

CULTURAL FACTORS IN LOCAL REVITALISATION - IRELAND

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1.1 Introduction

Irish culture is a complex mix of many experiences, from antiquity to the present. From the tombs of the Boyne Valley- which predate the pyramids of Egypt-to the comparatively recent landscapes created by Viking, Norman and other arrivals, it has been a culture in constant change. The recent challenging financial circumstances of Ireland remind us that our culture is – as it always has been- a very important component of our economy. This is reflected in a recent initiative by the Irish Government to host a large forum designed to identify key strategies to assist economic recovery; culture emerged as a key sector.

Since this conference is focused on cultural factors in local revitalisation, let us look briefly at the main structures of the cultural economy. We will then focus on one area – a peninsula in the southwest of Ireland- to allow a more in-depth look at cultural factors in local revitalisation.

1.2 Background- The Export Economy

There are essentially two components to Ireland's economy: one is the international export sector which is performing strongly. It includes major technological and knowledge-based industries and is underpinned by the Industrial Development Authority, a body set up expressly in the nineteen seventies to attract major hi-tech industries. With a favorable corporation rate of 12.5% it has transformed what was largely an agricultural and tourist- based economy with a narrow traditional industrial base into a global one, strongly linked to science and manufacturing, and export -led. In 2010 Ireland was ranked by IBM as first in the world in terms of job

creation by foreign investment relative to population size. It is also the case that there is significant investment in the reverse direction; there are about 200 Irish companies in the US, with one, Kerry Group, being one of the biggest agricultural product-based industries in the world; it has large enterprises in the American Midwest and in South America.

1.3 The Domestic economy

The domestic economy, on the other hand, has recently been hit by severe recession. An over-extended and over-ambitious banking sector brought contagion to much of the banking system. Other factors included a badly-regulated planning system that allowed for too much growth in the construction sector, not just in cities but in rural towns and villages. The cumulative effect of has led to the necessity of the Irish state being bailed out by the IMF as you will no doubt have noted. Now more than ever, we need to innovate, and the cultural economy has been identified as having an important role to play in the recovery.

2.0 The Cultural Economy- Overview

The key bodies which underpin the cultural sector in Ireland are divided into national and regional/local components. The Arts Council, founded in 1951 funds artists and venues across a wide range of disciplines. In terms of the built heritage, the Office of Public Works is a key player in the State sector. Fáilte Ireland is the major tourism funder, and it supports a very wide range of tourism experiences. Significantly, it strongly supports Cultural Tourism, noting that 'Arts plus Tourism equals more visitors and higher revenue into Ireland'. In 2009 culture and heritage tourism generated an estimated 2 billion euro for the Irish economy, with four out of five tourists from overseas citing 'interesting history and culture' as a motivation for choosing Ireland as a holiday destination.

3.1 Case Study- The Preservation of a Heritage

Kerry is a county (the main local administrative unit of Ireland) on the south-west coast of Ireland. It has a rugged coastline with great peninsulas reaching out into the Atlantic Ocean. It was from one of these that the first telegraph cable was laid on the seabed all the way across to Newfoundland, and from the county capital- Tralee-

and the great port of Cork in the south of the province that many emigrants sailed to seek a better life in far –off lands. Agriculture and fishing were important economic mainstays, but the lack of an industrial infrastructure of any scale sufficient to employ the population meant that emigration was an option taken by many.

3.2 The Blasket Island Story

The coastline of the Dingle peninsula is spectacular, making it popular as a destination for tourists. Many tourists could have driven by, oblivious to the fact that some of the most famous literature of the Irish language was written on the Great Blasket Island - a place of great beauty in a small group of islands off the farthest southwest coast. On the mainland, as on the islands, there are traces of the earliest monastic communities of Ireland, mingled with even earlier arrivals dating back to prehistoric times.

This island was home to a community of people who had a remarkable history; fishermen as they were, they produced an extraordinary literature in the early and middle years of the twentieth century; the most important of the authors, Tomas O Criomhthain, wrote *The Islandman*, which has been translated into most of the major languages. Other authors, both men and women, have written their stories also, creating the most cultural archive of its' kind in the Irish Language. It has attracted great scholars of folklore and linguistics not only from within the Irish scholarly community but from farther afield- the Nordic countries, Germany and Great Britain- and the iconic island storyteller, a woman called Peig Sayers, is considered to have been one of the greatest storytellers in the world.

