

## THE PERSONALITY OF WEST CORK (PART 1)

William J. Smyth

What do we mean by West Cork and where is it in the first place? I suppose we could all agree that West Cork should be west of Cork city - that island city which takes its name from the boggy marsh which its people eventually reclaimed and conquered. But 'Cork' means other things as well. James Joyce had a painting of the city by the Lee placed in a cork frame on one of his walls - so a cork can float, and duck and weave. So already before we head westwards from Cork, two images - that of a soft treacherous bog - difficult terrain to conquer, even more difficult to hold - and that of a floating cork - shall we say a currach - swim into view. We can tack off for West Cork from many directions - for West Cork is a land of mobile boundaries, a place whose location and character curves and shifts, depending not only on the weather, but on the different lenses and assumptions that we bring to bear on it. Likewise, West Cork has been seen, evaluated and utilised in different ways by the many cultural groups and social stratas who have shared and shaped this south-west corner of Europe. All I want to do here is to open a few vistas and raise some questions about its geographical structure and individuality - to explore 'the personality' of this elusive, enigmatic and flexible region. *✍*

In one important sense, West Cork begins in the County Hall where - since the 1934 Local Government Dividing Order - the Assistant County Manager for West Cork proper and his team of bureaucrats, planners and engineers are responsible for a whole series of public services in an area that officially stretches from the sea at Courtmacsherry through Bandon and Enniskeane to Gougane Barra, the Kerry bounds and the Beara Peninsula. The South-West electoral area corresponds closely to this boundary so national/central state forces are also mediated via the TDs - the 'local chieftains' - into this regional framework. The palaces of the Cork bishops, the RTC, the University, the Regional Hospital, the Asylum, the Greyhound Track, the Craftsman's Guild and the downtown area generally are all directly involved in the life of West Cork, as is the ferry service to that old West Cork smuggling centre - Roscoff. The emigration port of Cove too was once part of the pain of the West Cork region. Above all else, the economic power exhibited by the

Atlantic port of Cork has dominated and integrated the produce and trade of West Cork - eclipsing all its south-west rivals by the turn of the 18th century - its butter, provision merchants and butchers then exerted as powerful an influence in the region as the IDA, the Cork city banks, and other financial agencies do today. Above all, the city has been a centre for migration for West Cork people - the telephone and diocesan directories, the seminary, public houses and shopfronts are full of their names. So in a sense, West Cork is first of all, deeply embedded in the mores and imagination of Cork city itself. Cork city people feel superior to all peoples except those from West Cork - since their parents or grandparents hail from this region.

For my purpose, we can tack off for the rest of West Cork by three main routes - by the sea, or through the middle valleys and ridges, or directly westward by the Mardyke, the Lee and the Bride. In this context, one wonders to what extent the West Cork railways helped to popularise the notion of West Cork region in the first place - and indeed the extent to which its regional consciousness today is partially a Bord Failte affair. Does West Cork really begin, therefore, as some people argue at the Viaduct or must one travel out to Bandon by Waterfall and Crossbarry - where now written into the landscape is a symbol of one of the West Cork Flying Column's famous victories, a monument to one of West Cork's contributions to the creation of a new nation state? That monument reminds us again how West Cork can be defined in so many ways: in an abstract way by the scientists as, for example, in the West Cork Resource Survey (1963), which stresses how difficult much of that environment is. West Cork is seen in an abstract imaginative way by the artists and painters (a view that seems to have a strong coastal bias, if one may judge from the context of its art exhibitions). Likewise, West Cork can be defined by each man, woman, child, worker, in terms of his or her own experiences - or, as at Crossbarry, Sam's Cross, or County Hall, in military, administrative and ideological terms. The perspective emphasised here is that of a cultural geographer trained in the humanities and the social sciences, and of a Tipperaryman with no roots in the region at all.

We can also reach Bandon - which claims to be the gateway to West Cork - by the more modern road that takes us to Innishannon and along the old line of the railway onto Bandon bridge where the men on the dole act as watchful porters to the columns of tourists and others who pass through on the way to this bright western land - a land, which as Daphne Pochin Mould has said, is the brightest and most colourful in all of Ireland with its furze and sea pinks and lush Lusitanian vegetation. Bandon - Droichead na mBandan or Droichead ui Mathuna - the second capital of the O'Mahonys of Kinalmeakey - was after the Munster Plantation a walled imperial frontier town, a 17th century outpost of the West Country woollen industry and early capitalism, a lynchpin of settler colonisation inland as well as a fall back garrison centre in 1921 as well as 1641. It was also the headquarters of Sir John Moore's West Cork military zone in 1798 and the memories of sharply divided loyalties still slumber beneath its daily routine. The hilltop juxtaposition of Catholic and Protestant churches has much meaning here. After a massive decline in its industrial fortunes in the early 19th century, it is now one of the great agricultural/service centres in Ireland, most renowned for its cattle mart and the centre of one of the most innovative farming regions in the island. Like the other two gateways to West Cork - Macroom and Kinsale - one feels the strong pull of the metropolis here. Bandon, therefore, has a hinge function for West Cork but is no longer wholly of it.

