

“A Shower from the Sky”: Legitimizing the Traditional Hamlet in Ireland

BARRY O'REILLY

Traditional hamlets constitute a largely unacknowledged component of Ireland's settlement pattern. The reasons include a lack of clarity about their nature and origins, issues of nomenclature, and a longstanding misperception of their “formlessness.” Stigmatized by an association with poverty and the Great Famine (1845–49), as well as by government and landlord efforts to rationalize or eradicate them, a great number of these traditional settlements have disappeared from the landscape. Yet, at the same time, public discourse today fails to acknowledge them, polarizing discussion of rural settlement between dispersed (“ancient”) and urban (“alien”) modes. Research by the present writer, however, confirms that, far from being exceptional, Irish traditional hamlets have recognizable forms and types, and indeed fit well into the mainstream of European settlement. Ironically, a recent policy shift toward encouraging clustered rural housing attempts to bridge the divide, but could end up adversely affecting the distinctiveness of these historic nucleations.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of reaction [in the wake of the Great Famine] is to be found in the expressed desire of most country people to have an isolated dwelling-house. The clachan or hamlet, once the centre of communal life and tradition, is despised, a symbol of squabbling poverty, and it is the wish of nearly everyone to have a house where he cannot be overlooked.¹

This statement from 1957 by the eminent geographer Emyr Estyn Evans is just as relevant sixty years on. Discussion of rural settlement in Ireland today tends to be polarized between advocates for dispersed housing, on the one hand, and those who promote the concentration of housing in towns and villages, on the other. The former, predominantly based in the West of Ireland, question the legitimacy of urban settlement, while the latter, often urban-based, emphasize the unsustainable aspects of contemporary “one-off” houses.

Barry O'Reilly is a Research Associate at the School of Architecture, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, U.K.



FIGURE 1. Typical recent bungalow. Kiltullagh, County Galway. Photo by author.

Indeed, a goal for a great many rural dwellers is to have their own stand-alone house away from towns and villages — but within their own rural community. A yearning to live among their own people in their home area, and not in a distant town or city, has thus ensured strong opposition to planning policies that favor the aggregation of new housing in towns or even in villages.

It was certainly the case, historically, that a considerable proportion of the population of Ireland, especially in the West, lived in wretched conditions.² And this legacy of extreme rural poverty, coupled with the trauma of evictions of impoverished tenants by some landlords, has greatly colored perceptions of life in the countryside and the aspirations of rural people to achieve better. This has undoubtedly also fed a common desire to abandon what is often seen as the historical baggage of the uncomfortable traditional house for the fresh start of the comfortable contemporary “bungalow.”

Bungalows were erected in relatively small numbers as symmetrical, three-bay houses in the 1920s–50s. But this was followed from the 1960s onward by a far greater number of larger and more varied forms (FIG. 1). The latter were built from pattern books, the best-known being *Bungalow Bliss*, the first of a dozen editions of which appeared in 1971, and which came to be regarded as a textbook for building a stand-alone rural house. Indeed, the book’s success was so great that its publisher, Jack Fitzsimons, has been credited (in a rather jaundiced way) with changing the appearance of the Irish landscape.³ However, the seventh edition of *Bungalow Bliss*, published in 1981, did include a substantial section presenting the argument for the clustering of new dwellings in the countryside, as well as for a more fair-minded attitude toward the traditional house.⁴

SETTLEMENT FORMS AND TERMS

Although there is some historical and archaeological evidence that the larger preexisting monasteries had many of the features of towns, it is generally recognized today that town-building in Ireland began in earnest with the arrival of the Norse at the end of the eighth century.⁵ Urbanization then accelerated with the arrival of the Anglo-Normans toward the end of the twelfth century. And, later, new towns were established with the plantations of the sixteenth century, and as part of the estates of late-seventeenth to early-nineteenth-century landlords.

While the evidence for dispersed settlement in prehistoric and early historic times appears substantial, this may be due to the small-scale nature of excavations before the 1990s. Since then, there has been growing evidence for nucleations in the Neolithic (c. 4000–2200 BC) and Bronze Age (c. 2200–600 BC).⁶ The record for the early historic period (c. 600–1200 AD) is heavily dominated by discrete dwelling enclosures that appear to be the residences of single families, with a size hierarchy reflecting personal status. However, a second layer of settlement, accommodating a servile class of agricultural laborers, is also known to have existed, although this is almost completely invisible in the landscape or archaeological record.⁷ The conclusion, simply, must be that dispersed settlement and nucleated settlement coexisted in the ancient settlement pattern.

A significant number of rural settlements were established by the Anglo-Normans in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Some thrived and survive today as villages — and less visibly, as hamlets — but many more failed and exist only as archaeological traces. Later villages, compris-

ing probably the majority of larger rural settlements, were the work of landlords in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries, who laid these places out in the form of a long street, focused on a crossroads, or around a significant social center such as a church or public house, in time augmented by other services (FIG. 2).

One advocacy group for contemporary dispersed rural housing, the Irish Rural Dwellers Association, has asserted in a self-published volume that “the native culture of Ireland . . . is mainly rural . . . our traditional settlement pattern was based on the dispersed village, as compared with the feudal . . . settlement pattern of other countries.”⁸ The archaeologist Séamus Caulfield, writing in the same volume, more inclusively recognized three rural settlement forms: “*sráidbhaile* or street village,” “*clachan* or nucleated village” and “*baile fearann* or dispersed village.”⁹ As he explained, while “street village” and “*clachan*” (better rendered as “village” and “hamlet”) are certainly components of the rural scene, the concept of “village” in the case of “dispersed village” (a term not readily familiar to students of Irish geography), is typically deployed to encompass all of the scattered houses of a townland (*baile fearann*), the smallest land division/address unit in rural Ireland.¹⁰

The geographer Patrick Duffy has likewise noted that “in parts of the west of Ireland, the townland is sometimes referred to as ‘village’ — but in general the townland is a territorial rather than a settlement entity, and ‘village’ is likely to be a residual reference to original rundale clusters within the townland.”¹¹ And Duffy has even made the tantalizing suggestion that the common Irish usage of the term “street,” to denote the yard space outside a farmhouse, indicates the former existence of space between *houses* and therefore recalls nucleated settlement.¹²

The discourse is further hampered by the fact that there is no generally used word in the Irish language for “hamlet.” The most appropriate term, *gráig*, is rarely used, and its distribution is exclusive to the southern half of Ireland. Meanwhile, *baile*, the classic settlement term, is employed too

widely to be useful for present purposes. Its present application ranges from the most intimate (“home”), to the most expansive (Baile Átha Cliath — Irish for Dublin City), although it historically also meant the lands of a kinship group. In many parts of Ireland, *baile* is also used in the names of rural nucleations, most frequently where these contain (or contained) all the buildings of a townland.