Notwithstanding the history of the island culture, it was evacuated in 1953 as part of a government policy; its fishing infrastructure had deteriorated and many of the inhabitants had left over the years, settling in communities in the North Eastern United States. They had a particularly important concentration in the area of Springfield, Massachussets, with many more in Hartford Connecticut. Those who had remained were housed in villages on the mainland, within short distances from the island. When they left in their canvas-covered boats in 1953 they brought as much with them as possible- including in many cases the felt roofs of their houses that had sheltered them so snugly against the raging Atlantic winds. It was a sad parting.

The island continued in the ownership of the islanders, used for grazing

sheep by those whose holdings on the island remained. Between the natural beauty, its bird life and seals and the island lore, the Great Blasket attracted the interest of visitors – many of whom who were fascinated by its culture. Other visitors came home from America to see what remained of their ancestral places; I remember being there with an eighty year old man who had left in his teenage years; all that remained of his home was the hearth and the rabbits at play.

'Island for Sale'.

One day in 1985, an advertisement appeared in the Wall Street Journal carrying an advertisement that there was 'an Island for Sale'. News spread quickly to Ireland; it soon became apparent from the description that it was the Great Blasket Island and the implication of the news caused ripples in the communities on both sides of the Atlantic.

If, as appeared to be the case, the island were to be sold to become- to whatever extent- a private demesne, one of the most unique cultural spaces- an iconic space in the National pantheon of writers - might be lost to the broader community forever. Lost would be the place where Gaelic and Nordic scholars had collected folklore; where Peig Sayers one of the great storytellers of the world had recited tales of the ages past to scholars from all over Europe; where writers like JM Synge had gone to visit and learn about the culture; where so many scholars of the Irish language had learned to perfect their command of it.

Many people write the history of iconic places, but what made the Island literature so unique was that the authors had written their own stories, full of joy and sorrow and entirely shaped by their own imaginations. The island was for sale; over three years in the 1970's 17 out of 20 units of land had been bought, and nobody had shouted 'stop'.

Community response- from awareness to mobilisation,

The problem now was - how to proceed?

With a long history of out-migration in the West of Ireland, the remoteness of the Dingle peninsula, and the decline of fishing as a key component of the local economy, providing jobs has long been a challenge.

Strategies around actions by the State - while undertaken – were rarely long-

lived due to the remoteness of the area. Tourism and fisheries were the mainstay of the peninsular economy, with the main cultural industry being the Irish language courses provided from the 1950's onward to students spending their summers in the area. Tourism in itself was growing, but there was no really good infrastructure to trigger strong revenues in the area through the sixties and early seventies.

There were of course some big excitements, such as the filming of *Ryans Daughter* by the distinguished filmmaker David Lean in the nineteen seventies. This led to such developments as better accommodation, upgrading of hotels and a good deal of ancillary activities for local individuals and enterprises, but it was short-lived- even if it heralded the winds of change and modernity in such a remote part of the world. The peninsula still haemorrhaged its' young and small enterprises came and went-never lasting for long. The one great industry of former times- fishing- was being reorganised by the EU and has been diminishing as fears grow for fish stocks. A high proportion of the educated young simply left, as had their people before them ...to England and America mostly...following the well-trodden paths of the vast nineteenth century emigration.

Action :1985

A small group of people representative of the local community decided to investigate the best way forward. They organized a community meeting to see what the local people felt. It was decided that setting up of some sort of organizational structure to deal with the situation was necessary. The outline of a plan of campaign was devised; there would be a two- pronged approach with both a Local and a National Committee established.

At the next meeting in Feb. 1986, the second local Committee meeting took place; the highest county authority was involved- the County Manager- as well a member of the national Planning Board. These were briefed on a list of proposed actions; the composition of a Foundation; its aims for conservation of the Great Basket, and a proposal to copperfasten the cultural history and importance of the Island and its social and literary inheritance.

In the ensuing weeks and months good progress was made, involving key personnel from the local administrative institutions and local people in other jurisdictions with special capabilities. Sites in the USA and Canada were investigated

to see how 'heritage' areas were managed. A template of ideas was assembled, as a basis for discussion with key local and regional authorities including the County Manager, whose function we have seen, and planning authorities.

