

Landscape, place and memory: towards a geography of Irish identities in colonial Australia

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The continuing interest in the history of Irish emigration to Australia forms part of a wider academic engagement with the Irish diaspora, characterised by methodological diversity and ideological debate. Calls for comparative analyses of the processes and outcomes of Irish emigration to different countries – which themselves have not gone unchallenged¹ – point to a growing awareness of the need to situate Irish migrant experience, as indeed that of any migrant group, within the wider histories they shared with others. In Jan Ryan's words, the perceived need now is to explore the migrants' 'shared experience of a shared world' and avoid narrow ethnic histories which 'exclude and contain' their subjects². Even so, the diversity of the Irish migrant experience *per se* still exerts its own fascination, and in North America in particular, the burgeoning diaspora literature continues to explore the social, political, economic and – increasingly – gendered construction of Irish migrant experience in a wide range of historic material environments.³

In Australia, academic engagement with the nature and consequences of Irish immigration has undergone its own paradigmatic shift. Earlier work by various scholars, notably Fitzpatrick, MacDonagh, McCloughlin, O'Farrell, Reid and Richards⁴ has established in broad outline the contribution made by nineteenth-

1 D.H. Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora* (Belfast, 1996); M. Campbell, 'Exploring Comparative Histories. The Irish in Australia and the United States' in R. Pelan (ed.), *Irish Australian Studies. Papers delivered at the Seventh Irish-Australian Conference, July 1993* (Sydney, 1994), pp. 342–53. 2 J. Ryan, 'Chinese Australian History' in W. Hudson and G. Bolton (eds), *Creating Australia, Changing Australian History* (St Leonards, 1997), pp. 71–8. 3 For example, B. Elliot, *Irish Migrants to the Canadas* (Belfast, 1988); C. Houston and W. Smyth, *Irish Migration and Canadian Settlement* (Toronto, 1990); Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles* (New York, 1985). See also volumes one to six in P. O'Sullivan (ed.), *The Irish World Wide. History, Heritage, Identity* (Leicester, 1992–6). 4 See for example, D. Fitzpatrick, 'Emigration 1801–70' in W. Vaughan (ed.), *A New History of Ireland. V. Ireland under the Union I. 1801–1870* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 562–622; *idem* (ed.), *Home or Away? Immigrants in Colonial Australia* (Canberra, 1992); *idem*, *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (Cork, 1994); O. MacDonagh, 'The Irish in Australia: A General View' in O. MacDonagh and W. Mandle (eds), *Ireland and Irish-Australia* (London, 1986), pp. 155–74; *idem*, 'The Irish in Victoria in the Nineteenth Century' in P. Jupp (ed.), *The Australian People. An Encyclopedia of the Nation, its People and their Origins* (North Ryde, 1988), pp. 578–82; T. McCloughlin, *Barefoot and Pregnant? Irish Famine Orphans in Australia* (Melbourne, 1991); *idem* (ed.), *Irish Women in*

century Irish settlement to the construction of Australia's demographic profile as a *congerie* of colonial 'settler' states. Conventional wisdom suggests that the European 'settler' population rose from around 7,000 in 1800, twelve years after the 'First Fleet' under Captain Philip made its precarious landfall at Botany Bay, to approximately one million by 1858 and to around four million by 1905.⁵ By contrast, recent estimates suggest that the indigenous population fell during the same period from a conservatively estimated minimum of between 200,000 and 600,000 ca. 1800 to no more than 93,000 by 1901, as a result of dispossession, casual European violence, systematic local warfare and imported diseases.⁶

Research on the Irish component within this particular demographic transition has emphasised the mechanisms, aggregate statistics and population characteristics of both free and penal Irish migration, as well as the experience of the Catholic majority among the migrants. Consequently, the likely numerical scale of the Irish migrant stream (about a third of a million between 1840 and 1914 – the number of 'Irish born' rising from c.46,000 in 1846 to c.228,000 in 1891), their relative distribution (mainly in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland), and the assisted migrants' general 'ordinariness', low occupational status, regional origins in Ireland and gender distribution are reasonably well attested. So too, are aspects of the social, cultural and political role of the Roman Catholic Church, the one institution which is pre-eminently associated in the popular historical imagination with Irish Australian identity.⁷

If these broad demographic patterns are reasonably clear, their interpretation remains contested and subject to at least some of the discourses which inflect the production of Australian history in general. Chief among these as far as Irish Australian historiography is concerned are issues of ethnicity, religion and gender. In a complex and diverse literature, two characteristics stand out. First, the growing recognition of the need to augment earlier aggregate analyses and general readings of Irish Australian emigration with accounts that privilege the individuality and diversity of the emigrant experience. And second, the continuing emphasis

