PEAT TURF, SEAWEED, AND THE 'POOL OF HELP' ECONOMY: TRACING THE SOCIAL LIVES OF NATURAL RESOURCES ON LETTERMORE ISLAND, GALWAY

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Abstract: Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork on the island of Lettermore, this paper catalogues a historical network of resource exchange between island, coastal, and mainland communities on the southwestern coast of Galway, and discusses the social construction of group identities and communitas in this region. Under conditions of material scarcity, people on Lettermore perform a 'transmutation' of the material into the social. The example of peat turf shows how, through customary processes of labour, exchange, and use, natural resources are subsumed into a pool-like economy of social support for members of the island community and outsiders on the island to draw upon as need arises.

Keywords: Islandness; Lettermore; rural Ireland; informal economies; island exchange networks; peat turf; nonlinearity; ethnographic methods.

Introduction

The definitional and analytical contours of 'the island' have been debated within the social sciences. In their paper 'Understanding Islandness', Foley et al. (2023) attempt to untangle tangled narratives and operationalise terminology, laying out distinct conceptual framings in social science literature of the island, island communities, and cultural 'islandness' (Conkling 2007). They identify three key framings of islandness: the island as 'other', islandness as 'smallness', and islandness as 'sociocultural phenomenon' (Foley et al. 2023, 1801). Often informed by ethnographic methods, the sociocultural phenomenon framing examines 'cultures of kinship and resourcefulness' (ibid, 1805) and distinctive forms of social life arising in communities that experience physical isolation – though those communities may or may not be water-bound. This paper contributes to this discourse of sociocultural islandness as phenomenon. I explore an unusual form of social-economic organisation on Lettermore, a generalised 'pool of help' which arises under conditions of relative isolation and resource scarcity on the island, and potentially in other island communities, coastal communities, and landlocked communities in rural County Galway. I aim to 'think archipelagically', situating Lettermore's social-economic life within an archipelago or 'constellation' of other physically isolated and rural communities across the larger island of Ireland (Pugh 2013, 10-12).