I tried my best - for obvious reasons - to put Macroom outside of West Cork. Its own people quite properly insisted that Macroom was in Muskerry. Note here the baronial loyalties which are indeed much deeper than the wider loyalty to the more recent notion of West Cork - there are the people of the Carberies, of the Beara, of Barryroe and of Muskerry and it is interesting that both Smith (1750) and Townsend (1850) in their descriptions of County Cork talk mostly in terms of life in these baronies - suggesting a deeper regional consciousness at these levels, - an unusual feature for Ireland as a whole where such consciousness is confined to coastal pays alone. There are also other powerful loyalties: to the 'Dohenys' of Dunmanway, the Bantry Blues, the people of Ross, Clonakilty and Skibbereen. In this sense, West Cork is a polynuclear region where a restructured society pivots around the competitive, jealous (Frank O'Connor [1957] said 'horrid little') country towns, all claiming to be the capital of West Cork. The West

Cork Regional museum is in lively Clonakilty as are some of the clerical offices of the West County. Dunmanway claims inland capital status while Rossmore claims not only the cultural capital of West Cork but also West Munster - not to speak of the ancient town of Rosscarbery itself now stranded on a hill since the sea has receded and the Catholic pro-Cathedral shifted to Skibbereen although here again the size of Clonakilty church, "as big as an Italian Cathedral", (1977) points to local rivalries and maybe even lost episcopal dreams.

\*Skibbereen's centrality and power is symbolised along many fronts, but none more effectively than in the Southern Star - a powerful vehicle for shaping the perceptions and boundaries of this cultural region, providing illuminating insights into the popular as well as the official concerns of the region and a reservoir of detailed information about what concerns the people most tales of life and death, funerals and marriages, bankruptcies and court cases, county councils and churchmen, sports and bowlers and farms and houses for sale. Its historical evolution and above all its battle with, and final absorption, of the imperialist Skibbereen Eagle also has much to tell of the polarities and victories within this region.\*

Macroom is in Muskerry, but in the end I could not push Macroom out of West Cork. Like all Irish towns it is a border land between different traditions and contrasting local regions - we can read so much from the settlement history of such towns which act as the meeting place for so many braided streams. A classic frontier town, Macroom had a Norman castle that failed to hold its ground until reinforced by the Cromwellian father of the founder of Pennsylvania. My reason for trying to exclude it was that Macroom has a strong functional relationship with places in North Cork like Newmarket and Millstreet - all designed in a linear and straggling fashion, apparently shaped by Kerry butter, cows, cattle and horses as they pounded their way to the Cork Butter Market and the Quays. Yet Macroom is dominated by people from the west - its migration field is clipped on the eastern side by the ever expanding commuter zone of Cork city but the town holds an independent sway over the men and women of Carrig-an-ime, Baile Bhuirne, Uibh Laoghiare and Cill na Martra. These places are saturated with deeper meanings - immortalised as they are in the great love poem - Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire (1981) which is perhaps even

more popular here since the poem has a tough sectarian flavour which fitted neatly into the late 19th and 20th century perceptions of how the battlelines were always drawn. It also points to the long-standing vitality of the Irish tradition in this wider region.

It may well be that it was the late dissolution of the Clancarty estates which protected Muskerry from the indepth planter settlement that took place along the Bandon valley - nevertheless Louis Cullen (1981) sees this zone as part of an extensive, sharp south western settlement frontier where an older Gaelic aristocratic world ran into modernising planter influences. Certainly if we look at a map of literacy of County Cork in the mid-19th century, we will understand that underneath the veneer of English speechways lies a very deep layer of Irish cultural traditions. The region's placenames are also a good guide; a great concentration of early settlement and enclosure terms are deeply embedded in these western Macroom hills. This area is, despite its marginality, a long settled land, a very specific 'outlier' of West Cork - a region which writers like Frank O'Connor and others emphasised as being the 'real West Cork'. Yet it is only one of a succession of worlds that overlap and co-exist in this wider region.

As Brian Lawlor (1984) has noted, Eibhlin Dubh Ní Chonaill's lament is matched by the work of two other women of another declining aristocracy - the Protestant aristocracy. Somerville and Ross illustrated another corner of West Cork - the last literati who illuminated a vanishing culture in early 20th century with much great humour and vivacity. Yet, as Oliver MacDonagh (1983) argues, their work also reflects a sectarian dimension. The little arc of country in a radius of say 15-20 miles from Castletownsend - a planned village in a cluster of big houses - is described with exquisite loving care. "Furze, fuschia, rhododendron covert, hill and meadow, cloud, sky and sea are rendered with the intensity of a childhood recollection" - but as in the book, The Real Charlotte (1894), the meaningful population is exclusively Protestant. The Protestant visiting or intercourse distribution defines the limits of their imaginative worlds.