Colonial Australia (St Leonards, 1998); P. O'Farrell, *Letters from Irish Australia, 1825–1929* (Belfast, 1984); *idem*, *The Irish in Australia* (Sydney, 1986); *idem*, 'The Irish in Australia and New Zealand, 1790–1870' in Vaughan (ed.), *New History V*, pp. 661–81; *idem*, *Vanished Kingdoms* (Sydney, 1990); R.E. Reid, 'Aspects of Irish Assisted Emigration to New South Wales, 1848–1870' (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, National University of Australia, Canberra, 1992); E. Richards, 'Irish Life and Progress in South Australia' in *Irish Historical Studies*, 27 (1991), pp. 216–36. 5 Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra. For slightly lower estimates, see S. Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 81, 110–11. 6 J.R. Short, *Imagined Country* (London, 1991), p. 127. Macintyre suggests the rather higher figure c.1788 of around 750,000. Macintyre, *Concise History*, p.14. 7 C. Kiernan, 'The Irish Character of the Australian Catholic Church' in Jupp (ed.), *Australian People*, pp. 568–73; P. O'Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community. An Australian History* (Sydney, 1985); *idem*, *Vanished Kingdoms*.

placed on arguably narrowly-defined and culturally-disabling notions of ethnicity as a major referent for Irish migrant behaviour.

Patrick O'Farrell's *Letters from Irish Australia, 1825-1929*, published in 1984, was the first in a series of anthologies which sought to recover the detailed trajectory of individual migrant histories and explore their meanings through the textual analysis of migrant correspondence. It was followed by Clarke and Spender's *Life Lines* (1992), Fitzpatrick's *Oceans of Consolation* (1994), and Frazer Simons' *Tenants no More* (1996).⁸ These studies represent a self-conscious departure from attempts at aggregate analysis, and a significant affirmation of the importance of the mental, social and material worlds inhabited by Irish migrants both in Ireland and Australia in accounting for their experience of emigration. Fitzpatrick in particular envisages migrant letters as a method of ritualised negotiation, which used formulaic greetings and content to deny the growing cultural distance which separated correspondents in Ireland and Australia, but which nevertheless still frequently portrayed imaginative evocations of 'home' which remained firmly grounded in Ireland.⁹

The individualism and sense of origins which characterise the migrant trajectories recovered in these anthologies have been mirrored in other recent readings of Irish migrant experience which have privileged the particular over the general. Reid's analysis of Irish assisted migration to New South Wales between 1848 and 1870 grounds this process firmly in the localities in Ireland where these people originated, while Malcolm Campbell has reiterated his call for a heightened awareness of the regional and cultural diversity of emigrant origins and experience in Ireland and Australia.¹⁰ Similarly, accounts of female orphan migration and of the experience of Irish women migrants in Victoria and Queensland, as well as 'micro-studies' of the Irish communities in Geelong, Gippsland (Victoria) and Adelaide have all contributed to the particularist turn in Irish-Australian historiography.¹¹ They predate but accord with Hudson and Bolton's recent assertion that 'mono-

8 P. Clarke and D. Spender (eds), *Lifelines. Australian Women's Letters and Diaries, 1789-1840* (Sydney, 1992); P. Frazer Simons, *Tenants No More. Voices from an Irish Townland and the great Migration to Australia and America* (Richard, 1996); Fitzpatrick, *Oceans*; O'Farrell, *Letters*.

9 Fitzpatrick, *Letters*, pp. 535-627. 10 M. Campbell, 'The Irish in South West New South Wales: The Validity of a Regional Approach?' in O. MacDonagh and W. Mandle (eds), *Irish Australian Studies. Papers delivered at the Fifth Irish-Australian Conference* (Canberra, 1989), pp. 25-41; *idem*, *The Kingdom of the Ryans* (Sydney, 1997); Reid, 'Aspects'. 11 C. Macintyre, 'The Adelaide Irish and the Politics of St. Patrick's Day, 1900-1918' in Pelan (ed.), *Seventh Irish-Australian Conference*, pp. 182-96; McClaughlin, *Barefoot and Pregnant?*; *idem* (ed.), *Irish Women*; P. Morgan, 'The Irish in Gippsland' in P. Bull, C. McConville and N. McLachlan (eds), *Irish-Australian Studies. Papers delivered at the Sixth Irish-Australian Conference, July 1990* (Melbourne, 1991), pp. 120-35; R. Reid and C. Morgan, 'A Decent Set of Girls'. *The Irish Famine Orphans of the 'Thomas Arbuthnot', 1849-1850* (Yass, NSW, 1996); P. Rule, 'Irish Immigration to Geelong: A Microstudy of Success and Failure' in Bull, McConville and McLachlan (eds), *Sixth Irish-Australian Conference*, pp. 201-16.