The next meeting of the local Committee was to be a key one; attended by the County Manager and other key officials, it was established that the template of proposals put together by the local Committee was in keeping with the County Development Plan- a most important consideration.

Outcomes included:

- a Work Plan for the local Committee
- an explanatory plan for the County Manager and his team outlining the key proposals of the Foundation . These included the requirements for conservation work on the Island itself and
- a proposal- to build an interpretative Centre on the mainland, facing the Island..

The officials had practical suggestions for the best approach to site evaluation, suitable planners to carry out the work and to investigate the ownership and other issues of Island infrastructure. The year 1927 was chosen as the baseline of the National Historic Park project. It was the year that preceeded the publication of '*The Islandman*' by Tomás O Criomthain, and the young Maurice O Sullivan was absorbing the material that would be the basis for '*Twenty Years a- Growing*'; both books have become classics of world literature. In subsequent times, a canon of books from men and women of the area has been written, as well as accounts by American authors of the Islanders.

Mobilisation and Fundraising

With a sound basis on which to proceed, it was now necessary to mobilise the wider public. This meant identifying people who were knowledgeable about the central issues and had the leadership skills required for mobilization

- creating awareness locally, regionally and nationally
- creating a powerful social network to carry the message

-fundraising

To realise this goal, it was decided that a magazine would be established in which the goals and ambitions of the plan would be publicised for all to see. The magazine, called *An Caomhnóir* ('*The Conservationist*') was widely disseminated at local, regional and national level.

The first task was working to convey to a wider public an understanding of the importance of the goal; networking was based on bringing key contacts aboard from the various levels of society where there would be sympathy for the goals of the Foundation. The individuals contacted included powerful political leaders, civil servants, industrialists, churchmen of all religions, language activists and scholars from both Ireland and overseas who were familiar with the Blasket Literature and culture. All of these people were led to an understanding of the social and cultural importance of the project to save the Great Blasket Island.

By October 1986 the indefatigable Committee were selecting officers for a National Committee, had a booklet and a list of Patrons, which included politicians, clergymen, university professors, industrialists, local people, overseas scholars- the project was gathering momentum. A date was chosen for a National launch to take place in Dublin. By November there was a 'Friends' scheme to report.

Many of these people were either from the Peninsula, associated with it through teaching or linguistic research, and those learning the language there in their youth. From local farmers to the highest official levels of the Irish State, there was by now a massive interest in the fate of the Great Blasket Island.

The local committee decided on a fundraising drive. They organised a draw; tickets would be entered in a raffle for a prize- money or goods. This is where the Japanese come in to the story! Toyota Ireland offered a car per month as a prize- (to be repaid in when the money was raised). This proved a tremendous success. Members of the committee drove the length and breadth of the county and beyond, selling tickets in Ireland and overseas. The response in Britain and the USA was very strong, as was the response locally and throughout Ireland. One of the defining moments in the success of the venture at community level was when a local farmer won a Toyota in May 1988; it is still his pride and joy, and Toyota can rest assured its' reputation is safe in our peninsula...

380,000 euro was gathered in the fundraising campaign, by virtue of the dedicated work of members of the Foundation who moved heaven and earth to achieve their vision . By 1989 the Blascaod Mor Historic Park Bill was finalized, having passed all stages in Parliament with the great support of members from all parties; it was a wonderful moment for all of the people who had worked so hard to arrive at their goal.

The Blasket Island Centre: A place for learning and scholarship.

The idea of building on the mainland was at first received with mixed feelings, but the OPW were adamant that the imaginative building conceived by the greatest architects at their disposal could only work on the mainland. This meant that the Island itself would remain pristine, with a conservation plan for both the original village that still remained there and its magnificent flora and wildlife.

The building was built to face and frame the Island, lying low above the cliffs and waters of the Blasket Sound. It is a remarkable place; as you walk through that flagged, cathedral- like space that leads you to the view of the Island, you are seeing the images of the island writers- the men and women who were the tellers of their own tale. They had been nourished and encouraged by the greatest of scholars, but they were the creators of their own story.

On the opposite wall are images of all of the wildlife of the island that sustained its' people. In the archive, the first full genealogical record of the islanders and their descendants- commissioned specially as a true record for the people.