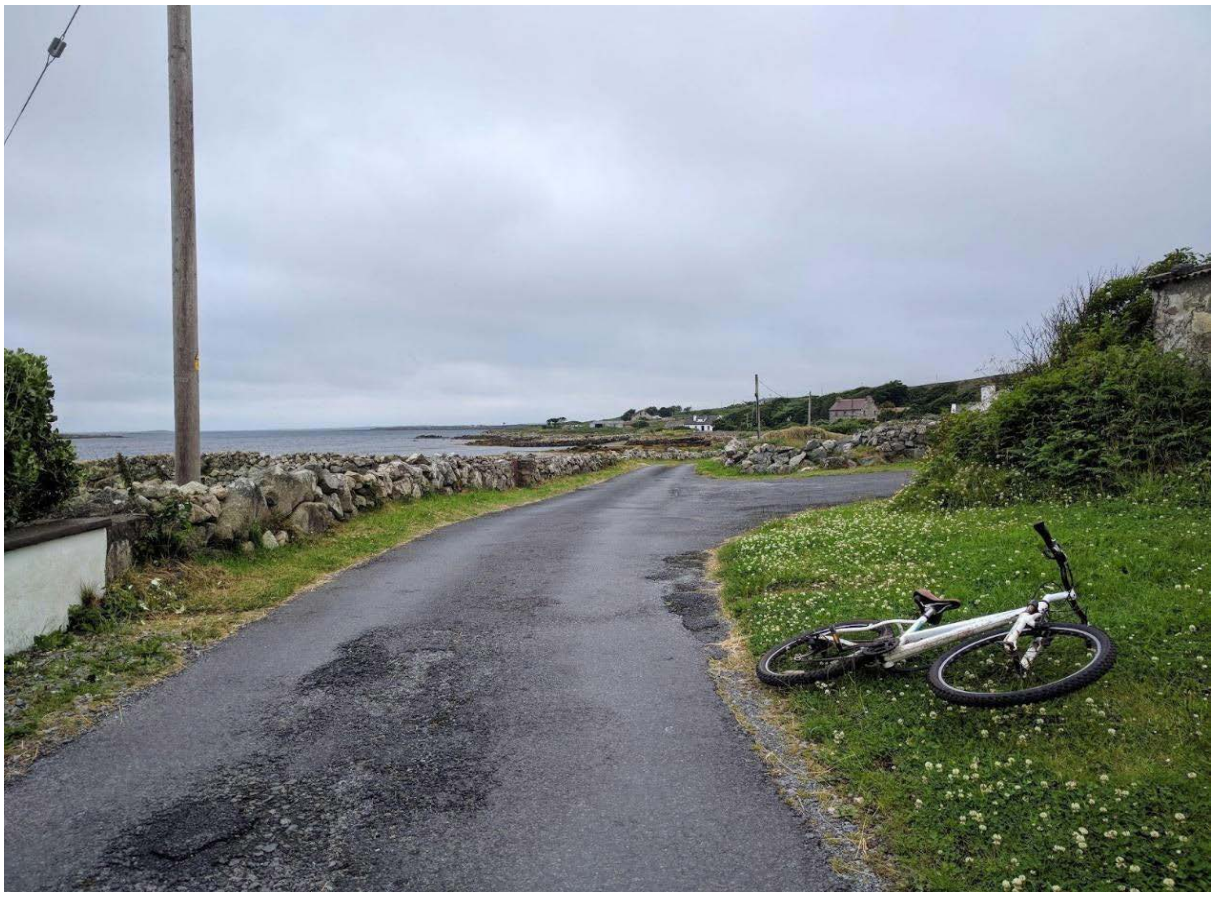

Figure 1. A road along the coast of Lettermore. Photo by author.

Archipelagic networks of inter-island resource exchange and social networks can help distinct island communities to cultivate a shared preparedness for the unpredictable and navigate shared vulnerabilities (Campbell 2008). From narrative accounts of islanders on Lettermore, I document a historical network of resource exchange in Lettermore's environs, made up of village–village, island–island, and island–mainland movements (Pugh 2013) across a diffuse network of communities north of Galway Bay. I also discuss the co-construction of relational group identities within this trade network. Tracking the social lives (Appadurai 2009) of land and sea resources in this network reveals not only relational identity making, but also a mutual recognition of shared material circumstances among island and nearby mainland communities in Lettermore's environs.

I then explore the idea that on Lettermore island itself – and likely also in the nearby island and mainland communities that mutually identify with Lettermore's material conditions – sparse land and sea resources are 'recycled' or 'transmuted' into social life through customary processes of labour, exchange, and use. Resources lose their material forms and enter into social life as they generate a larger social resource, which I call a 'pool of help.' The pool becomes available for members of the island community and visitors to the island to draw upon as need arises. During the process of labour, exchange, and use of resources in Lettermore's gift economy, the distinct lines of giver to receiver,

and the distinct timelines of giving and receiving, become entangled, so that it becomes impossible for members of the community to determine where the gift begins and ends. In response to this obfuscation, and through the extension of good will by community members, the gift economy transcends its form as a jumble of intertangled vectors of social obligation, and takes on a more convenient, amorphous form as a diffuse norm of generalised reciprocity that transcends linear time and specific relationalities or materialities and permeates community life: this is the 'pool of help'. I will track the social life of peat turf as a case study to demonstrate how the Lettermore community transmutes material resources into this larger social resource.

This analysis also speaks to social life beyond Lettermore's environs, elsewhere in County Galway and perhaps more broadly in rural Ireland, where natural resources can hold a similar level of material and social importance for small land-bound communities, and similarly diffuse and non-systematic economies of exchange and mutual care have been identified in social life (i.e., Salazar 1996). I engage with Salazar's ethnographic work on economic life in rural Ireland to explore the conception of a wider 'archipelago' of rural communities across Ireland who live under similar conditions of isolation and material scarcity to those on Lettermore, engaging innovative economies of resource exchange and transmuting resources into social safety nets of mutual support that parallel Lettermore's pool of help.