Further confusing the issue is that “*clachan*” is a Scottish Gaelic word transmitted through Lowland Scots English and introduced to Ireland during the early-seventeenth-century plantation of Scottish and English colonists in the province of Ulster. As such, it normally refers to a small settlement, usually having a church. Its appearance in scholarly literature in Ireland may thus be traced to geographers based at Queens University Belfast, although it has been used more generally and more clumsily since to include any traditional grouping of farmhouses.¹³ By contrast, however, the Irish word *clochán*, although it can have a similar meaning, generally refers to a corbelled stone structure.

Among other useful terms, “farm village” was coined by the historical geographer Jack Burtchaell to distinguish hamlets of likely Anglo-Norman origin on good tillage lands in eastern Ireland from the largely western rundale settlements — the latter having a more precarious economic basis on marginal lands.¹⁴ But the English word “hamlet” is rarely used in Ireland, being curiously regarded as appropriate only to Britain (particularly England). According to one source, the term derives from Old French, but is originally a Germanic word related to the English “home.”¹⁵ Evans did, however, occasionally use the term as an equivalent for *clachan*.¹⁶ The term “village” is also sometimes loosely used by occupants of these places.

In considering all the nuances described above, “hamlet” would appear to be the most appropriate term for the historical rural nucleations in Ireland. This article therefore employs the term “traditional hamlet” to describe places with an economy usually based on (or formerly based on) farming or fishing. These have layouts that are often quite irregular

FIGURE 2. Johnstown, County Kilkenny. A landlord village, based on a crossroads with greens at the quadrants. The main street is at the right. Photo by author.





FIGURE 3. Thurles, County Tipperary. Cabin suburbs stretching out from town centre. Ordnance Survey map of 1840.

or sinuous, with a high proportion of traditional houses and farmyards (at one stage having only traditional buildings). Such places may further be distinguished from other settlements established by landlords and others to act as service nodes for a district, and which typically contained public buildings such as a church, inn or school.

There were two other forms of traditional settlement that might be useful to mention here. Both were more typical of urban contexts, however. “Cabin suburbs” were long rows of small houses on the outskirts of larger towns, which were mainly replaced by social housing in the first half of the twentieth century. The other instance were the traditional settlements that formed the kernels of later towns — an example being Skerries in County Dublin (FIGS. 3, 4).

Considering the discussion of terms and forms above, it is curious to consider the dominance of arguments for the primacy of dispersed settlement in discussions of rural policy in Ireland today. This would seem to require, in addition to setting aside all contrary evidence, that the antiquity of thousands of clearly rural nucleations be dismissed. Also problematic is an official perception that nucleated rural settlement is a phenomenon purely (or largely) found in the West of Ireland. The Republic’s *National Spatial Strategy 2002–2020* thus stated that

*In some western seaboard areas, notably in Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Clare, Kerry and West Cork, distinctive settlement patterns have evolved in the form of small clusters of housing. There is a need to recognise this distinctiveness. . . .*¹⁷

Likewise, the government’s *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines* (2005) stated that



FIGURE 4. Skerries, County Dublin. Part of the traditional core of the town. Photo by author.

*Areas with clustered settlement patterns are generally associated with the western seaboard counties . . . where there are comparatively fewer village or smaller town type settlements compared with other rural areas.*¹⁸

A review by the author did, however, find mention of hamlets as a component of historic settlement in four out of a sample of 35 local development plans. However, the Antrim Area Plan (with nine mentions of hamlet), the Banbridge and Newry/Mourne Area Plan (with a general mention), and the Northern Area Plan (with a list of 34 “small settlements-hamlets”) all appear to refer to schemes of laborers’ cottages, recent housing estates, or service nodes; and the plan for Clare erroneously refers to the village of Tuamgraney as a hamlet.¹⁹ Therefore, in none of these instances can the reference to “hamlet” be said to refer to a traditional settlement. Planners in all the 31 other instances chose not to use the term at all.

By comparison, the term “clachan” receives general mention in the local authority plans for Galway City (“clachan settlement pattern”) and Mayo (“in coastal areas of the County, distinctive settlement patterns have evolved in the form of clusters such as clachans and linear groupings”).²⁰ And the use of “cluster” almost always comes in the context of economic development — although Donegal’s plan mentions “traditional building clusters” without further comment²¹ — while the term “dispersed village” does not appear at all.

However, the Meath plan features a section on “graigs,” which appears to be its term for hamlet — although none of these appears to be a traditional hamlet. And the Westmeath plan mentions “the traditional settlement of Ballymore,” which may once have been traditional, but which by 1840 included a chapel and a post office, and today is recognizably a village with few, if any, traditional buildings.²²

PERCEPTIONS OF ORDER AND DISORDER

A consistent element in accounts of visitors to Ireland has been that its traditional hamlets are “formless.” This perception arises especially in comparison to the more obviously “designed” arrangements established by landlords on the edge of their demesnes. Indeed, both demesne and village were alien intrusions intended to order the landscape — and, perhaps, to inspire the native population to emulate their landlords’ concern for straight lines and the regular placing of buildings. The implication was that “order” legitimated the built environment, with the added benefit in the case of Ireland of taming a people apparently bent on chaos. As traditional settlements are often informal in terms of form and structure, there may typically be reluctance to accepting that there is rationality behind their layout. Moreover, in Ireland, where any traditional settlement appeared to have a clear structure, this “order” was often attributed to the influence of a landlord.

The roots of this perception of disorder may lie in comments such as those made by Caesar Otway in 1839, describing the houses of a settlement on Achill, an island off the northwest coast, as being “very like a Hottentot’s kraal . . . a congeries [or pile] of hovels thrown indiscriminately together, as if they fell in a shower from the sky.”²³ Later, the same author referred to another place on Achill as “the congeries of wigwams called Dugurth [Doogort].”²⁴ Reflecting the spirit of his age, Otway thus managed to disparage several colonized peoples.

