THE PERSONALITY OF WEST CORK (Part II)

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Someone (from West Cork?) once said that West Cork is bigger than Ireland: its tourist promoters have suggested that there is a bit of every Irish county in this region; others like Estyn Evans have argued that the particular difficulties of Ireland's personality are all piled up in this south-western corner of the island.[1] All of this is by way of saying that what we are exploring here is the meaning of place - place as the dynamic context for the lives of the people of (in this instance) West Cork. Life is experienced, structured and reproduced in very specific places and contrary to theories of modernisation, cultural standardisation and the role of the mass media, it would appear that local ties have diminished very little if at all in West Cork while extra-local ties have obviously increased. What this essay seeks to explore is the making and reproduction of West Cork and its people - to explore the intrinsic importance and interest of its local and regional lifestyles as compared with the often levelling assumptions of national stereotypes.

In Part I of this paper we defined the gateways (Kinsale, Bandon and Macroom) and ringed the physical boundaries (but not the mental worlds) of West Cork. We can now penetrate its inland core - the central axis from Bandon through Dunmanway onto Bantry and Skibbereen. Zigzagging across this east-west axis is an old north-south cultural frontier which stretched from Macroom and west of Crookstown to Castletown-Kinneigh and then curved westwards in a narrow belt along the coast - I speak of the marchland between the Cambro-Norman and Gaelic worlds. This hybrid zone saw a fusion of Norman and Gaelic traditions as epitomised in the love poetry of the 15th and 16th centuries and still perhaps echoed in the distribution of the hurling parishes in the east and south of the wider West Cork region as opposed to the essentially football parishes in the peninsulas and mountains of the west. It was here also that defensive farmer movements like that of the Rightboys found a ready home as did chapel villages and a very able Catholic middle-class and clergy in the later 18th and early 19th centuries. Earlier still, it was into this long-fought over zone that the Munster planters came - mainly from Armorican Devon and Cornwall and the West Country generally. The stories of the origins and cultural history of these settlers and the specific adaptations and lifestyles of these people in their new South Munster lands has still to be written and needs to be written. They had their own images of the new land and their own assumptions about the existing populations. They colonised the remaining

woodlands and created new farms along the valleys but also pushed their frontiers of settlement hard fast against the old settled lands. The territory embraced by Bandon, Enniskeane, Clonakilty and Kinsale formed a rich heartland core for the settler, with Dunmanway as a classic secondary core area. Founded in the later 17th century with its defensive triangular focus, it is significant that Dunmanway was developed into a linen town by a Bandonian - Sir Richard Cox. It thus became a secondary seed-bed for immigrant movement and consolidation westwards, a process reflected in the significant expansion in the West Cork distribution of Protestant families as between the 1659, 1766 and 1861 Censuses. This westward salient may also have contributed to the ragged colonial frontiers that ran westwards into Ireland's land's end - the Mizen peninsula - but this final cultural extension was more likely a consequence of the fusion of both maritime and inland settlement frontiers. Here also a line of Methodist chapels points to the diversification of and internal tensions within the old and sometimes poor settler population. It was this wider zone too which acted as a fulcrum for the diffusion westwards of the linen industry. With Clonakilty and Bandon playing key roles, the flax was retted in the boggy waters of West Cork and its qualities as a cottage industry absorbed not just men but also women and children into the labour force. And is this region not also the core of the bowl-players? The origins of this passion for bowling needs further study - but one thing is clear, the weekend leisure time of many West Cork males pivots around the world of scórs and public-houses and not a little gambling.

In the latter 19th century it was this creative middle zone which produced leaders like O'Donovan Rossa, Michael Collins and Tom Barry who were to steer events both regionally and nationally and to play such a powerful role in shaping the ethos of the new state. The core of the West Cork IRA brigades was in the eastern half of the region with Bandon playing a pivotal role. West Cork people remember their heroes with some monuments - the icons in the landscape - and many stories. Almost three-quarters of a large number of people sampled across all of West Cork know where Michael Collins was born and could name at least one of the monuments erected in his honour in the area. Any it is the people who revere these icons and tell these stories of defeats and then victories who now <u>own</u> the place. The stories tell of a historic reclamation - they tell that the townlands now belong to the people and unlike the monuments, this feeling for place as expressed in song and story is more mobile and flexible and moves with the speaker and the singer. The story and the song makes one's sense of place a deeper and more geographically expansive idea and feeling. By way of

contrast, the men who defended the empire are now remembered in more subdued monuments and settings. The ordinary soldiers, stokers and mechanics are remembered in the simple gravestones in old graveyards. The officers are more often remembered on the walls inside the Anglican churches which look out over the seas onto the great world outside and its stories of naval battles fought long ago as far afield as Kingston, Naples, Savannah and Siam.