Ethnographic Context

Lettermore (or, in Irish, *Leitir Móir*, meaning 'large rough hillside') is a starkly beautiful sea-bound island of approximately three and half miles in length off the coast of County Galway in the West of Ireland. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in 2021 over the course of 10 weeks on the island of Lettermore and in two other rural Galway communities, with smallholding farmers and families who heat their homes using peat turf extracted from local bogs. Stays with hosts were organised through WWOOF Ireland, the Irish division of the World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) programme. Emerging pressures are being placed on rural communities in Ireland to eliminate peat turf as a fuel source under new international and domestic environmental initiatives (O'Riordan et al. 2016), and the response of rural communities to these pressures was the original focus of the research. The research was conducted using ethnographic participant-observation of community life and work on the land and the bog, and through informal and formal interviews. Most of these were working interviews, conducted as I worked side by side with my host farmers, their relatives, and their extended communities.

My key interlocutors on Lettermore were Tom and Fiona (pseudonyms used for all interlocutors), a young couple who rented a small, whitewashed house beside the sea in the island's loosely clustered Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) village, which also goes by the name of *Leitir Móir*. Now in his thirties, Tom had grown up on the island, moved away to study agriculture, and returned. He had extensive

knowledge of the island – its natural resources and local history – and continuously supplied answers to my stream of questions and connected me with others to interview as we worked in the bogs or on his farm land, drank tea, or shared meals at the kitchen table.