Artefacts of daily life- their boats, their implements, their clothing- are all there, as are the tales of those who left for other shores, especially to Springfield , Massachussets; a new world –but there was always a hunger for home.

What is most important is that this is a place created by the State in response to the wishes of the people themselves. It is the only high - level Irish language heritage centre in the world and will hopefully develop into a centre for the best of scholars to continue to explore the historical context of the language, as well as the folklore and culture of the area.

Celebration and New Scholarship

One of the highlights of the year at Ionad an Bhlascaoid is the Ceiliúradh-

meaning 'celebration'; organized by the members of the Blasket Island Foundation (Fondúireacht an Bhlascaoid) it takes place annually in October. It is a high-level Symposium addressed by scholars locally, nationally and overseas on a topic relevant to the work of the Centre and the community.

There have been symposia on many themes, including Vikings, the work of John Millington Synge, the literature of the Blaskets, and religion. This past October the keynote lecture addressed the topic of 'the Church of Ireland and Gaelic Culture in West Kerry'. It unveiled aspects of the linguistic tradition that raised a totally new awareness among the community, and key passages of the talk by Dr. Irene Whelan are worth quoting:

'For Ireland was until the early part of the last century part of the British Empire, and there had been a history of interest in the vernacular languages of Great Britain on the part of the Protestant faith. During what was termed 'the Second Reformation', there was a focus on the Irish-speaking peoples of the western seaboard of Ireland, and in particular in evangelising the native Irish speakers in their own language. Preaching and educating in the Irish language opened up an entirely new avenue of contact with the native culture.

Ireland came to be considered something of a 'laboratory of progress' where evangelisation in the Protestant faith would render the native population as loyal and peaceful as their counterparts in Wales and Scotland, who had been successfully evangelised in the latter decades of the 18th century.

A Protestant mission was established on the mainland, and a protestant school was built on the Blasket Island. One of the most vexing and confusing situations that the early pioneers of educating in Irish encountered was the inability of monoglot Irish speakers to actually learn the skills of reading and writing in Irish. If they wanted to teach the skills of reading and writing to pupils whose only language was Irish, they first had to teach them English, in which language they would acquire the skill. This could then be adapted and applied to Irish. But English had never been spoken on the Blasket Island, and it can only be inferred that if literacy was taught to the children in the school introduced by the missionaries in 1864, that it was done through Irish.

This may very well have been why the Blasket Islanders were able to begin what would in effect be a whole canon of literature of their own in the twentieth

century, beginning with the classic The Islandman, of Tomás O Criomhthain and continuing in an unbroken tradition to their descendants on the mainland today.'

Thus has scholarship opened up a new awareness of the complex past of this Island culture and social history; a place famed for beauty is now famed for so much more. In a community where farming is in decline, out-migration has been constant and the language challenged, there has been a mobilisation of people both locally, nationally and internationally in the revaluing of their heritage. The leader of the Springfield Massachussets Blasket Community, born on the Blaskets and now in his nineties, has last year been awarded an Honorary Degree at a special ceremony in the Blasket Island Centre- an affirmation of the Island Diaspora and its' ongoing significance .

In keeping with its' remit to create and keep databases of the community, the island and its literature, important papers of former Prime Minister Charles Haughey, a great supporter of the project, are now deposited in the Centre's archive. This, together with the creation of the genealogical data base of the Islanders, film footage of the last remaining Islanders commissioned for the Centre and the output of the annual Ceiliúradh presentations, are a major resource for scholars of the future- local, national or international.

To say that this complex island history and the extraordinary effort of the people manifested in the campaign to save the Great Blasket Island heritage has been transformative, would be an understatement. The revaluing of a culture has led to a new force for job creation and confidence in the western Dingle Peninsula; this summer, the first Irish -speaking park Guides took up their employment on the Great Blasket; the work of conserving the houses and other built environmental features is now ready to begin. The cultural heritage of the peninsula has indeed proven to be a key economic driver.

44,000 people have visited to date; the benefits extend to the whole area; to businesses of all kinds, to hoteliers and restaurateurs, to the wider local economy and society. The greatest benefit perhaps, has been the true contribution to cultural understanding that has grown among the people arising from the new knowledge that emerges from the work of this centre at the end of Europe. Perhaps someday you will visit it too, and experience the magic for yourselves.