This is what I call the inland core and cockpit of West Cork. However, it is the sea and the coastline which is the oldest heartland of the region. Up until the early 19th century, before a new and more elaborate road system was developed, it was seaborne activity which shaped most of the settlement in the whole area. The sea was the great highway. Notice how the old clan territories and the even older parishes struggled to gain access to the sea-god - their inland territories stretching fingerlike to reach the coastal inlets. The old core of West Cork is therefore sea-oriented, seagirded, awash with boats and ships that brought in the first settlers, the megalithic builders, the prospectors, its early Christian monks, its later settlers, and its new crop of 'planters' today. This maritime zone is one where ships prospected, fished, fought and traded. Today the sea is a heartland of a leisurely society of yachts and dinghies - where the modern sea nomads come every Summer and transfer the suburban cocktail belt out into the open sea. It is, therefore, an area where many people have their second homes; other outsiders have come to settle permanently in the place and in the process are helping to create a new kind of voluntary cultural region on the European periphery. Skibbereen is the cultural capital of this 'new world', with Schull, Ballydehob, Glengarriffe (old outlier of the Victorian tourist zone) and Baltimore as its sailing and artistic foci. And the older natives of West Cork have also had long maritime connections. At least one-third of West Cork's population - reaching inland as far as Dunmanway - have relatives who have worked at sea, whether as fishermen, in the merchant navy, on ferries or whatever.

It is therefore along the coast that one can pick up the essential plurality of West Cork's heritage - its many attractive little harbours acting as the bridgeheads for many cultural groups. Along the south-east of the region, especially in the baronies of Ibane and Barryroe, the Courceys and East Carbery, we find early Christian settlements such as Tigh Molaige - Timoleague. Later as a small castle-town and bolstered by Butler, Barry and McCarthy patronage, it built its fine Franciscan friary. It traded with the continent - selling its grain for wines before its harbour silted up, following hard on the cutting down of the woods in its hinterland. The

decline of Timoleague opened up a gap for the old Norman foothold of Courtmacsherry - better located for later maritime enterprises with its deep-sea fishing and yachting area, all overlooked by the Earl of Shannon's summerhouse (now a hotel). Between 'colonial' Courtmacsherry (which the natives still see as dominated by 'outsiders' and 'foreigners') and the more Gaelic Timoleague is the chapel village of 'Siberia' with its surrounding County Council houses. So here within a few miles of one another are three settlements with very different origins, class structures and cultural assumptions, Similarly one notes the local contrasts between the fishing village of Union Hall, the chapel village of Leap and the refurbished tourist world of old Glandore all located around the harbour of the same name. The small inlets of West Cork are full of these local diversities. These coastal lowlands, especially those to the east are the richest, warmest lands of the South of Cork. Tillage crops were always more important here in a word of industrious and skilful farmers. Early potatoes, barley, cooperatives, sugarbeet and Marian Shrines are all part of the character of Ibane and Barryroe. This pocket of West Cork has wonderful, underexplored, undervalued landscapes.

Cambro-Norman colonisation was swiftly extended along the west coast from Barryroe - very different to the much slower, more ponderous, inland expansion in Munster. Castle foci were established at Glandore, Baltimore, Ringarogy, maybe Skibbereen and reached west to Long Island, Ballygobbin/ Bantry and possibly Glengarriffe, Adrigole and Bearahaven on the Beara peninsula. However, the roots of these medieval coastal settlements may reach back further and may have been based on the settlements of the Corca Laoi. It is noticeable that the oldest placenames of West Cork are concentrated in these coastal foci. Part of the richness of these Norman footholds also relates to the extensive ecclesiastical lands of the bishops of Cork and Ross. The O'Driscolls were the patrons of St. Facthna and the diocese of Ross with its small seagirded parishes. In turn, it was the O'Mahonys who gave the long sweep of Cork's diocese its specific shape from the Mizen to Cork city and it was the O'Mahonys who patronised the cult of St. Finbarr.

