signposts. As one commentator has remarked about such landscapes, 'the M25 doesn't really exist – there is no "there" there ... the road and its borders are metaphors of circulation and containment, dreams of escape and inevitable return'.¹⁴ The ultimate in placelessness are the reductionist landscapes identified by numbered motorway junctions: where Celbridge will be identified with Junction 3 on the M4, Duleek with Junction 8 on the M1.

Our 'activity space' is much larger than it ever was. The huge rise in car ownership means that people now range over longer distances to work, to shop, to play – well beyond local horizons. And local commitment to place is more elusive and ambiguous. 'Where are you from?', an inquiry which is laden with enormous social as well as geographical meaning, may soon become as meaningless as it is in many new world landscapes where a highly mobile population renders it irrelevant.

Some have referred to a process of 'de-localization' taking place, where there is a clear disconnection from locality. The internet and multiple television channels, for example, seem to have made the world dominantly global – thereby eclipsing the local entirely. One reflection of this may be the way the American television and movie industries are leading to a global convergence of cultures, reflected in a universalizing of values, tastes and lifestyles. Popular/rock music's global culture knows no bounds. At a more superficial level, it may also be leading towards a smoothing of regional

accents among the young. More and more people may now also identify with non-existent places and spaces, 'virtual communities' in cyberspace, which override all boundaries of locality and render the local irrelevant.

And can we talk of local areas in Ireland, like parts of the US, which are perceived as 'placeless'? There are, no doubt, suburban landscapes where rapid changes have taken place, where there is no connection with the landscape by its inhabitants. These places have little meaning, no memories, no name even. A sort of 'landscape amnesia' prevails.

Perhaps there are examples of this too in many rural landscapes in Ireland which have been depopulated and abandoned and which have reverted to wilderness, haunted by the slumbering ghosts of people who once lived and loved there. In the West there are such lost landscapes, forgotten fields among the whins and heather and lazy beds of the mountains.

Even at this most local level in the hierarchy of places in Ireland, changing farm practices have reduced the knowledge of local space. Tractorised agriculture has little use for field names bestowed when these local spaces were ploughed and harvested for hours or days on end with horse or scythe. Rural work patterns have changed relationships between people and their locality. As Michael Viney has observed in west Mayo: 'Flocks of sheep that, twenty years ago, were driven past the gate by a man and a dog now proceed routinely ahead of the farmer's car (the dog, on occasion, riding in the passenger seat). The end of manual turf-cutting ... has cancelled a whole seasonal procession between the townlands and the bog'.¹⁵ In County Down, three generations of one family have shown a successively contracting knowledge of townland place-names in their district, with the grandfather knowing a wide range of townlands, while the grandson was only aware of his own townland name.¹⁶ So it would seem there is a much reduced connectedness today with the landscape of farms and fields and laneways.

So we could ask – are local places important anymore? Do they matter today? Our world today has stretched over other spaces and experiences and, as Seamus Heaney has noted, ‘We are no longer innocent, we are no longer just parishioners of the local.’¹⁷ Although our relationship with the local has been irreversibly altered in the past couple of generations, he suggests that we still need to be grounded in a local dimension, in a sense of place.

Perhaps associations with local space are more complex today. There is still a need for grounded placeness. We still have to belong *somewhere*. Is it just that the kind of belonging may be different now? Social change inevitably means revisions or modifications to the relationship as reflected, for instance, in emerging communities like Ratoath in the metropolitan fringe of Dublin.

It does seem that we are now seeing a turnaround and a resurgence of interest in the diversity and the particularity of the local – the ordinary, the everyday and the homely in terms of living space. The writer Dermot Healy said, ‘Now places and dialects are opening out again to the world.’

So maybe we are seeing a ‘re-localization’ taking place? This turnaround is reflected in local studies and history courses, in rising interest in local landscapes as reflected in the best-selling *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape* published in 1997, and also the evident rise in local heritage tourism.

Ironically the outsider or tourist gaze may have stimulated a response by locals that has helped to redefine their relationship with their locality. Many townlands in west Mayo and Connemara now have their names prominently displayed on carved stones by the roadside – a pride in place that has been energized by tourism and an interest in heritage. And a contrast to fifty or more years ago when townlands and intimate countrysides were hidden places known only to locals and of little interest to anyone else.