lithic' understandings of 'Australia' are no longer possible, and their call for studies which recognise the multiplicity (and by implication, instability) of historic identities which operated simultaneously at individual, local and national levels.¹²

If the individualism inherent in these studies represents a necessary corrective to the generalising assumptions of previous aggregate analysis, it may also have helped to destabilise the essentialist ethnic assumptions which have underpinned much of the discussion of Irish migrant identity and behaviour in Australia. The central tenets of this essentialist discourse are first, that the primary explanation for migrant behaviour is to be found, not in the material conditions the Irish encountered in Australia, but in their innate ethnicity, a view which Campbell argues also underpins the 'exceptionalism' of Irish-American historiography.¹³ And second, that the only *authentic* Irish ethnicity was, by implication, Gaelic and Catholic. The epistemological status of these assertions has rarely been considered, and the assumption of Gaelic/Catholic authenticity frequently accepted unreflexively as a 'given', though some recent studies, notably by Akenson and Payton, have begun to address its meanings.¹⁴ Here we follow Ashcroft and Isajaw, and consider an ethnic group to be a population subset defined or set apart by itself and/or others, primarily on the basis of cultural or national characteristics. These include a common ancestral origin, shared cultural traits, traditions, language and social patterns; and a shared sense of 'people-hood' or group belonging, expressed in terms of experiences, consciousness of kind, memories and loyalties.¹⁵

When defined in these terms, it seems hard to assert that the Anglo-Irish and Scots-Irish minorities among the Irish migrants were less deserving of separate ethnic status than the Gaelic Irish majority. Although as migrants, these three groups shared a common origin in Ireland, they did not share a common ancestry there. Equally, while they might have been defined on occasion in Australia as a collective 'Other' – and been willing to accept this designation – they remained deeply conscious of their own defining localism and separate identities. And finally, above everything else, they remained divided by possibly the most powerful cultural referent of all: religion and its attendant narratives of empowerment and dispossession. Whether, in the end, this made the Anglo-Irish and Scots-Irish less *authentically* Irish, is entirely a matter for subjective judgement. We merely conclude

¹² Hudson and Bolton, *Creating Australia*, pp. 2–18. ¹³ Campbell, 'Comparative Histories'. ¹⁴ D.H. Akenson, *Small Differences. Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants 1815–1922* (Dublin, 1988); *idem*, *Diaspora*, p. 112 ff; C. Cumming, "In the Language of Ossian": Gaelic Survival in Australia and New Zealand – A Comparison' in *Australian Studies*, 12 [2] (1997), pp. 104–121; P. Payton, 'Re-inventing Celtic Australia: Notions of Celtic Identity from the Colonial Period to the Era of Multi-Culturalism' in *Australian Studies*, 12 [2] (1997), pp. 78–90. For a wider theorisation of representations of identity in Australia, see M. Dixon, *The Imaginary Australian. Anglo-Celts and Identity – 1788 to the present* (Sydney, 1999). ¹⁵ B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin (eds), *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London, 1998), pp. 80–4.

that the migration stream from Ireland to Australia contained members of each of these three population groups who, while they were in many ways quite clearly distinguishable in ethnic terms, also shared a highly contested history in Ireland, which at times blurred and shaded their identities both there and, subsequently, in Australia.

It is therefore noteworthy that despite the well-attested evidence for significant Protestant Irish migration to Australia, much of the discussion of Irish Australian history continues to ellide their history with that of the Catholic majority. Protestants are estimated to have accounted for up to 45 per cent of Irish-born migrants in 1844–5 (in New South Wales), and by 1891 still numbered perhaps one-fifth of the total of c.228,000 Irish-born in Australia, yet their presence in the historiographical record remains curiously muted. Obvious exceptions include studies of various Anglican gentry families and of the Anglo-Irish in general, as well as the textual analysis of letters from Protestants in the migrant anthologies referred to above, but in general the non-Catholic Irish have attracted only generalised comment.¹⁶

The existence of these 'hidden histories' of Irish Protestant migration are an apt reminder of the silences and absences which inflect all attempts at historical understanding. The remainder of this paper argues that in the case of Irish migration (of all descriptions) to Australia, one of the most significant silences relates to the geographical construction of the clearly diverse identities this created in that country during the colonial period. While rejecting assertions of Gaelic Catholic ethnic authenticity in Ireland, the discussion recognises that this particular community nevertheless stood in a cultural relationship with British authority there which was not shared in its entirety by others. Accordingly, after considering first, how geographical space might be implicated in general in the reproduction of Irish identities in Australia, the paper concludes with an analysis of the implications for these identities of what has been argued to have been the 'colonial' relationship between Britain and Ireland up until the nineteenth century.