The Corca Laoi of the O'Driscoll country is the oldest settlement and territorial base that we can recognise in the historic era - and in a sense a regional consciousness survives here in the movement which seeks to see the diocese of Ross made autonomous again. It is also likely that these coastal lands were also connected by sea with other old maritime foci such as Corca Duibhne and Corca Baiscind. The strength of this wider south western region in the early Christian era is suggested by the great

density of cilliní, early Christian hermitages, stone carvings and Ogham stones. These ogham stones indicate the earliest zones of literacy in this part of Ireland (an ironic juxtaposition with the map of functional illiteracy in English in the mid 19th century). West Cork's islands were particularly relevant to this early Christian ethos - not least that striking rock of Cape Clear, the island of the clerics.

Although its settlement pattern was restructured by the landlord Beecher in the early 1830s, there is a depth, sturdiness and clarity to the lives and landscapes of the still Irish speaking capers as opposed to the more broken, dishevelled landscapes and communities along some areas of the nearby coast. Cape Clear has its ferry 'Naomh Ciarán', its Trá Ciarán, its strange early Christian (cum megalithic?) slab and the legend of the oldest saint of Ireland. All along the south coast the first saint is claimed (as with Declan at Ardmore), but perhaps, the myth, as often, holds a central truth. Francoise Henry suggests that the material remains of early Christianity in the South and West - its distinctive ecclesiastical architecture, stone carvings, the development of cilliní and the strength of the díseart/hermitic tradition - may indicate drect continental movement into these lands.[2]

So direct continental connections loom larger as we converge on the south western end of the coast. The passage grave art at Cape Clear also emphasises that we are dealing with an island that has been settled for at least 4000 years. What this megalithic culture, which clearly underlies the peculiarities of the early Christian tradition, we reach the deepest layers in this culture. Here we are encountering the first clearly defined cultural zone in West Cork. Places like Drombeg stone-circle with its specific orientation and ritual functions are central to this story. It appears that a combination of copper-seeking peoples, traders and pastoralists colonised these coasts, peninsulas and upland interiors. They established what may be an ensemble of related cultural items, stone circles, stone alignments, standing stones and boulder burials. Copper mining was also important - as it was to the builders of the nearby wedge tombs as well.

The origins of mining, farming, craft work thus reaches deep into pre-history in this region. Cornwall probably supplied the tin for the bronzesmiths in the region and again supplied the new technology and expertise for the 19th century mining boom which produced its own distinctive landscape of Cornish chimney stacks, house types and deserted villages - as at Horse Island - symbols of the fact that in the 19th century, the copper mines of West Cork were second only to Cornwall in

terms of European production. Likewise, earlier settlers like the Hulls of Lemcon, the Stawells of Kilbrittain, the Halls of Glandore, the Huxleys and the Tresilians were part of a broader and mixed trading/smuggler culture that linked southwestern Ireland, with Cornwall and the European mainland, with Nantes, Bordeaux and beyond. Our seaward glance must also sweep across to Brittany and northwestern France; Finín O'Mahony's 16th century Irish translation of Sir John Mandeville's travels was partly Breton-based, just one expression of the long established contacts between these two peninsular regions - from megalithic builders, through the Normans, Irish emigrants to France, French Hugenot settlers, the French of 1796, the new French and Breton settlers today and the Glen'anns sailing schools.

Another triangular network including southwest Ireland, southwest Britain and Spain - the latter the great meeting place of Atlantic and Mediterranean currents - may have seen Bronze Age Galician miners and art come to the south, may have influenced the design of Iron Age promontory and stone forts and saw Spanish and Portugese ships gain favoured access to these rich fishing grounds in the 15th and 16th centuries. The Spanish fleet at Castletownbere today and the bringing in under duress by the Dun Emer of other Spanish fishing vessels points to the continued interaction - fruitful and not so fruitful - between the southwestern corner of Ireland, the Iberian peninsula and the Mediterranean.