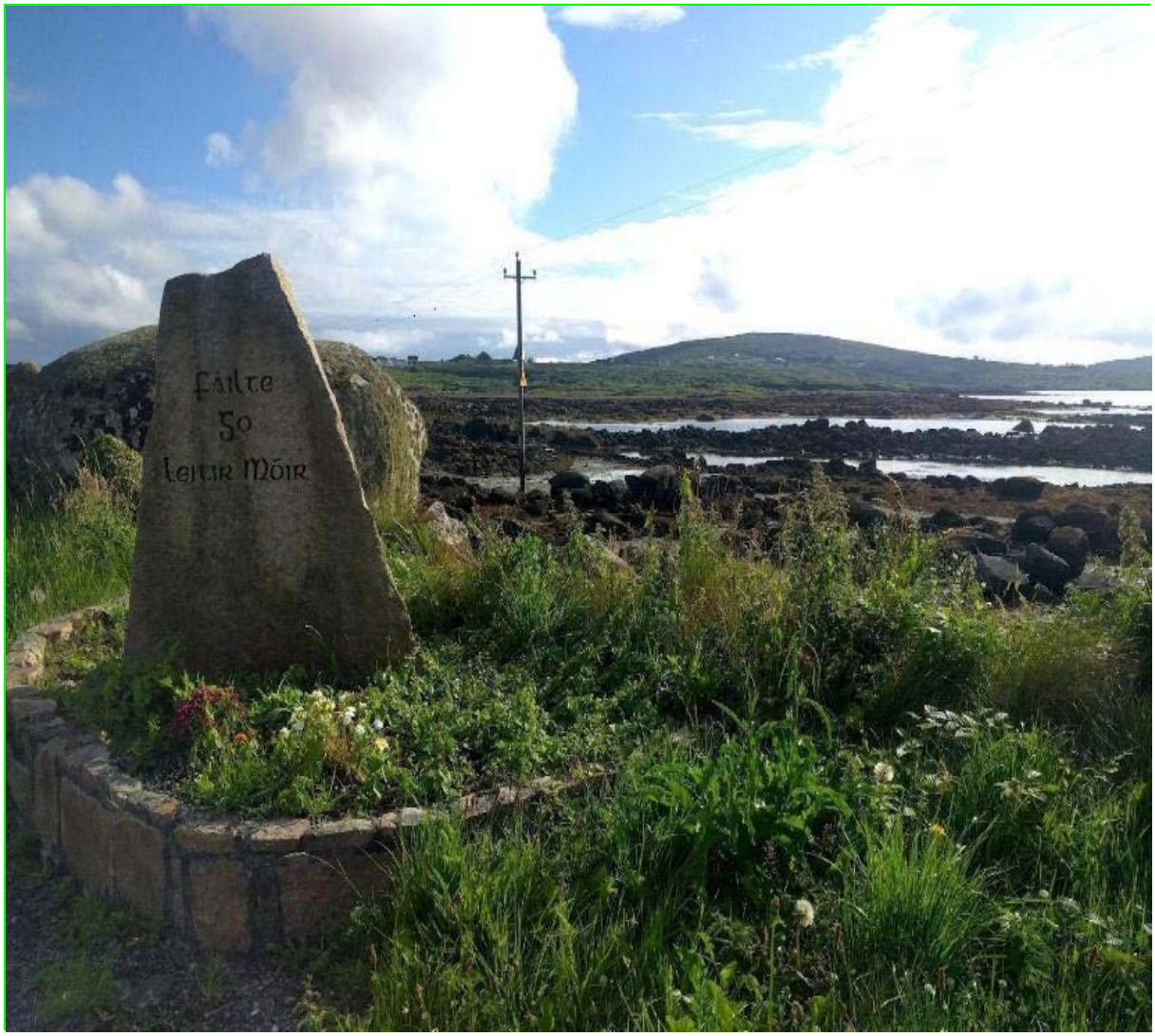

Figure 2. A sign beside the main road reading 'Fáilte go Leitir Móir' (Welcome to Lettermore). Photo by Michaela Wentz.

Despite now being connected to the mainland and other nearby islands by drivable bridges and connected to new sources of income and resources such as remote working, commuting, a golf course, tourism, and holiday homes, Lettermore has historically been isolated from mainland Galway and has experienced high levels of poverty (Gailey 2010). In this environment of relative material scarcity, islanders' innovative uses of endogenous resources from the land and sea have shaped distinctive arrangements of social relationality and identities. To explore these, I will first discuss the construction of island–island and island–mainland relational identities (Pugh 2013) through resource exchange networks in Lettermore's environs, and then turn to the pool of help.

Island–Island and Island–Mainland Resource Exchange: Relational Group Identity-Making