A slightly later visitor, Thomas Foster, visited Galway City in 1847, at the height of the Great Famine, and commented favorably on the settlement of fishermen in the area of town called The Claddagh:

*I never saw a community more like a mixed community of English and Welsh . . . well and neatly clad. . . Their wives keep their clothes in order, clean their houses and make their nets; and the men are bold and hardy fishermen. There were many Irish names among them [but he noted that the majority of their names were Welsh, English and Norman-French]. . . Their houses are whitewashed and built in regular streets.*²⁵

However, of Menlo, another fishing settlement four kilometers to the north, he wrote:

*Order, which Pope sets down as “Heaven’s first law,” you will look for in vain. The cottages look as if pitchforked to one side. . . there is never a street. . . There is one of these villages about four miles from Galway, called Menlow. . . It contains about two thousand inhabitants. . . The way through the village is the most crooked, as well as the most narrow and dirty lane that can be conceived. There is no row of houses, or anything approaching to a row, but each cottage is stuck independently by itself, and always at an acute, obtuse, or right angle to the next cottage. . . The irregularity is curious; there are no two cottages placed in a line, or of the same size, dimensions, and build. The Irish mind has here, without obstruction or instruction, fully developed itself. As this is the largest village I ever saw, so it is the poorest, the worst built, the most strangely irregular . . . of any village I ever was in.*²⁶

Foster’s concern for the people and their extreme poverty at a traumatic time appears to have been rather less acute than his unease with the lack of apparent order in the layout of their settlements (FIG. 5). His identification of disorder



FIGURE 5. Menlo, County Galway. Ordnance Survey map of 1839.

with the native (Gaelic) Irish and of order with those of British ethnicity, while apparently not inaccurate, was nevertheless judgmental and unsympathetic to the possibility that both settlement forms could in fact have been native, and that each might have had its own particular rationale. However, the mindset displayed by Foster and others can also be understood as part of a colonial narrative that reaches back to the writings of Gerald of Wales, who visited Ireland in 1173 as part of the Anglo-Norman conquest. Gerald’s opinion was that the Irish were “a barbarous people, literally barbarous.”²⁷

This notion of formlessness has been presented so often over the years, even by geographers, that it became almost an article of faith. Thus Bruce Proudfoot (1959) wrote of “a cluster of farm houses and associated outbuildings grouped without any formal plan”²⁸; J.H. Johnson (1994) saw “in many parts of Ireland [though speaking of rundale] . . . clusters of farm dwellings and their associated outbuildings, usually grouped without any formal plan”²⁹; and, more recently, Kevin Whelan (2003), referred to “the notorious irregularity of the house clusters.”³⁰ F.H.A. Aalen has also observed that “This absence of spatial order seems to have been a fundamental characteristic of native Irish settlements” — although he did note “interesting exceptions to the amorphous layout.”³¹

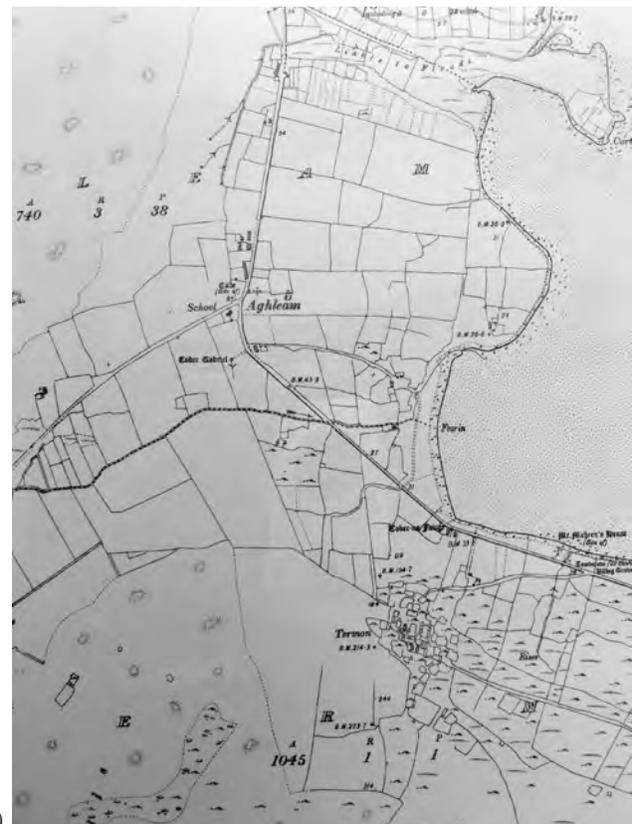
For his part, Evans once described the houses of rundale settlements as “clustered without plan or order (and never strung together end-to-end) generally in some sheltered hollow in the richest part of the townland, though they might be disposed along a road with some semblance of regularity.”³² And he observed that “the absence of a discernible plan as compared with many English or German villages has led visiting critics [presumably the likes of Foster] to regard the clachan as a reflection of the disordered Irish mentality.”³³ Evans also considered that the Irish settlements lacked “many of the well-known features of the English village.”³⁴

Such perceptions have not been without political repercussions for the rural population of Ireland. Indeed, the policy of governments and landlords alike from the nineteenth century onward was to break up traditional hamlets, especially in western Ireland, in order to rationalize the minute patchworks of landholdings. The concern, often well intentioned, was to create “order” from “chaos,” and thus to legitimate what was regarded as illegitimate. Two government bodies in particular, the Congested Districts Board (1891–1923) and the Irish Land Commission (1933–78) were charged with the consolidation of the myriad holdings and the housing of farm laborers and tenants. The resulting reorganization of landholdings was extensive, even if the rationalization of hamlets was less than thorough. This can be seen in the case of two neighboring hamlets in County Mayo at the turn of the twentieth century (FIG. 6). One was altered so radically as to be unrecognizable, while the other, only 800 meters away, remained substantially intact (albeit with a depleted stock of buildings). In the latter case, there was another, informal linear hamlet further to the east. Today, however, the first has been consolidated into a small village, and the second has essentially vanished, having been replaced in recent decades by bungalows and an orthogonal road pattern.

Kilvine, County Mayo, presents a good example of the recent work of the Irish Land Commission in reordering land and hamlet form. In 1953 it aggregated 330 detached plots operated by 45 tenants into 62 plots operated by 33 tenants.