All of this points to the long-established seafaring traditions of the southwest which - for much of its history and all of its prehistory - was probably more effectively linked with other peninsular ends of Atlantic Europe than with other parts of Ireland, especially its inland regions. The New World discoveries were also to relocate this southwestern edge of the known world, making it essential from an English state's point of view that these searoutes to the Americas were controlled and patrolled. Out of these general processes flowed the Munster plantation, and the savage pacification of the region after 1641. Later came Cork's Atlantic provisions trade and the beginnings of migrations, forced and otherwise, by West Corkonians - Donovans, MacCarthys, Harringtons and others. As indentured servants or whatever, they crossed the Atlantic to places like Montserrat, to become part of the 'Black Irish' of Jamaica and to form a significant component of the leapfrogging from the Caribbean to the plantation economies of the Carolinas and Georgia - the same route followed by the cheaper linens and provisions which were used to clothe and feed the slaves. Later on, another major stream of emigrants were carried on the return journeys of the timber ships from New Brunswick allowing West Cork people to filter south from the ports of New England - to Portland, Boston and wherever - the precursors and

pathfinders for the great flood of emigrants in post-Famine times. Today West Cork sees the ironic juxtaposition of many local people migrating to work in the big cities while newcomers from urbanised Europe travel in the opposite direction.

It is therefore a region of many residuals and many survivals. Clustered farm settlements, potato ridges and a spate culture persisted in this region until the late 19th century. These wet rugged southwestern peninsulas - from Skibbereen westwards especially - saw an enormous pile up of population and agglomerated farm settlements in a wider region with the highest population densities of Munster, stretching from Ballymacoda in East Cork round to the coastlands of Kerry. The density of population here in the mid 19th century was often over 400 per sq.mile, and in some places over 1000 people per sq. mile - densities of South East Asian rather than European dimensions. These places were then full of people, living - as some West Cork people still do - on their wits. These were also the regions where people lived in swollen agricultural villages. Such a social and settlement structure contrasts sharply with the worlds of east and north Cork - with their big <u>independent</u> farms, their stratified class structure with a significant artisan and a majority labour population. Apart from medieval contrasts, the later landlord commercialisation of agriculture - especially in sheep and dairy products - and the associated class and landscape transformation saw the scattering of old partnership/'gneever' village dwelling tenants of East and North Cork. In these rich lands of the North and East, a more complex society and an essentially <u>dispersed</u> settlement structure of bigger farms, smaller farms, artisans, labourers and spailpínís emerged. In contrast, along the South-West coast, the richness of sea resources continued to underpin the older village and social structures. The sandboatmen shovelled the seasands and plied every quay from as far west as places like Glengarriffe (whose coral sands fertilised the crops as far inland as Inchigeela) and as far east as Kinsale where their industry underpinned the high density of populations along the tidal reaches of the Bandon river. The sea-based fertilisers allowed for regular rotations of the life-giving crop of potatoes - that early esoteric garden vegetable that eventually blossomed into a common field crop. The spread of the linen industry and the mining boom also inflated many of these clustered settlements while the collapse of both these enterprises further exacerbated the poverty of the South West. Clearly the development of a rash of new roads in the beginning of 19th century cut into these older settlement patterns but these roads also facilitated the further colonisation of the poorest lands along the coast and also made more easy the colonisation of

remoter inland areas, previously distant from manures and markets. The emergence of new central places like Durrus, Kealkill and Glengarriffe also probably undercut the older settlement structures. Yet, as late as 1841, the closed locality and kinship-bound nature of these small-holding fishing/farming societies is epitomised by the density of agglomerated settlements in the Muintearvara peninsula where 90 percent of all the families bore only four family names - the O'Dalys, the O'Mahonys, O'Driscolls and MacCarthys.[3]

These were the areas most traumatised by the Famine and subsequent emigration. The trauma is immortalised in the landscape: at Skibbereen by the marker of the famine pits whose victims were hastily interred, by the Big Cross at Bantry's famine graves and by the signpost at Macroom which identifies a separate Famine graveyard on the road to Millstreet. Today, Muintearvara has only one quarter of the population it contained in 1841. No can even attempt to capture the horror and devastation of the famine years, a devastation added to by the opportunities it provided for the rationalisation and consolidation of holdings by landlord, bigger farmer and shopkeeper alike. Hugh Brody's book Inishkillane points to both the continuing transformation, demoralisation and cultural deprivation of some of these remoter rural regions and the emergence in their place of a more class-based, more consumer-led society.[4]