I

With the notable exception of Malcolm Campbell's *The Kingdom of the Ryans*,¹⁷ scholars working on the history of Irish settlement in colonial Australia have eschewed detailed engagement with the geographical contexts in which it

¹⁶ G. Forth, 'The Anglo-Irish in Australia. Old World Origins and Colonial Experiences' in Bull, McConville and McLachlan (eds), *Sixth Irish-Australian Conference*, pp. 51–62; *idem*, "'No Petty People": The Anglo-Irish identity in colonial Australia' in P. O'Sullivan (ed.), *The Irish World Wide. History, Heritage, Identity. Volume Two. The Irish in the New Communities* (Leicester, 1992), pp. 128–42; T. McCloughlin, 'Protestant Irish Settlement' in Jupp (ed.), *Australia People*, pp. 573–76; O'Farrell, *Irish Australia*, *passim*. ¹⁷ Campbell, *Kingdom*.

occurred. Rather, and on the basis of spatial statistical analyses that have gone largely unchallenged, conventional wisdom has it that Irish migrants were widely distributed throughout the settled areas as opposed to the outback, but showed no particular preference for agricultural districts. Moreover, while they might have been slightly under-represented in urban Victoria but over-represented in urban New South Wales between 1861 and 1901, they displayed no tendency to congregate in the sort of urban ghettos that characterised New York or Boston. The overall pattern has been variously explained in terms of social and geographical mobility and urban growth, but has also been held to reflect the Irish settlers' 'caution, prudence and good economic sense'.¹⁸

There are, however, considerable limitations to this formulation. It is based on the consensus that since by the late nineteenth century, the overwhelming majority of Irish migrants were Catholic, in the absence of census data relating to place of birth, data on religious affiliation can be used as a surrogate measure of the distribution of 'Irish' settlement. Figure 1 exemplifies this, and identifies those census enumeration districts where the number of Catholics exceeded 34 per cent of the recorded population in 1891. Whether it is acceptable as a representation of the distribution of *Irish* Catholics at that time depends, first, on the accuracy of this consensual estimate that around 80 per cent of Irish migrants were by then Catholic, and second, on the status of Macdonagh's assertion that the overwhelming majority of Catholics in Australia were Irish. Even if both these conditions hold true, the depicted distribution quite clearly excludes Protestant Irish settlement, and yet it was originally published as an acceptable surrogate representation of the distribution of the Irish in south-east Australia.¹⁹ In reality, therefore, the map is culturally-disabling, and constitutes a form of erasure which reinforces the essentialist assumption of synonymity between authentic Irish ethnicity and Catholicism.

Moreover, there are sound reasons to suggest that this form of areal statistical representation is itself inherently misleading, and certainly does not support the thesis that Irish settlement was characteristically evenly distributed. This involves what has been termed an 'ecological fallacy',²⁰ the assumption that the population characteristic which is under consideration (in this case the proportion of Catholics), is uniformly distributed throughout the geographical space represented by each enumeration unit. This is plainly not necessarily the case. Figure 1 tells us nothing about the micro-geographies of Catholic settlement either in the enumeration units which it highlights, or in others where the *overall* proportion of Catholics was lower. We cannot determine from the threshold proportional statistic whether Catholics were concentrated in particular parts of any enumeration district, or whether they were indeed evenly spread across its entire area. Both outcomes are entirely plausible irrespective of the overall proportion of the

¹⁸ Summarised by Fitzpatrick, *Oceans*, pp. 16–18. ¹⁹ Kiernan, 'Irish Character', p. 569.

²⁰ D. Martin, *Geographic Information Systems and Their Socio-economic Applications* (London, 1991).