A) **FIGURE 6.** Hamlets at Aghleam and Termon townlands, Mullet Peninsula, County Mayo, depicted on A) Ordnance Survey map of 1839–40, and B) 1900–01.



B)

FIGURE 7. Ballynapark, County Galway. Ordnance Survey map of 1838. This hamlet had entirely vanished by about 1900.



In the process, twelve families were thus “migrated” to other districts to relieve the congestion in the townland. The commission noted that

*... the main cluster of buildings in the townland might almost be described as a rural slum. Thirty-five houses with corresponding out-buildings were congregated within a radius of 90 yards . . . Almost all these buildings were very old, thatched and structurally unsound. The out-buildings were ramshackle and manure heaps were close to the dwelling-houses. These insanitary housing conditions had prevailed for generations. . . . According as new buildings are erected, the old buildings are being demolished and the sites cleared. It is intended that all buildings will be located at reasonable distances to facilitate a high standard of sanitation and general convenience.*³⁵

Where external forces failed to eradicate hamlets, population decline — whether the result of mortality from the Great Famine, or from emigration thereafter, but especially in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the opening ones of the twentieth — hastened their demise. An extreme example was Ballynapark, County Galway, where a substantial hamlet of 45 houses, with a population of 233 in 1841, dwindled to 20 houses and 89 people by 1851; three houses and nine people by 1881; and no houses and no inhabitants by 1891 (FIG. 7).³⁶ Today, this hamlet is essentially an archaeological site. In the early Census of Population, any settlement having twenty or more houses was considered a

“town” and highlighted in block capitals and followed by a “T.” But if the number of houses dropped below twenty, as happened frequently over the passage of the decades, it was delegitimated through applying mixed case in the reports.

The loss of many hamlets, and the shrinkage in size of a greater number, in many localities has meant that these settlements have become less visible in the human landscape. The present writer has assessed the changes wrought in hamlets in five widely separated regions.³⁷ Between circa 1840 and 1900 there was a total settlement loss of 9 percent, with a further 61 percent of hamlets being diminished in size. And by about 2010 there had been a cumulative loss of 19 percent, and a further 55 percent of the surviving hamlets had shrunk further. However, some of the latter now comprise a single house or farmyard, and others retain few traditional buildings. Meanwhile, 84 percent have had buildings added since 1970 and now appear to remain viable as settlement foci, even though they often contain few farmers.

STUDY OF THE TRADITIONAL HAMLET

*There are clusters of farm buildings grouped together in an informal manner with the physical sense of a village. They are the smallest units of physically organised settlement, although only rarely do they include social or community facilities . . . ownership boundaries are blurred and the land associated with the farm buildings may be some distance away.*³⁸

While hamlets in Ireland have been the subject of investigation since the 1930s, few descriptions of them have been as neutral as that above by Patrick and Maura Shaffrey. Most studies have instead been lopsidedly focused on Ireland's western counties, more particularly through a long-running discourse on rundale agriculture, which was a strong feature of settlement there. Rundale was a two-field rotation system comprising a tilled "infield" close to the settlement and a pasture "outfield" (sometimes also having a tillage component) beyond, according to which the cattle were brought in to manure the infield after harvest (there was also frequently transhumance).³⁹ Evans, in his earliest paper on the matter, suggested that the system represented continuity from prehistoric times.⁴⁰ However, it has since been shown that rundale was in fact a late response to acute population pressure in western and other upland regions. Thus, previously unsuitable lands were reclaimed by the land-hungry, encouraged by landlords eager to reap the rewards.

From the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, considerable efforts were made by landlords, the Congested Districts Board (in the West), and The Irish Land Commission to eradicate rundale agriculture — and with it, the associated, relatively crowded and "insanitary" housing. This eradication was justified as a solution to the frequently extreme fragmentation of holdings and tillage plots that had developed over the previous two to three centuries. The campaigns of ratio-

nalization resulted in a radically different farming landscape in large swathes of the country, especially in the West. Today, such districts tend to have a majority of stand-alone holdings and relatively few hamlets. As early as 1939, Evans had written that there was "abundant evidence that the type of settlement accompanying rundale cultivation before its decay was not the dispersed habitat which is such a feature of the Irish landscape [in the West] at the present day, and which, it is often claimed, has always done so."⁴¹ Whelan went further: "much of the West of Ireland was but newly settled, an adventitious and desperate veneer born out of grotesque . . . demographic circumstances" — although he allowed for "pockets of old settlement" in the Dingle Peninsula, at the east end of Galway Bay, and in the Burren, County Clare.⁴²

In a key contribution to the subject, Desmond McCourt, also a geographer, published two important and fascinating maps of Irish hamlets, the first based on the first edition of the Ordnance Survey (published 1832–45), the other on the third edition (published 1881–1913) (FIG. 8).⁴³ He used the term *clachan*, without distinguishing between rundale and non-rundale contexts — and, in opposition, "dispersed settlement." McCourt's second map and commentary discussed the major thinning out of settlement clusters throughout most of the country, and the survival of dense hamlet landscapes in Galway (east of Lough Corrib and along Galway Bay), Roscommon (south of Lough Ree), Kerry (west end of

