

Chapter 2

From Rathdowney to Rattanakiri: honouring Prof.

CONNELL FOLEY and RONAN FOLEY

Red-Light Readable

In Rattanakiri the word for basket
Has been spoken for three thousand years
A tiny tribal man sharpens arrows
As we plan an election
For which he has no word.

I scan the alveoli of jungle
from a helicopter
Searching for villages
along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.
In my hands an American map
from the early seventies.

The Engineers' insignia
surround the map's scale-bar
as the bombing escalates.
The scales of Mao's fish glisten
under scales of justice
hanging by a laddered thread.

A simple stamp declares:
Destroy when no longer needed.
Reading these maps I am
scaled, scalded, white-hot,
ready to plot each crater
each pockmark on the skin.

Red print emerges from the green:
This map is red-light readable.
Blood lines flow from
jungle and ricefield
A kind of foreign policy
in a rubber stamp.

Cambodia a map
*destroy when
no longer needed.*

Contemporary work by cultural geographer Hayden Lorimer frames the relationships between the teaching and learning of geography, and its passing down in text, word and deed across generations, as a set of 'small stories'. He traces the significance of a set of materials (textbooks and notes) and material encounters (tutorials, field-trips, friendships) to a set of lives that linked Aberdeen University, the Scottish Highlands and suburban Lancashire from the 1940s to the 1990s. Our small story connects W.J. Smyth, UCC, and the lives of the authors, Connell and Ronan Foley and similarly employs materials and material encounters in a range of settings from 1977 to the present day. Lorimer correctly notes that to be small is not to be unimportant. It is precisely the everyday nature of lives and their wider 'reach' that glue connections across time and space. Those connections are always mediated through people, memory and the emotional resonances of encounters in particular places at particular times. Such a sensibility has always informed the work of William J. Smyth.

Connell Foley

The academic world provides its own history. Academics laud their colleagues publicly. It happens in almost all walks of life. So what about hearing the reflections of an academic life from someone who rejected it? Below lies a celebration of the legacy of William J. Smyth, geographer and man, from an ex-student who chose a different life.

In my memory, I associate my first encounter with this new head of department, this young professor, with a sense of calming and control. Our first year in UCC geography had been traumatic: three compulsory courses of physical geography followed by a second paper of eighteen compulsory questions. Eighty-five per cent failed the summer exam and 'the brother' and I escaped the massacre. The usual gossip suggested a power vacuum and therefore some shows of strength. But then the breath of fresh air arrived and calmness as well as dynamism entered the department. And the department quickly grew and diversified and then flourished, apart from the madness of the four year masters degree, the so-called Mode A of pure research which we snobs preferred to the two year, part taught course. History quickly judged our snobbery!

Choosing a postgraduate theme, I railed against the hegemony of historical and cultural geography in Ireland. These people were surely living in the past and studying in safe comfort zones when there was so much injustice in the world, so many contemporary problems that needed analysis and answers. I was on the side of David Harvey and *Social justice and the city*. I was influenced by Barbara Ward's *The home of man*, recommended by UCC urban geographer Kevin

Hourihan. Sadly, I was never a radical but I was uncomfortable. Prof. had a perspective that interested me because it was different than mine. He viewed the world with a lens I did not have. He saw things from the perspective of groups, the collective, the ascendancy, the small farmers, the small town business people, political parties as representatives of constituencies. I, the young man lost in existentialism and confusion, saw things from the perspective of the individual seeking a place and meaning in the world. Perhaps it was the age difference then, a stage in the life-cycle. Probably it was training and vision on his part. But what I remember of him as a teacher is as one of the first of the modern wave: open, engaging, listening, and curious as to the perspectives of students; a leader by inspiration, behaviour and warmth than by any title or set of letters.