But West Cork is also a region of immigrants - many areas have been renewed by the movement of other Europeans 'making their souls', seeking alternative lifestyles and environments away from the madding crowd. West Cork apparently attracts such people because of the attractiveness and inspiration of its wild rugged landscapes, because of its quietness and solitude, because of the leisurely nature of its people and because it is perceived as a more open and more tolerant society. Some of these emigrants have adapted successfully to the west and have become more rooted and integrated in a world of artists, craftworkers and organic farmers. As high as 10% of the names listed in the Bantry/Castletownbere telephone region are of newcomer stock while about 7% of those in the Skibbereen and Schull region are also 'outsiders' to the region. However, there has been a significant turnover of much of this immigrant population - much coming and going - and some of its outsider residents still seem to remain outsiders, belonging to and locked into other external worlds. It is still an open question as to the longterm cultural significance of the new settlers - will they create a 'new world' in one of the oldest parts of Europe?

Finally we come to the beaked prow of the Beara peninsula - a world apart - where the highest concentration of the most developed clustered

settlements in all of Cork were located in the 19th century. One of the great symbols of this rugged peninsula is Hungry Hill; there is also a Hungry Hill in Springfield, Mass. and Beara sheep farmers are found as far field as Wyoming and Beara miners in Bute Montana. Remote by land, it was probably along the Beara coastlands on either side of Bantry and Kenmare Bay that the first farmers and copper prospectors came nearly 4000 years ago. We began this story with Cork city and its growing powers as a regional centre in the late 20th century. We conclude by noting that in ancient times, it was this jutting peninsula and its surrounding lands which were better known to the sailors who helped people like Ptolemy make mark Ivernia on the map. The Beara has its legends about its origins and about the King of Spain's daughter. This hardy land of seafarers and fishermen sometimes presents a simply awe-inspiring and sometimes awful landscape with its Alaskan like deserts of stone along its central ridges. Yet the wrinkled eternal face of the old Hag of Beara also softens in lovely oases at Ballydonegan Bay or in the vicinity of Eyeries. This western outpost is also culturally close to the Kerry peninsulas and is part of the old O'Sullivan Mór territory. It is now part of the Catholic diocese of Kerry (originally part of Ross) and the Beara men (I assume the women could not care less, but I could be wrong) are deeply ambivalent about their allegiance to Cork or Kerry footballers. This world is a long way from the warm tillage lands of Crookstown and Timoleague - but both areas share in and shape the personality of West Cork. There are other worlds too - where, for example, the Southern Star travels by post - wherever the Bearamen's Associations meet in Dublin, New York, Los Angeles or even Cork city. It appears that wherever two Beara men come together, they form a congregation - the old tribal instinct runs deep. Stories and memories make places very mobile, enveloping the emigrant far from home.

West Cork has, therefore, a complex but identifiable geographical structure. For the people who feel I have neglected the Bantry lowlands, I will conclude with the marvelous pillarstone at Kilnaruane. It has much to say of West Cork - an early Christian site (probably with older roots) on good drumlin soil. It exhibits high craftmanship in stone, shares in a megalithic standing stone tradition and exhibits the rich symbols of early Christianity, including, for example, Paul and Anthony breaking bread in the desert. The central motif is the so-called Bantry Boat on one of the panels - probably the first ever representation of an Irish currach. This has been interpreted as an early representation of the Ark - a symbol of the Church, already found in Coptic Egypt. Today we can let this symbol stand for any kind of boat - an old sailing boat, a schooner or a coaster but not I think

a huge oil tanker. This well-crafted boat has weathered the harshness of sea, sky and rock. It has endured; is resilient, crafty, leisurely, agile and patient. Maybe West Cork and its people are like this boat: riding out traumas of enormous dimensions yet still capable of renewal. I have my own ideas about where hull, prow, the stern, the ribbed clinker boards, the beam, the oars and cockpit of West Cork are but I would prefer you to work out your own solutions. The critical features of the region may be resilience, vulnerability, openess and above all endurance and the capacity to tack in different directions and to construct many definitions of itself.

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