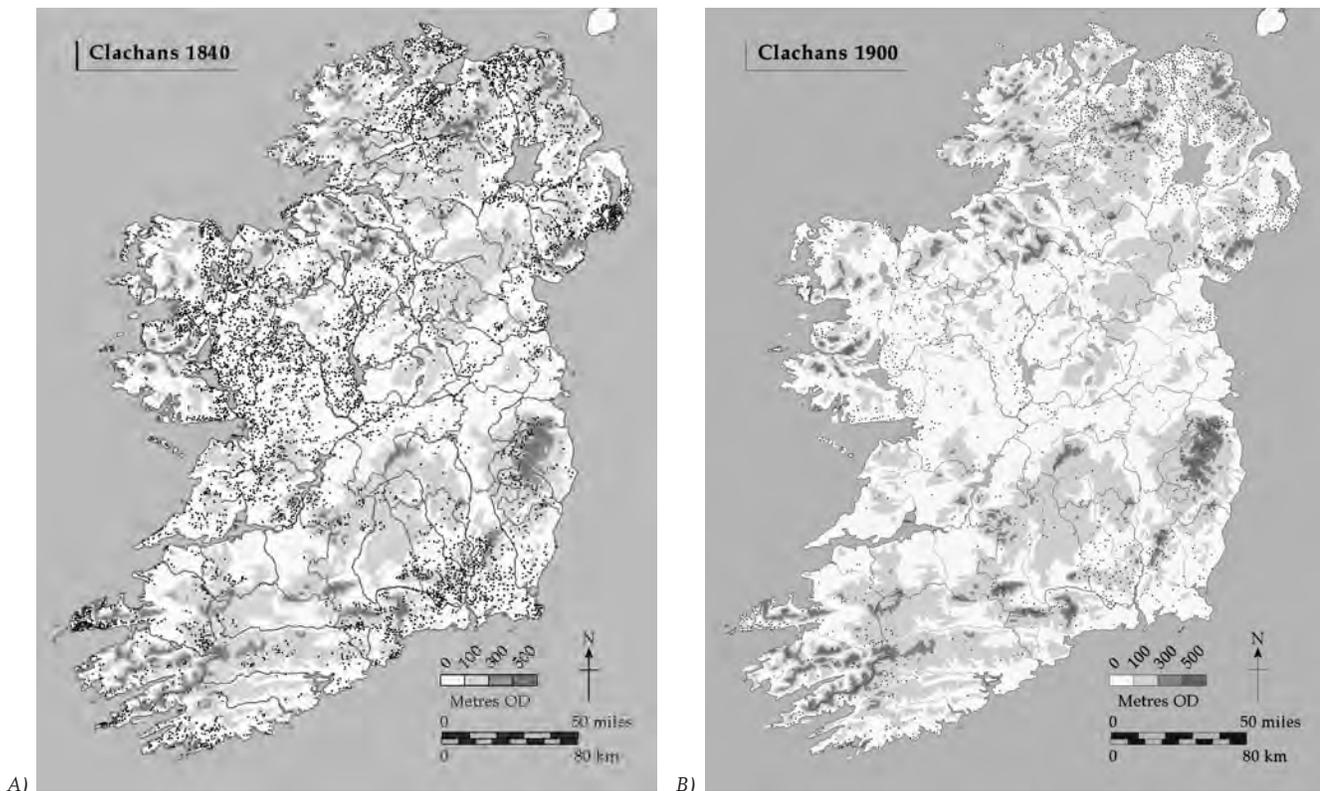


FIGURE 8. Hamlets in Ireland, based on A) Ordnance Survey maps of 1832–45, and B) 1881–1913. Maps drawn by and used with courtesy of Matthew Stout.

the Dingle Peninsula), Cork (southwest corner), much of Kilkenny and west and south Wexford, the western fringes of the Wicklow Mountains, south Louth, the region around the city of Derry, east Derry, and much of Antrim and Down. At about the same time, the Kilkenny hamlets were being recognized as distinctive, and having a different pedigree to western hamlets.⁴⁴ McCourt also suggested, more generally, that there may formerly have been settlements in regions that had few or no settlements marked on the first edition maps, a proposition verified by Duffy for some districts.⁴⁵

The present article also contends that an enhanced understanding of Irish hamlets is possible through a rigorous engagement with their morphology. A number of academic researchers have written of their differing forms. Pierre Flatrès, for example, contrasted Doornane, County Kilkenny, which he regarded as a “centrally-organized village of feudal influence,” with Kiltullagh, County Galway, which he saw as a “regularized indigenous village.”⁴⁶ James Johnson, by contrast, saw the “hamlet” of Kiltullagh as “possibly the result of the activity of a former landlord, though it is noticeable that the houses are not perfectly oriented to the road”; and he contrasted this settlement with the “*clachan*” at Ballyhillin, County Donegal, a linear arrangement with buildings partly on one side of the road and partly at both sides.⁴⁷ Aalen has also observed, for settlements on the Dingle Peninsula, a distinctive “parallel alignment which seems to reflect an intimate relationship between house type and settlement morphology . . . another type of farm cluster occurs with an ordered layout . . . arranged neatly on each side of the road or, less commonly, around a small and ill-defined central space and the farmsteads are often of the courtyard type.”⁴⁸ The most engaging study of hamlets, however, is in Burtchaell’s discussion of south Kilkenny “farm villages.”⁴⁹ He noted four types: linear and regular, often aligned on one side of the road; settlement at a focus of routeways; farmyards arranged along a road like a pearl necklace; and settlements focused on a green or commonage. He also saw the Kilkenny settlements as fundamentally different from those of western Ireland, especially in terms of the social stratification and the mixed occupational nature of the former.

The present writer has tackled the morphological examination of more than two thousand hamlets in Ireland, based on the three broad culture zones of Leinster/east Munster (heavily influenced by the Anglo-Normans), Connacht/west Munster (“native”/Gaelic), and Ulster (greatly affected by the Ulster Plantation of 1609–25). In Ireland, a major drawback for historic landscape studies of this type is the paucity of source material, partly the result of tragic losses of records, especially during the 1916–23 “revolutionary period.” However, the maps of the Ordnance Survey, published in 1832–45 at a scale of 1:10,560, offer a superb framework from which to work forward or backward.⁵⁰ These highly accurate maps offer the huge benefit of having been completed on the eve of the Great Famine, and thus record the high point of popula-

tion on the island. They also record a great number of hamlets at the time of their greatest morphological clarity.

In the author’s study, several criteria were used to identify traditional hamlets: the presence of a grouping of three or more farmyards, or ten or more buildings (less if other settlement features were present); for otherwise amorphous linear groupings, a proximity of farmsteads or dwellings within 50 meters of each other; the lack of a church, police barracks, public house, inn, or school (although they might have included a forge, animal pound, or limekiln); identification by a settlement name (although these were often omitted until later map editions); evidence of a network of roads/lanes, some connecting to the broader road network, and others leading into fields; and the presence of a green, or “green-lets” (the latter formed at junctions of lanes or roads).⁵¹

An invaluable guide to this analysis of morphology is the work of Brian Roberts, who has classified the basic form of settlements as either of row, agglomeration, or polyfocal (a combination of rows and/or agglomerations) type, and according to their regularity.⁵² Using his scheme, Irish hamlets fall readily into categories of row (two-thirds) and agglomeration (one-quarter); but there are also settlements more classifiable as group, peripheral, scattered, and uncertain (about one-tenth). Regularity is more difficult to assess for nineteenth-century Ireland on account of the great flux in settlement. In some regions, however, such as the Dingle Peninsula (County Kerry), south Kilkenny, and parts of Mayo, hamlets are instantly recognizable on the early Ordnance Survey maps because they contained all of the buildings in their townlands. Only on later maps are their buildings sited in a more dispersed manner — particularly as the “ordering” work of the government agencies advanced. Some regional types are also immediately apparent on these maps. For example, the Dingle Peninsula exhibits a regular pattern of agglomeration comprised of parallel ranges of houses and outbuildings, their gables oriented toward the force of the prevailing Atlantic winds (FIGS. 9, 10). These settlements also divide between those where the ranges lie parallel to the road and those that lie perpendicular to it. Interestingly, this is a settlement type also found in other parts of the Atlantic Facade, such as in northern Scotland and western Brittany.