I jotted in my notebook on May 5, 1984 my observations of Prof. leading a field trip:

The teacher leads here, stops there, pointing, this block of a man, this Colossus. See the waves of hair fall about the forehead with every sweeping gesture; jet-black this hair, a black as dense as a map maker's ink; a poet's hair, not an administrator's. His talking meanders and flows across many fragmented lands. Ruins, I remember, and graveyards and names on shop-fronts. Discontinuities, I remember, the collapse of old orders that could not adapt, the jungle of social groups constantly tugging against each other. Groups, I remember more than most, for his eyes always saw through groups. He lives at that perspective always on a different level to me, understanding society better. An incurable romantic, he laughs at strait-jackets and lenses. I learnt something today, either enthusiasm for such vision or the complexity of the Irish landscape.

To cover a maternity leave, I became a stand-in cartographer for the department and was still there five years later. Prof. was suddenly my direct boss. We worked on the journal *Irish Geography* together in the mid-1980s. My memory of the office on the top floor of the Geography Building, another of Prof's major achievements, was of golden sunlight streaming onto the huge tree of autumnal leaves under my eave and of Prof. marching in, huge and benign and filling the space around the photocopier and coffee table with a presence at once physical and full of spirit. His intellect was always a down-to-earth one. Then there was the size of his smile.

The thematic maps we made back then were ink on tracing paper. We had wide flat drawers where the maps lay on top of each other,

chipping inkwork or Letraset lettering when they were moved. I loved them but my favourite was a map Prof. himself had done years before for his PhD. It was the plan of a church in Tipperary with each churchgoer mapped out according to gender and social class. It said more than all the maps I had seen before. It was a marvel of social observation and anthropology.

I left the cartographer's office to finish my MA. Serendipity provided me the opportunity, in 1992, to work as a volunteer with the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, planning and managing the first elections in Cambodia for two decades. It was a dream come true. I ended up heading the Cartographic Unit, as much to do with my wider geographical training, understanding of the political context and English language skills, as anything else. I ended up working in development in Cambodia until mid-1998 and it gave me a new perspective on Ireland. I appreciated all that we take for granted about our most boring institutions: the law, independent media, a politically-neutral civil service, academia, and a strong educational system. These may not be perfect but they serve as the bedrocks of a stable, fair and just society. That we do not build on this bedrock is but our fault.

Working in international development, I saw at every turn the need for decent research to guide our work. It did not exist but was beginning to emerge. My eyes were opened to the power and potential of community development and capacity building and participatory methods – the need to develop capacities not in individuals *per se* but in cadres and teams and groups so that something remained, should a favoured one leave. In development also we need to 'deep map', get under the skin of things, hear the faint voices, feel the little places, understand the meaning of social periphery. We use the phrase: 'the big picture is found in the small household'. I saw the value of my own training in UCC and how critical and analytical thinking are at the heart of development. Alongside wonder, curiosity and a passion to know more, these are the attributes I saw in William J. Smyth.

In my current work, I constantly see the need for research and rigour and evidence. We practitioners, doers, chase our tails in the tailspin of the speedy world, all reaction and the need to act. We are often in the fug of inertia and comfort zones, continuing to do things that have no proof of success. So now we feel the need to be led by and to lead evidence. We see the need for it everywhere. And there lay the researchers led by their interests, their narrowness and the bitterness of their deep enquiry. We need to get together under action research and generate useful knowledge, breaking down academic



Plate 2.1: May 5, 1984. Professor W.J. Smyth talking to UCC students on a field trip at Timoleague Abbey, Co. Cork.

barriers while keeping standards high under the shadow of Wikipedia and the warp-speed tentacles of the social media.

As a student, as a person, I owe much to W.J. Smyth: the ability of personal warmth and being positive to get things done; the foundation of critical thinking; the refreshing of curiosity and the sense of wonder. Back then, he was, in Anne Buttimer's terms, *paideia* and *poesis* to my *logos* and *ergon*. Now I feel we are closer.