But I deviate again from Macroom, where curving westwards we pass through parishes like Kilmichael and realise that West Cork is ringed by places of great victories and defeats. Flor Crowley in his marvellous little book In West Cork Long Ago (1979) - notes that the

battle and victory at Kilmichael seemed to "simple rustic minds to be the undoing of the battle of Kinsale; it was revenge for Dunboy, for the atrocities of 98". Certainly over all of West Cork one senses not just the rolling sea, clouds and landscapes but also the complex ebb and tide of history - of periods of peace and prosperity followed by the sound of armies, and the violence of poverty, deprivation, emigration. So another prime characteristic of this region is its vulnerability - its bust and boom characteristics. Its landscapes is littered with ruins.

These thoughts are revitalised when we have crossed through the Pass of Keimaneigh and reach the rich coastal lowlands around Bantry. Out beyond are the great deep harbours of Kenmare, Bantry Bay, Dunmanus, their drowned valleys providing the kind of depth for shipping that allows Whiddy Island to provide a shelter for the great oil tankers. Bantry town thus reveals much of the vast oscillation in the economic history of the region - military/naval base, mining booms, fishing booms, provisions boom, linen booms and then recessions. Its current status reflects how the fortunes of smaller places are so strongly interlocked with the controls of great global forces - its deep cyclonic depressions are matched by its economic lows.

We can reach the third gateway to West Cork via Cork Harbour or follow the tide down from Innishannon to the Harbour of Kinsale. Strongly reminiscent of Cornish and Devon fishing towns, Kinsale too marks a boundary, in this case between two maritime worlds - a world to the east that had long been used to both civic, corporate and merchant life, as opposed to the west where a world of sheltered coves and deep harbours saw, for the most part, a very late blossoming of small urban foundations - an area which up until the end of the 16th, or should I say 19th century, was seen as a wild, remote and anarchic region, a kind of cockpit of European rivalries in trade, fishing and piracy, 'a little Irish Caribbean'. The great maritime castles of the O'Sullivans, O'Driscolls and O'Mahonys were built for and from the proceeds of the lucrative fishing grounds which they controlled for themselves and the French, Spanish, Portuguese and other fleets. It was from the naval base of Kinsale after 1601 that the savage pacification of these coastlands took place - at Castlehaven, Dunmanus and Dunboy - a traumatic period which uprooted the old elites and left

the greatest discontinuity of settlement sites in all of County Cork. The richer lands and towns of North and East Cork, reveal a much more continuous settlement history and a greater settled confidence. This maritime region was, therefore, not only a training ground for the English navy before conquering America - it was also one of the early breeding grounds for merchant capitalists with its fish palaces, mines and woods, new urban foundations and extensive trading links that also involved the Dutch middlemen. Massive transformations followed from the growth of an Atlantic economy, the emergence of new landed political elite and the long run growth in population. Kinsale, therefore, had a powerful strategic role in West Cork. It was also important culturally: from here spread new fishing techniques and boats, Kinsale hookers and things like, regattas which reached Glandore in 1838 and gave Schull its centenary a year or two ago.

We have now defined the gateways and ringed the main part of West Cork. We can now penetrate its inland core - the central axis is that from Bandon to Dunmanway and Bantry but one should also explore the ribbed ridges, plateaus and coastal headlands where the first ringfort builders cleared the deciduous woodlands. The earliest sites may have been stone forts and promontory ports but whatever their origins - an Iberian connection is a possibility - these so-called Celtic farmsteads and farmers represent a way of life of unique strength and durability - an culture carved out of the richest soils, yet still avoiding the lowlying wooded locations. And it was the descendants of these ringforts builders who enshrined forever their own family names in the placenames - and gave us another decisive feature of the personality of West Cork - its own collection of family names, Deasys, Harringtons, O'Driscolls, O'Mahonys. As Evans (1981) has pointed out, their ancestors cleared the woodlands to colonise the very best lands and then clothed the land in deeply-rooted kinship networks which still interrelate across the land like a complex of Celtic scrolls. The seas warming maritime influences and the sheltering ridges also helped to make for the most powerful dairying region in Ireland - aided by the Cork city butter merchants who developed an elaborate credit system for the farmers and middlemen who in turn adapted the old patron/client arrangements to set-up a more commercialised dairyman system. Out of this emerged the smaller

dairy farmers of the 19th and 20th centuries. Today, the co-ops are like the old hillforts - located inland at Barryroe, Drinagh, Lisavaird and Carbery- a part of the introversion of the resilient cow culture which never cared too much for towns. But these better if still difficult lands are also a zone of conflict - indeed the cockpit of West Cork. Whatever about its prehistoric rivalries, this area was clearly fought over between the O'Driscolls and O'Mahonys. This middle country was likewise where the McCarthys and the O'Donovans drove many wedges to the sea while still controlling the inland territories. In the process, they also pushed back the Cambro-Norman frontier which at its peak stretched from Castletownkinneigh to Macroom. Robin Glasscock's (1970) moated sites indicates the extensive North-South frontier zone in Middle Cork - along the same line that gave the county its West Riding boundary when judicial and policing functions were regionalised in the 19th century. West Cork, therefore, has a long history of resistance to, and the deception of, a stranger.

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