A key feature of European settlements in general is a large open space or “green” at their centers. In Ireland, such spaces have usually been identified with landlord villages or with the marketplaces of medieval or plantation towns. In fact, however, one in seven hamlets has a green, and a further smaller proportion appear to have formerly had such a feature. The physically larger instances of such spaces were apparently used as places for cattle to graze and/or water during droves, or as places for milking; but at a later stage, some greens were used for more general communal activities. Thus the hamlet of Booyglass can be seen to have had a large (typically triangular) green and a system of long, narrow fields. It is further evident that this green, which cut through



FIGURE 9. Smerwick/Ard na Caithne, County Kerry. Ordnance Survey map of 1841.

what had been medieval tillage plots, and Boolyglass's buildings, arranged around somewhat skewed courtyards, stood at what had been the western edge of the fields (FIG. 11).

The courtyard as a component of settlement in Ireland was particularly evident in the East, where tillage was better and the topography more amenable to such activity. Thus a very common hamlet type in south Kilkenny comprised a row of contiguous courtyards, a type that has parallels in Germany and Scandinavia. The presence of the type in County Kilkenny, but not in Waterford (the focus of Norse settlement in the region), suggests that it may have been introduced by the Butlers, earls of Ormond, powerful overlords of the region. Indeed, examination of the cartographic and documentary sources from the seventeenth century onward indicates at least a late-medieval origin for up to a quarter of the hamlets in this region — and island-wide, perhaps one-



FIGURE 11. Boolyglass, County Kilkenny. Ordnance Survey map of 1839.



FIGURE 10. Smerwick/Ard na Caithne, County Kerry. Photo by author.

seventh. Many hamlets, especially in the province of Leinster, also have medieval settlement features, such as tower houses (small castles), churches, or diagnostically medieval field systems, suggesting a medieval origin for the settlement of these places.

The recognition of so many hamlets with features and types having parallels elsewhere in Europe shows that, far from Ireland being exceptional, its smallest settlements belong within the mainstream of European rural settlement.

THE FATE OF TRADITIONAL HAMLETS

Foster, in 1839, was in many ways accurate in his description of Menlo — a place that remains viable and, in fact, has been much expanded through the ribbon development that has occurred since the 1980s. The old core was, and continues to be, highly irregular in appearance. Two factors determining its informality appear to have been its siting at the junction of two rivers that flow from a lake (Lough Corrib) and the fact that its lands fall toward the water. It thus appears that access to landing places along the shore shaped its network of roads, lanes and paths. There is also a definite logic to the placement of its houses: those on roads face the roads, and those on lanes stand at an angle to the lanes. Using Roberts's terminology, the hamlet can be classified as a complex polyfocal settlement, comprising several agglomerations and loose rows, in which one large agglomeration has a radial layout, apparently influenced by the topography.

As related by residents, in about 1840 the lands of the hamlet were divided into 26 holdings, with one man in each holding paying the rent on behalf of the others. The holdings were grouped into quarters of various sizes, an arrangement found in many countries but rarely, if ever, observed in Ireland. Socially, rivalries also existed between the various quarters, and intermarriage only took place between particular ones.

Another characteristic of the settlement is that all its roads, lanes and paths are named, usually after families or individuals, or related to topographical features, principally the lake. However, there is a subtler geography based on slight rises in ground and on notable boulders or stones. One standing stone, named *Crois an Mhargaidh* [Market Cross], suggests that Menlo once had a marketplace. At the heart of the settlement also lay a boulder, named *Cloch Mhór na Cathrach* [Big Stone of the Stone Fort], which was, however, broken up by the local authority in the 1970s and hauled away. The stone had been the focus of social gatherings, neighborly chat, card-playing, and even political meetings. According to local people, its destruction was an act of iconoclasm — one even could say delegitimation.

Perhaps the most contentious act of delegitimation with regard to such traditional hamlets was the destruction of The Claddagh, the iconic fishing settlement at Galway City mentioned earlier (FIGS. 12, 13). The Claddagh had had a separate identity for centuries, with a large degree of autonomy, and even elected its own “king,” a traditional custom in parts of the West of Ireland. It was essentially a trans-pontine fishing suburb of Galway City, with its origins in the eighteenth century, and, as such, it had succeeded an earlier (pre-1651) settlement 600 meters to the north and of similar morphology. Its inhabitants were renowned fishermen, who repaired their nets in the large, open spaces between their rows of small single-story thatched houses.

FIGURE 12. *The Claddagh, Galway City.* Photo by Irish Press, c.1928. Source: P. O'Dowd, Down by The Claddagh (Galway: Kenny's Bookshop and Art Galleries Ltd, 1993), p.66.



Aerial View of the Claddagh (c. 1928): Two open areas are shown including the 'Big Grass' at the bottom of the picture and O'Dea's *Garraí* with electric light pole next to the Fairhill Road at the top. The Rope Walk runs from left to right through the centre and Dogfish Lane winds its way down around the Dominican priory grounds to the right. Fr. Griffin Road has not been constructed and only fields stretch northwards towards Sea Road and the Jesuit Church. (Courtesy Eamon Mitchell).



FIGURE 13. *The Claddagh, Galway City.* The fishing village in process of demolition, c.1930, with new housing visible at left. Seán Sexton Collection.