In a preface to a book on Ulster townlands, Seamus Heaney refers to his own personal feelings about the idea of the local townland

when as a young man he read John Hewitt’s poem ‘The Townland of Peace’ in Magherafelt library. The very sight of the word ‘townland’ appearing, as he said, in a ‘fume of affection and recognition’, on the ‘official paper’ of a book was a public affirmation of the local landscape and sense of place. He talked about a ‘premonition of demarginalisation’ passing over him – the townland coming out of the margins and into the light.¹⁸ This is why the abolition of townlands in Northern Ireland by the Post Office authorities over twenty years ago was resisted in so many places. It was an example of the erosion of local identities by a bigger ‘global’ technology – computerized postal codes – which struck at the heart of local identities.

So, interest in local landscape is emerging almost as an antidote to the placelessness and facelessness of global culture. Local cultural differences that are grounded in local experiences are now increasingly prized. There is a new awareness of the value of the inherited artefacts and landscapes which surround us. No doubt commercial tourism has now commodified heritage, as well as the ‘local’ culture and the local landscape. And the EU actively supports the maintenance of cultural diversity, as it is reflected, for example, in local landscapes and places. The implementation of the Rural Environment Protection Scheme throughout the country is a validation of changing popular attitudes to local landscapes and places, and the radical reconstruction of the CAP will significantly alter relationships between rural farm population and landscape in many localities.

One reflection of the continuing importance of the local has been the enduring popularity of the GAA. Indeed the GAA from its beginnings attached its organizational structures to the architecture of parishes, townlands and counties, and probably helped to preserve and promote a local sense of place over the decades. Many of today’s Gaelic sports clubs are using the World Wide Web to consolidate their local allegiances beyond the bounds of their localities and in newly-emerging suburban and ex-urban communities like Ratoath, it is a crucially important local integrating agent.

Local Radio in the past ten years has also been one of the most significant agents of local identity and local renewal. Ironically, the 'wireless', which in the 1930s, '40s and '50s helped to open up localities to the national world beyond their horizons, is now helping, through local stations, to nurture local identities. Local advertising, news and information (including funeral arrangements, a lasting mark of local commitment), music and requests, have significant listener allegiances. Local newspapers too have consolidated their position as badges of identity. Many are now on the web, so that Mayo people in Chicago or downtown San Francisco can drop into the *Mayo News* and keep up with local affairs back home. Although music is a universal global language, changing by the year, the vibrancy of traditional music is a reflection of a resurgence of the local. Nurtured by *Comhaltas Ceoilteoiri Éireann*, *Féisceanna*, etc. over the years, it is now thriving in a commercial and community sense.

We have almost certainly come full circle through all the big changes – we've probably seen a reaction against the placelessness of the global and a search for the connectedness of the local. And local cultures are taking what they find useful in the outside world (like modern technology) and using it to further their own ends. While it (seemingly) reduces the local, it can also nurture and reinforce it.

The Irish Folklore Commission realized the importance of the local and how rapidly changes to it were taking place as long ago as the 1930s. Its scores of collectors spent lifetimes recording the little bits and pieces of life that add up to the texture and meaning of local places and landscapes, which now form a valuable archive of Irish folklife. Like Kavanagh's invocation of Ballytrush and Shancoduff, they focused on the little things that their contemporaries took for granted or thought were unimportant. Time has told us how 'important' were the little places and how 'great' were the 'events' that happened there, manifested in pride in place, local settings of

local communities, local culture, local building traditions, accents, dialects, music, all the marks of significance of locality and place. The 1938 Folklore Commission's Schools Collection, based on a successful formula of linking schoolchildren at the time with older inhabitants of the community, could probably not be replicated in the same way for most places today.¹⁹ This is a measure of change and changing relationships in local community, landscape and allegiances in Ireland today. It is no coincidence that the National Museum of Country Life opened in 2001 in Castlebar, presenting the work of decades of collecting by the Folklore Commission and Folklore Department of University College Dublin. It is entirely appropriate that it should open at a time when the local life it recorded has slipped away, but when interest in locality has been revived and renewed.