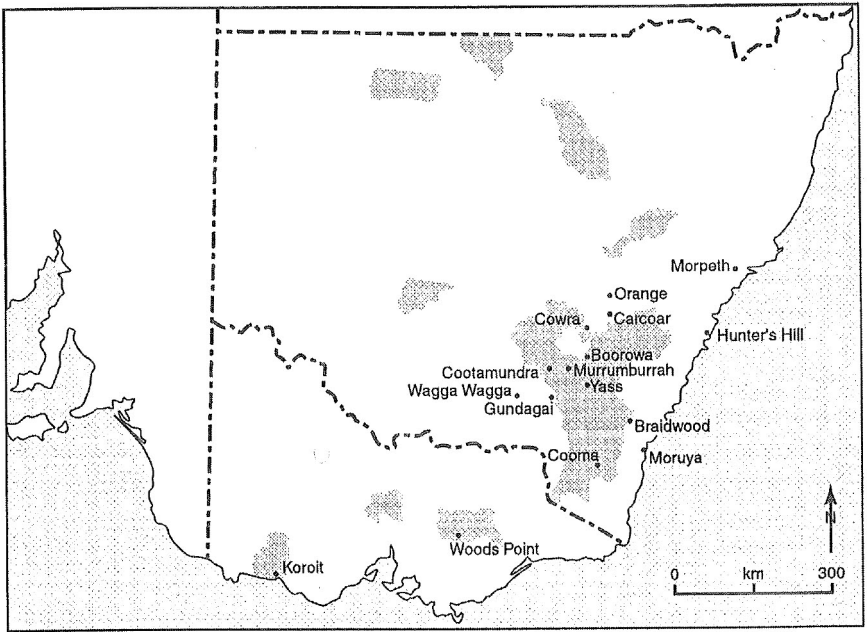


Figure 1. Census enumeration districts in south-east Australia recording over 34 per cent of the population as Catholic in 1891, after Kiernan in Jupp (ed.), *The Australian People* (Sydney, 1988), p. 569.

population represented by the Catholic community, and both have significant – and significantly different – implications for the *communautaire* construction of this particular form of Irish identity in colonial Australia.

If this form of essentialist approach to the recovery of the geographies of Irish Australia is problematic, more recent readings by cultural geographers of the ways in which individuals and communities create, manipulate and ‘consume’ space, may offer further elucidation of what geographers would claim to be the defining spatiality of Irish (as indeed of all) identities there (as elsewhere), and thus go some way to end the geographical ‘silence’ alluded to above. The emphasis in these readings has been on the unstable, not to say ephemeral nature of these spaces, and on the complex, multi-faceted meanings they convey to those whose lives are imbricated in them. Central to this analysis is the belief that individuals occupy not only materialist or physical space, but also – continuously and simultaneously – a complex variety of other, ever-changing, socially-constructed abstract spaces – ethnic space, religious space, political space, economic space and so on. Crucially, it is the meanings which individuals invest in these spaces, and which they contest and reproduce in a continuous process of self-identification, which provides a sense of ‘rootedness’ or ‘rootlessness’ to their individual and collective identities.

Fundamental to this rereading of the relationship between space and identity

are the related concepts of 'landscape' and 'place', which are argued here to offer a *trope* through which the detailed textures of the everyday spaces inhabited by Irish migrants of all ethnicities might be recovered and their invested meanings read. Following Althusser, landscape has been conceived of by the Duncans, Williams and others as a socially-constructed 'text', which encodes the prevailing system of signifying symbols (or culture) through which the world is experienced and the prevailing social order communicated, reproduced and explored.²¹ As cultural practice, therefore, landscape is also thoroughly implicated in the processes of social and economic reproduction, since these both shape and are shaped by it.²² Accordingly, landscape can be deconstructed to reveal the continuously emerging power relations or ideology which underpins the prevailing social order. In the case of nineteenth-century Australia, this ideology was that of the capitalist-driven colonialism which, in progressively modified form, constituted the immediate and specific expression of British imperial engagement there. When construed in these terms, the socially-constructed landscapes of nineteenth-century Australia might be read for evidence of the economic, social and political power relations which were implicit in the reproduction of British imperial interests, and in the tense and ambiguous core-periphery relationships which characterised the progressive delegation of metropolitan authority to individual colonies after the establishment of responsible government between 1855 and 1890.

But implicit in this decoding is the assumed existence of subordinate as well as hegemonic groups or 'textual communities'. These textual communities 'cohere around shared visions, languages and codes of practice'²³ and thus share a common understanding of landscape's textual content, and order aspects of their lives in compliance with or resistance to the prevailing ideology. The landscapes representing these hegemonic values are therefore never entirely innocent, but always contain the potential for encoded subterfuge geographies of resistance. In the context of colonial Australia, this concept of landscape as a terrain of resistant alterity, encoding the values of subaltern textual communities, resonates strongly with contemporary and modern representations of the Gaelic Catholic Irish as a colonial 'Other', who were viewed from the very beginnings of the colony as potentially subversive. According to O'Farrell, this projection of alterity eventually led to an essentially positive outcome, insofar as the Irish Catholics' peculiar sense of displacement and marginality led them to pursue social and economic objectives