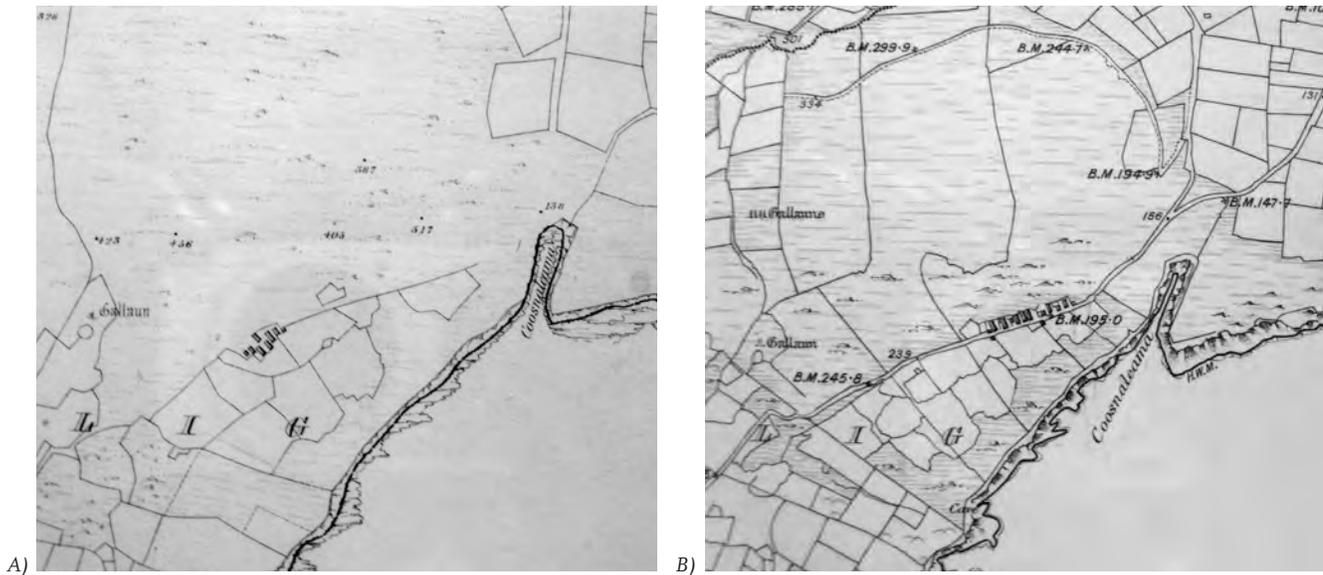


FIGURE 14. Kilreelig, County Kerry, depicted on Ordnance survey map of A) 1842, and B) 1896.

Originally, therefore, The Claddagh had been a large hamlet with a very striking appearance, not dissimilar to the morphology of hamlets in other Atlantic zones, such as the Dingle Peninsula. But by the time the decision was made to demolish it, the local fishery on which it depended had been in decline for nearly a century, and many of the houses had already begun to fall into disrepair. It had already shrunk from 468 houses (with 2,336 inhabitants) in 1812, to 329 in 1855. And by early 1927, there were only 255 houses, of which 51 were classed as “poor,” 69 as “bad,” and 106 as “very bad under normal housing conditions of the time.” Thus, on July 9, 1927, The Claddagh was declared an “unhealthy area,” essentially a slum, and the local authority decided to completely replace all of the houses.⁵³

Ironically, the wiring of the place for electricity in the late 1920s appears to show that the settlement was still regarded as viable — at least by the Electricity Supply Board. There was also some opposition to the project, as the chairman of the local authority commented that “a good many houses . . . could, with a little expense, be made habitable and it seems a pity to knock these down and build new ones when the people don’t want them (applause).”⁵⁴ Indeed, an architect involved in preparing the development plan for the new Claddagh proposed the retention of a small group of the thatched houses as a “folk centre” or tourist attraction. However, his suggestion was not acted upon, indicating that the local authority was motivated by a degree of iconoclasm — a desire to work from a clean slate, literally as well as metaphorically. Delegitimated by the local authority, the place was, however, “relegitimated” by the same public body in the form of a new urban scheme with an utterly different layout and building forms. Demolition of the hamlet began in 1929, and the last house was taken down in 1938.

Kilreelig, County Kerry, is another hamlet that suffered an ignominious fate. There was a row settlement here in 1842, the houses not untypically placed parallel to each other and at a right angle to the road. However, by 1896 this settlement had been abandoned, the buildings dismantled and re-erected about 200 meters downhill (FIG. 14). The relocation was carried out by the inhabitants themselves, as a response to the overly exposed nature of the original site.⁵⁵

In the 1860s the hamlet had six houses; however, two had been demolished by 1945, and thereafter the others had fallen into ruin. However, in 1989 it was proposed to “restore and refurbish eight stone houses with thatched roofs” at what the proponents called “perhaps one of the few surviving examples of a pre-famine rural community hamlet.”⁵⁶ Proponents of the project claimed, equally erroneously, that the hamlet “was built in 1790 after severe climatic change made an earlier sea side habitation further up Bolus Head Road impossible.”⁵⁷

The purpose of the project was to create a haven for artists on a scenic bluff above the ocean. However, as a “restoration,” it resulted in the total demolition of the original settlement, including the foundations of its buildings, and their replacement by partial facsimiles, only one of which has the dimensions of the original. The disregard for facts and the emotive use of the Great Famine simply compounded the loss of this historic settlement.

Promoted as an act of relegitimation, by “rescuing” the ruins of an evocative place, the project thus instead became an act of delegitimation — the ruins needing to be pulled down and reformed to accommodate artists who would appreciate this “extraordinary place,” with all appropriate modern conveniences. Order from disorder! One journalist, who had previously been critical of the effort, wrote:

It's true that [they] demolished eight of the ruined cottages and reconstructed them, using the original stone, with plastered concrete-block inner walls . . . kitchens, bathrooms and glass-roofed studios. But Cill Rialaig [the original Irish name] turned out to be an outstanding success, attracting some 2,500 artists from all over the world . . . to spend time living and working in this extraordinary place; the spin-off benefits for . . . the surrounding area are almost incalculable.⁵⁸

In the time since this unfortunate episode, the outlook for traditional hamlets has brightened somewhat. Indeed, there is a growing appreciation of their traditional character and a concern for their conservation on the part of some local authorities.