Ronan Foley

An apocryphal story from UCC in 1977 had it that a shivering African nun, soaked on a daily basis in her first weeks of college by autumnal deluges, was overheard asking a geography student when the rainy season ended? It was into such an endless rainy season that three men crossed geographical paths for the first time. One, a leonine refugee from the clerical deserts of Maynooth, took charge of his new department with imagination and brio. The other two, siblings from the peaty-moss soils of south Laois, had negotiated their first year of life in Cork, still confused by the newness of it all, but settling into the beginnings of a deep affiliation to that same department.

A good teacher always inspires and passes on his or her knowledge to their students who in turn take that knowledge and inspiration off in new directions. The word filament is relevant here. In textiles it is defined as 'a continuous object, limited in length only by its spool'. This sense of grounded inspiration, continuity and

limitlessness is an essential part of any teacher-pupil interaction. From those first lectures in UCC, the passing on of Prof's knowledge to us, has led in turn to our reconfiguring of that knowledge in new forms, locations and practices. Prof., as he has always been known in our family, set us both off on a 'laddered thread' of geographical directions. Our routes, and indeed his own, have traced the ever-mobile shifts of the subject itself across five decades, from quantitative revolution to cultural turn and from the calm reaches of phenomenological theory to the constantly shifting sands of the real world. Those engagements were also shaped by the mobile settings in which geographical research is carried out, from the laboratories and classrooms of the Geography Building on Donovan's Road to field-work in west Cork and north Clare and of course, the wider world. In all of these places, the Prof. was entirely present and comfortable and carried us with him.

From around 1980, a postgraduate culture, inspired by the Prof. and other geography staff, began to emerge in UCC. A culture of research is best developed in congenial and collegial environments. A good pub, in this case Cissie Young's, was also an essential ingredient. For UCC postgraduates at the time, through our regular work as tutors and demonstrators and on field-trips, we began to learn to teach ourselves and to transmit what we had learned in our own fumbling ways. These initial experiences saw us, in Ruth McManus's words, move from being geography students to 'student geographers' and in time, professional geographers too. I carried out postgraduate research in historical geography, producing a thesis on the impact of canals and railways on the morphology of mid-Leinster towns; long on empirical detail, shorter on genuine insight. The work took me outside of the department, to Dublin and the literally dusty archives of CIE in the bowels of Heuston Station, as well as the archival valuation records in Ely Place. Here I got my first glimpse, always clearly visible in Prof's work, of the need for original research to be in some way grounded in the material. His own meticulous work on maps, documentary materials, archival records and even poetry, proved a yardstick against which to measure my own research.

Exiled to Wales by the harsh economic climate of 1980s Ireland. I drifted into a short career as a librarian in places of approximately equal latitude; Aberystwyth, Stowmarket and Kidderminster. Then a shift south to where Brighton Polytechnic were looking for a relative rarity in 1987, a person who knew about maps, libraries and computers. Geography's lure proved too strong to resist. In addition, this seemingly odd combination of subject interests quickly begins to coalesce into the skills that underpinned the emergent geographical

subject of GIS. Yet all of those cognate skills had their foundations in the tutelage of UCC and Prof. a full decade before. An understanding of the importance of organised spatial information, whether as map, census return or chart, was something I had picked up in UCC and the opportunity to automate, what had been quite labour intensive processes, seemed to open up new possibilities. The raw materials were the same, but the methodological potential seemed great.

While the development of mapping from paper to digital form may have been a partial triumph of technology over aesthetics, the difficulties of GIS to truly capture lived lives came home to me while carrying out doctoral research at the University of Brighton. I remembered those lessons learned from Prof. about the need for diligent research and evidence. In the beginning this seemed possible using digital data sets and map layers. Yet in trying to use GIS and spatial analysis to plan the provision of equitable services to carers, the difficulties of ever meaningfully representing the real lives of people coping with disabled children quickly became apparent. Here the ultimate dilemmas of cartography were laid bare. Somehow Prof's use of material gleaned from conversations with ordinary people always seemed to illustrate and imbue his ideas with a personal touch. My collated data seemed more distant, perhaps in tune with the technology. The power of information was apparent, but something got lost in translation. There was some value to the work and it was used to justify the location of a new Respite Care centre in an otherwise over-looked rural setting. More broadly, it also started me on a two-pronged path into health geography, where the traces of Prof's work, with his interest in the evidential and the emotional, began to emerge.