21 The key text is J. and N. Duncan, '(Re)reading the landscape' in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 6 (1988), pp. 117–26. See also J.S. Duncan, 'Landscapes of the self/Landscapes of the other(s):cultural geography 1991–2' in *Progress in Human Geography*, 17 (1993), pp. 367–77; *idem*, 'Landscape geography, 1993–94' in *Progress in Human Geography*, 19 (1995), pp. 414–22; E.R. Hills, 'The Imaginary Life: Landscape and Culture in Australia' in *Journal of Australian Studies*, 29 (1991), pp. 12–27; R. Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (London, 1988). 22 C. Harris, 'Power, Modernity, and Historical Geography' in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 81: 4 (1991), pp. 671–83. 23 K. Anderson and F. Gale (eds), *Inventing Places. Studies in Cultural Geography* (Melbourne, 1992), Introduction, *passim*.

which, though they at first set them at odds with the English colonial elite, later acted as a major catalyst in the formation of what O'Farrell describes as 'an Australian national identity'.²⁴ In a such a reading, the meanings of resistance and alterity encoded in the landscape for and by Irish Catholics can be construed to have given way to more positive affirmations of power, as the abstract spaces defined by Irish Catholicism were renegotiated in ways which enhanced their centrality in the projection of Australian nationhood.

This conceptualisation of landscape as text is essentially generic, and thus we may talk of 'colonial' or 'imperial landscapes', of 'feudal landscapes' or 'landscapes of oppression' and so on. The constitutive relationship between landscape as text and the specific and the particular – the individual self and its experience of the world – has been envisaged in terms of 'place'.²⁵ Traditionally, geographers have conceived of 'places' as closed, static and essentialist micro-locations in physical space, as nothing more than a synonym for physical location. However, as sites of individual understanding and of the memory which forms part of this, places may be more usefully conceived of in ways which foreground the slippery relationship between the abstract and the material spaces created and consumed by individuals. Thus as material locales, places possess a topographical identity, but one which is ambiguous and only loosely bounded.²⁶ Moreover, as these material locales represent shared space, they are imbued with multiple and, as we have seen, continuously changing or emerging individually-constructed social and cultural meanings, geared to the signifying systems of the hegemonic and subaltern ideologies encoded in the textual landscape.²⁷ Through such places, individuals make sense of their world and create and seat their own sense of identity – their 'rootedness' in the world around them. Places, therefore, are held to be multivocal and possessed of no single authentic essentialist meaning, but are instead the sites of individually-constructed memories which are imbricated into multiple, overlapping, identities.

Figure 2 provides one example of how some of the individual meanings attached to place in the spaces of Irish Australia might have been signified. It depicts the cross raised over the grave of Timothy Twomey at Hamilton, Victoria. As the inscription attests, Twomey was born in C. Cork in 1830, and died, at no great age, at Barewood sixty four years later. The cross is remarkable for the complexity and seeming accuracy of its 'Celtic Irish' ornamentation, but is in fact not particularly unusual in its use of the Ring or Celtic cross design, nor in its attesta-

²⁴ Most cogently stated in the Introduction to *Vanished Kingdoms*, p. xiv ff. ²⁵ Recent geographical literature on the topic is usefully summarised in J. Nicholas Entrikin, 'Place and Region' in *Progress in Human Geography*, 18 (1994), pp. 227–33; *idem*, 'Place and Region 2' in *Progress in Human Geography*, 20 (1996), pp. 215–21; *idem*, 'Place and Region 3' in *Progress in Human Geography*, 21 (1997), pp. 263–8. ²⁶ S. Daniels, 'Place and the Geographical Imagination' in *Geography*, 77 (1992), pp. 310–22; D. Massey, 'Questions of Locality' in *Geography*, 78 (1993), pp. 142–9. ²⁷ A. Pred, 'Place as Historically Contingent Process: Structuration and the Time-Geography of Becoming Places' in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 74 (1984), pp. 279–97.



Figure 2. Commemorative cross, Hamilton, Western Victoria.

tion of Twomey's place of origin. Jordan and Greiner have identified over eleven hundred Irish epitaphs from a sample of seventy-nine graveyards in Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales.²⁸ The particular significance of this cross, and of others like it, lies in the various meanings which may be ascribed to it.