Several development plans thus today refer to traditional settlements in a general way: “traditional building clusters” (Donegal); “clachan settlement pattern” (Galway City); “a random layout reflective of traditional clachan style settlement” (Dingle); and “in coastal areas of the County, distinctive settlement patterns have evolved in the form of clusters such as clachans and

linear groupings” (Mayo). However, by far the clearest recognition for traditional hamlets is the section on “farm villages” in the Kilkenny plan, based on Burtchaell’s work. Indeed, the plan highlights six of these places and the same local authority commissioned a detailed study of one, Listolín.⁵⁹

Among other initiatives, the Donegal County Council commissioned a “clachan survey” in 2008 that examined fifteen settlements.⁶⁰ The Larne Area Plan sets out specific development control measures for the settlement of Raloo, County Antrim, noting that “the settlement form is consistent with that of a Clachan and may also satisfy the Scots definition of a cluster of farms with a church — a ‘kirkton’.” And the same plan also lists eighteen settlements, several of which are or appear to be traditional hamlets.⁶¹ Elsewhere, a development plan for the Dingle Peninsula, County Kerry, proposes two traditional hamlets, Cill Ura (Kildurrihy) and Arda Mór (Ardamore) for protection as Architectural Conservation Areas, and highlights five others. And the Louth plan offers similar protection to three traditional hamlets — Newtown Monasterboice, Salterstown, and Whitestown — which it refers to as “clachan settlements” (FIG. 15).⁶²



A)



B)

FIGURE 15. A) Whitestown, County Louth. Image © 2018 Digital Globe, imagery date July 6, 2013. B) Whitestown, County Louth. Ground view of farmyard at top left of aerial photograph. Courtesy of Louth County Council.



FIGURE 16. Kilmore Quay, County Wexford. Image © 2018 Digital Globe, imagery date June 21, 2010.

A notable feature of most traditional hamlets today, however, is their multiperiod nature. For four settlements examined in detail, the average figures for date cohorts is as follows: pre-c.1840 (13 percent), c.1840–1900 (20 percent), c.1900–1975 (31.5 percent), c.1975–1995 (26 percent), post-1995 (9.5 percent). Therefore, the oldest cohort comprises about one-seventh of the current building stock. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century buildings, meanwhile, account for two-thirds. And while the earliest buildings are single-story traditional farmhouses and outbuildings, the latest are considerably larger dormer bungalows or two-story houses. These latter generally present a suburban-style appearance, standing in their own grounds at the edges of the settlements, with driveways leading up to them (and with the lawns of the post-c.1950 houses contrasting starkly with the bare, functional yards of the older ones). Mapping and aerial imagery clearly indicate the extent to which the recent accretions make a radically different statement in the human landscape.

Kilmore Quay in County Wexford offers an excellent example of this problem. It has long been a seaside attraction, now having restaurants and guesthouses; but it actually began as a fishing hamlet, with a Catholic church erected as late as 1875 and a Coast Guard station about ten years later (FIG. 16). A local area plan for Kilmore Quay, aptly illustrates the planning dilemma posed by such a site. It describes two key objectives: to conserve and protect the unique townscape, in particular the character of the Main Street, the thatched houses, built heritage, and spatial character; and to reconcile the needs of conservation with the social and economic needs of the community. It proposes to achieve these goal in several ways: by accommodating new housing in zones labeled “existing built-up area,” “village infill,” and “village expansion”; by encouraging “consolidation of the exist-

ing spatial pattern through infill development having regard also to the need to provide for adequate open space [and] car parking”; and by “encouraging cluster type development in groups of approximately eight to fifteen units in order to avoid extensive areas of suburban style housing which would detract from the character, identity and amenity.”⁶³

It is difficult, however, to see how the area’s spatial character can be conserved and protected if the aim of the plan is to consolidate the settlement by infilling back-lands and other areas — notwithstanding the use by builders of a palate of features and details present in the historic buildings. A key characteristic of this coastal settlement is the sinuous and permeable nature of its north-south main street, with gaps affording views of the sea to east and west.

At a smaller scale than above, development plans generally, as well their supporting documents, increasingly propose the clustering of new housing within existing clusters (as well as the formation of new clusters) principally as a development-control strategy. To be sure, the increasing emphasis on design that heeds local context and traditional features and details is a welcome development.⁶⁴ This should have the positive effect of consolidating traditional hamlets that have suffered population decline (a phenomenon certainly not confined to Ireland). But in order to retain the special characteristics of these places, considerable care is required. At present, the tendency is for new houses to be appended to the edges of traditional hamlets, where land is more available than at the cores (FIG. 17). There are many instances where houses at the core of a hamlet have become derelict as elderly owners die, but where the yards remain in use by older members of the family. In the meantime, the younger generation builds where it can, and this tends to be away from the hamlet proper.

FIGURE 17. Aughagault, County Donegal. Image © 2018 Digital Globe, imagery date March 7 2010.



REMEDIES TO DELEGITIMATION

Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine.

The proverb above translates as “people live in each other’s shadow.” It suggests that the inclination of Irish people to live in close proximity is deeply rooted.

As this article has argued, the multitude of terms used to denote nucleated Irish settlements can simply be reduced to the word “hamlet,” because this is what they are. However, over the years traditional Irish hamlets have undergone various processes of legitimation and delegitimation. Indeed, the latter is actually sometimes presented as a form of relegitimation. Delegitimation may occur in many ways, the subtlest being to simply ignore such places. But the perception of nucleated settlements as places of squalor has had a particularly negative effect, with large numbers being depopulated and thereafter vanishing from the landscape.

Academic study of these places radically alters perceptions of them, however. It shows that they are not “formless,”

but have standard European settlement components, and that they are, indeed, classifiable into types found elsewhere. Irish hamlets can, therefore, claim their place in the mainstream of European historic settlement.

The multiperiod nature of these places, with buildings erected over a period of at least two centuries — and, in many cases, up to six or more centuries — gives them deep roots. Further research could help to reinforce their legitimacy, as part and parcel of the settlement pattern, through analysis of their distinctive nature as traditional settlements. Such research is also required to guide planning and other policies for them. Simply using these distinctive places to absorb new contemporary housing forms, without careful consideration of their traditional character, will be harmful.

Recognition by local authorities of some traditional hamlets is a step forward. However, the most effective act of legitimation would be for the inhabitants of such places to simply continue to live there and modify them to fit their changing needs.

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