I was fortunate enough to visit my brother in Cambodia in 1997. Things were beginning to settle down politically though there was still the odd whiff of danger (so beloved of the comfortable *Lonely Planet*-toting traveller) in a journey to the North West. I shadowed Connell on his trip to Battambang to get a sense of his work. Two visits stand out. At Moug Russei I watched him run a HIV and AIDS workshop, where he listened carefully to a translator converting his words. I could see the shadow of Prof. in his careful ear, the head cocked slightly and then a subtle sign to the interpreter, based on his small knowledge of Khmer, that that wasn't quite what he meant. Later our cartographic paths intersected at Battambang where we visited a community mapping project. What struck me most was despite colonial and technological forms of cartography, the local knowledge and indigenous insights and wisdom in those simple paper maps produced something much more relevant to there and

then. The contrast with the more sinister intentions of cartography, to name, own and even obliterate, were all too apparent and I knew which form I preferred. But in that space, two brothers bent over a simple crayon drawing, I could see Prof. there in spirit, admiring the conjunction of presentation, map, text, voice and the honest lives of the communal contributors.

In the years just before and after the Millennium, the family diaspora was reversed and both of us returned to live in Ireland. My return was ironically linked to the offer of a post as lecturer in Geography at NUI Maynooth. It cannot have been a coincidence that in so doing I was retracing the steps of Prof., whose own starting point was one and the same. I taught and teach modules in GIS and Health Geographies but have also been drawn back to cultural and historical geography and have begun to write about healing waters in a variety of forms. My subjects seem to occupy a slightly later period than Prof's work on early modern Ireland but I like to think they are connected by thematic filaments. I was also lucky enough to attend the launch of Prof's literal and physical *magnum opus* in 2007 on map-making, landscapes and memory. This is a remarkable work, a rare academic replica of the wedding feast at Cana. Prof. has kept the good wine till the last and he somehow mixes good old fashioned content with a neat line in passing theory and a deep insight born from love and experience. The work reflects Nessa Cronin's exquisite phrase, *ómós áite*, a term that well represents Willie Smyth's long held respect for the power of place within the Irish landscape and indeed, psyche.

In another ironic twist of geographical fate, Prof. now has a second home in Rathdowney, where we first grew up and where we discover Prof's partner Vera is the daughter of Connell's godfather, Paul Ryan. Those themes so central to Prof's work, continuity and change, can be seen in the filaments being rewound on the spool, yet extending that process as each returnee creates spools of their own to bring the stories full circle. Those circles are small, being a set of local connections; familial, emplaced, embodied, affective. Yet at another scale, they are global in scope, incorporating large-scale narratives of colonialism, power, identity and language, and always, maps. Just as the night-maps of Cambodia speak of a careless arrogant power, so too do the Plantation maps of Ulster, Laois and Offaly; offset by scale-bars known, not innocently, as 'rulers'.

Even now in 2012 one hears in echo Prof's sonorous voice in a lecture from 1978, switching from the serious to the mischievous. He describes the strong relationships between the sing-song accents of Cork and South Wales in relation to those region's ridge-and-valley topographies. We write it as gospel; rigid, credulous, innocent. We

have all grown older since then. This text emphasizes that we all share a form of spatial DNA; personal and professional, appreciative and critical, teacher and learner interchangeably. The latest trends in the shifting sands of human geography now seem to focus on the emotional and policy-relevance. I'd like to think that in their different ways those themes matter to all three of us. So a pair of brothers, for whom geography and its ways and means have always been central, salute our own past and the man who was a key influence on our subsequent lives. In 2011, *Homeplace*, a television programme on the attitudes to landownership, narrated by a 'Who's Who?' of Irish geographers, opens with a familiar face striding across a familiar landscape in the parish of Clogheen-Burncourt. The caption says it all; William Smyth, Geographer.