The first and most evident of these meanings is the cross' testimony to one particular form of Irish identity. The cross was presumably erected shortly after Twomey's death in 1894, at a time when the 'Gaelic Revival' in Australia was creating a resurgence of interest in the Celtic language and in Early Irish material cultural forms in general among the Irish community. The Revival was not, however, simply a cultural celebration of the presumed antiquity of Gaelic Irish roots in pre-Norman Ireland; rather, it was also an expression of support for the thoroughly modern – and largely (though not entirely) sectarian – political project of Home Rule for Ireland. In these circumstances, the Twomey family's choice of a carefully-proportioned Irish High Cross of perhaps tenth or eleventh century design, lavishly decorated with intricate (and expensive) Hiberno-Norse strap-work, is unlikely to have been accidental. Rather, we may speculate (admittedly in the absence of direct proof), that it was intended as a commemorative assertion of Timothy Twomey's continuing sense of Gaelic and presumably Catholic Irishness. If this was indeed the case, it points to a Jansenist ambivalence in his own location of the self, something which has been argued by O'Farrell to have been widespread among Irish Catholic migrants. O'Farrell links this to what he describes as their deeply-rooted and intensely localist identities, and to the importance within this of a place-centred, 'Irish' funerary culture.²⁹ In Twomey's case, this statement of identity may be read as an assertion of the Gaelic Irish 'Other', all the more subversive and potentially destabilising because it was embedded in the spaces of Hamilton, the regional 'capital' and political hearth of the wealthy, anglophile, conservative 'squattocracy' of western Victoria.

II

Closer inspection of Twomey's High Cross reveals, however, that it is not altogether what it at first appears to be. While the proportions are those of a tenth- or eleventh-century cross such as the High Cross at Monasterboice, Co. Louth, the strap-work, but more particularly the absence of any figural Biblical decoration is much more typical of earlier crosses, such as the eighth-century example at Ahenny, Co. Tipperary.³⁰ However powerful its symbolism, Twomey's cross is in fact

²⁸ T.G. Jordan and A. Greiner, 'Irish Migration to Rural Eastern Australia: a Preliminary Investigation' in *Irish Geography*, 27 (1994), pp. 135–42. ²⁹ P. O'Farrell, 'Landscapes of the Immigrant Mind' in J. Hardy (ed.), *Stories of Irish Migration* (Sydney, 1988), pp. 33–46; *idem*, 'Defining Place and Home. Are the Irish Prisoners of Place?' in D. Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Home or Away? Immigrants in Colonial Australia* (Canberra, 1992), pp. 1–18. ³⁰ P. Harbison, *Guide*

a work of fiction: an inauthentic rendition of an imagined past. As such, it raises the issue of the *efficiency* of memory in the construction and reproduction of Irish identities of all traditions in Australia; and the character of the 'Ireland' or – more probably – 'Irelands', which these memories invoked.

Recent analyses have suggested that although evocations of 'home' require an increasing act of the imagination among diasporic communities as time passes and generational shifts occur, they are nevertheless capable of retaining a very powerful, if increasingly illusory, symbolic message. Mcleod argues that migrant constructions of the 'old country' become increasingly imaginary and discontinuous with the real location. The *idea* of the 'home country' becomes divorced and split from the *experience* of returning 'home', and thus 'home' becomes a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination, ever further removed in space and time from the migrant's real 'here and now'.³¹

This is certainly implicit in the imaginings rendered in Timothy Twomey's *Cross*. Its ellision of a complex archaeological reality indicates concern with the *idea* of an anciently-rooted Gaelic Irish past, rather than an engagement with the *reality* of its surviving material legacy. Yet as Maureen Strugnell suggests, the increasingly mythic quality of such evocations of home or identity does not necessarily diminish their importance as cultural references for subsequent generations of the diasporic community. Strugnell develops her argument in the context of twentieth-century Catholic Irish identities in Australia. She suggests that the mythic quality of evocations of 'home' in Ireland only served to heighten their potency for subsequent generations of this particular Irish diasporic community. Shorn of all ambiguity by the simplifying passage of time, they served to reaffirm the experiences of kind and collective consciousness that underpinned Gaelic Irish ethnicity. Strugnell concludes that these effects rapidly led to the re-invention of locally-born generations of Catholic Irish Australians as a notably essentialist Gaelic Catholic group, characterised by both Anglophobia and sectarian mistrust.³²

Central to Strugnell's argument is the idea that the Catholic Irish in Australia defined themselves as a community in relation to the 'Otherness' of English and Protestants, and this invites consideration of the possible sources of this 'Otherness' in the migrants' origins in Ireland. Put simply, the question is what sort of 'remembered Irish past' drove the construction of Irish identities of all descriptions in place and landscape in Australia? And what was there about the allegedly 'colonial' past in Ireland, with all its connotations of alien domination and indigenous subordination, which might explain the sense of Self and Other encountered by Strugnell?

Although there are strong historical arguments against representing the relationship between England and Ireland in formal colonial terms, it nevertheless

to the *National Monuments of Ireland* (Dublin, 1975), pp. 16–17. 31 J. Mcleod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 208–11. 32 M. Strugnell, 'It's a Long Way from Home: Irish Exiles in Australian Drama' in Pelan (ed.), *Seventh Irish-Australian Conference*, pp. 111–19.

effected seemingly 'colonial' cultural outcomes in the creation of an unevenly divided pluralist society in Ireland. Although historians have stressed, first, that English policy towards Ireland during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was marked more by opportunism, inconsistency and incoherence than by any colonial master-plan; second, that significant feelings of colonial difference were notably absent in Ireland during the eighteenth century; and third, that the Act of Union of 1801 spelt the end of any conceivably colonial relationship between the two countries, Ireland nevertheless still experienced unilateral colonisation by significant numbers of English and Scots.³³ This created a society which was divided along the multiple, but by no means conformable axes of language, religion, wealth and ethnicity, and in which the Catholic majority and their representatives were formally or informally excluded from political power from the early eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Unsurprisingly, this led to a highly contested constitutional, political, social and economic relationship between the State and its citizens, both during the brief period of constitutional autonomy under the Crown in the late eighteenth century, and after the Act of Union with Britain in 1801. Despite, or perhaps because of, Ireland's accelerating but regionally-uneven pattern of modernisation and demographic change, this underlying dialectic continued to find overt cultural and political expression – either through complicity or resistance – throughout the nineteenth century.³⁴

Whether formally colonised or otherwise, Ireland's ambiguous relationship within the Empire as Britain's constitutional yet culturally subordinate partner after 1801 seems to be appropriately captured by Mitchell's description of Imperialism at large. This, he notes:

'is not a one-way phenomenon but a complicated process of exchange, mutual transformation and ambivalence. It is a process conducted simultaneously at concrete levels of violence, expropriation, collaboration and coercion, and at a variety of symbolic or representational levels whose relationship to the concrete is rarely mimetic'.³⁵

Central to these 'complicated processes of exchange, mutual transformation and ambivalence' in more unambiguously colonial situations was the interpellation or 'naturalisation' of the colonial ideology in the beliefs and mind sets of the colonised, for only in this way could the material practices of colonialism work.

33 These arguments are most recently summarised in S. Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford, 2000). 34 In an extensive specialised and general literature, useful summaries may be found in K. Theodore Hoppen, *Ireland Since 1800: Conflict and Conformity* (London, 1989); D. George Boyce, *Nineteenth-Century Ireland. The Search for Stability* (Dublin, 1990); and C. Ó Gráda, *Ireland. A New Economic History 1780–1939* (Oxford, 1993). 35 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (Chicago, 1994), pp. 9–10.

This 'colonisation of the mind' among the Empire's subjects involved both alterity, the 'Othering' of groups who would not be complicit in the business of colonisation, and flattering invitations to (near-) 'selfhood', as other groups among the colonised were invited to participate in this.³⁶ In Ireland, the bitterly-contested issue of land rights and agrarian reform, the gathering pace of democratisation and the growth of sectarian politics, and the changing and unstable geographies of identity bound up with the regionally-uneven processes of industrialisation, modernisation and urbanisation, all point to the existence of analogous patterns of individual and collective collaboration and resistance, assimilation and alterity, and provided the context for emigration.³⁷ Quite how far these conditions were echoed in the spaces of meaning created by Irish migrants in Australia has yet to be fully assessed. But they bear witness to the individualism and diversity of the Irish identities which were bound up in the emigration process, and to the uneven spaces of meaning in Ireland from which these were derived.

This paper has argued for a new spatial awareness in the exploration of the symbolic identities that attached to Irish settlement in colonial Australia. Its central thesis has been that any understanding of the human condition demands recognition of its inherent value-laden abstract spatiality. It has demonstrated the limitations to essentialist ethnic representations of Irish migrant identities, and proposed that concepts of 'place' and 'landscape' which privilege the multiple and unstable meanings with which we invest the everyday spaces of our lives, provide an appropriate *trope* through which the complex abstract and material geographies created by Irish migrants to Australia might be recovered. In this way, we might hope to contribute to what Stuart Macintyre has called the reworking of an 'inescapably present' Australian history, which 'provides a capacity to determine what still might be'.³⁸

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³⁶ Mcleod, *Beginning*, pp. 37–40. ³⁷ Hoppen, *Ireland, passim*; Boyce, *Nineteenth-Century Ireland, passim*. See also G. Hooper and L. Litvack (eds), *Ireland in the Nineteenth Century. Regional Identity* (Dublin, 2000). ³⁸ Macintyre, *Concise History*, p. 280.