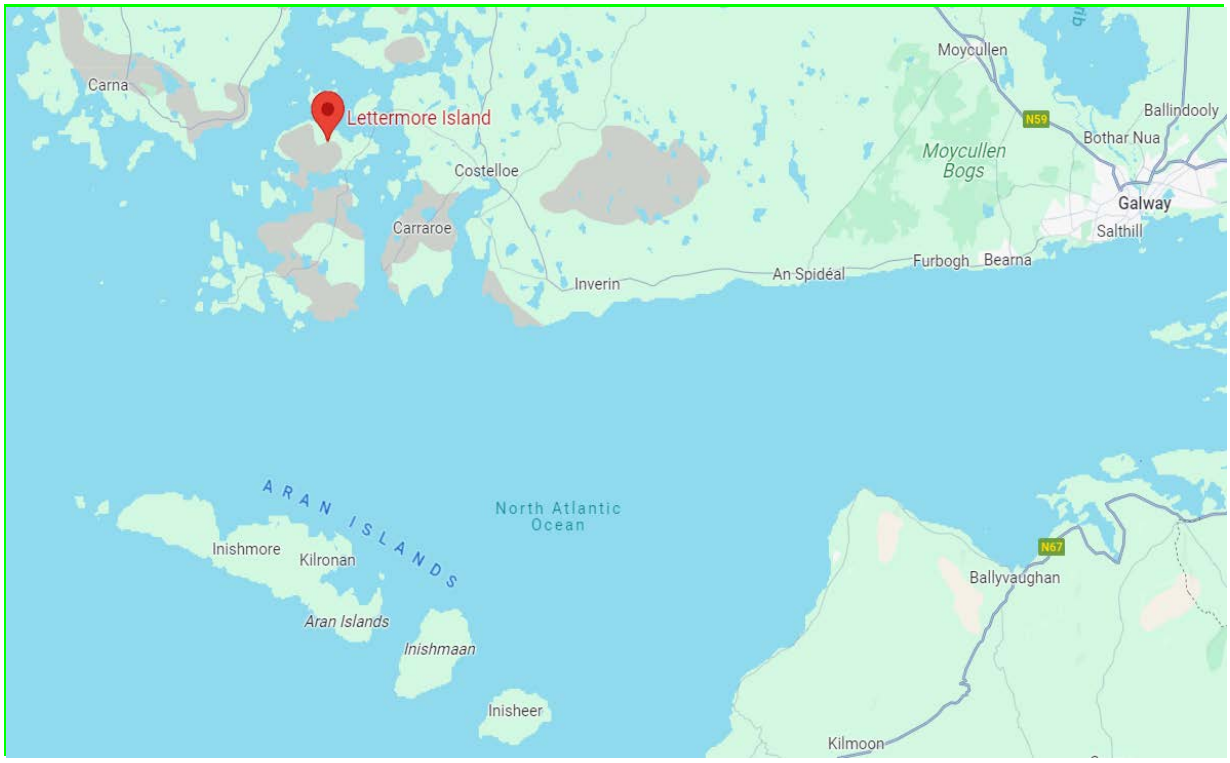

Figure 3. Lettermore Island, part of a group of islands northwest of Galway Bay, and its surroundings. Sourced from Google Maps.

Lettermore is part of a small, closely clustered archipelago in the West of Ireland, off the coast of Galway and formally part of that county. It is about a day's journey south in a fishing boat to the Aran Islands and a few hours east to mainland Galway. In an interview, Tom described how people on Lettermore historically saw themselves as part of a resource exchange network with other small islands, island village communities, and with the mainland:[9]

> *A lot of villages around here, they have, like, nicknames in Irish. I think here in Lettermore, they're called '/'flē hōōn/,' which are 'winkles.'*[10] *Because we are – we have good flagstones for picking winkles, and you know, we're kinda winkle producers. In Lettermore village, there used to be Travelers, which were called 'tinkers,' and at the time they used to come there every summer, and they used to fix all your pots and pans, so if you needed a pan fixed, you went to Lettermore village during the summer to get your pan fixed. Or, another name for Lettermore village is 'jumpers,' which is, you know, a cardigan or a pullover, so they must have made a lot of jumpers in Lettermore village. Then where my mother's from, they were called 'donkeys,' '/'o*

[9] In this excerpt, I have recorded Irish words using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), being unable to find a spelling for most of the words and wishing to preserve the pronunciation.
[10] Winkles are small edible sea snails.

> *set/,' because they had a lot of bogland, flat blog land, and they used to have a lot of donkeys to do all the work. And then, you know, for example, a village might be called 'pigs,' you know, moca ('/'mōku/') because they maybe had a lot of pigs in that village because the land suited pigs, not cows or sheep. And then same for Rossamote, they were called '/'pōō ku dē/,' which are goats, uphill goats, so they obviously produced a lot of goats. So if you wanted a goat or goat meat, you might go there. So even though we're small, that's just within this bay, and a few villages, you know, within a small area, each area had their own kinda niche to work with.*

Tom's account is constructed archipelagically (Pugh 2013), recounting a network of island–island, village–village, and possible island–mainland resource exchanges. The communities described are discrete entities with unique labels, their nicknames, but the nicknames reference the contribution of resources that communities make to other groups in the network, demonstrating relational identity-making in the material entanglements between the communities. Notably, some communities are given distinct nicknames despite their close spatial proximity. Several of the places Tom mentions are villages on the same island, and Tom does not differentiate between village, island, and possibly mainland, referring to the communities involved in the trade network diffusely, as: 'within this bay, and a few villages, you know, within a small area'. Rather than physical geography, it is the key material resource provided to others in the network that bands a group together under one label.

Historical island-mainland resource shipments from Lettermore to mainland Galway were confirmed in an interview with Conor, a local seaweed fertiliser producer whose family had made their living fishing in the area for generations:

> *You can see the land around here is very poor quality. It [the legal turbary right of families to collect seaweed from particular plots of coastline] was to bring the seaweed up to the land to help them grow their own food—somewhat like what Tom's doing here now, but without the greenhouses. Yeah, to help them, you know, just grow enough food for themselves. But I think 'twas always an industry…We have a picture of our sailboat—we have a Galway hooker—going to Galway in the early 1920s, loaded with seaweed, and they were sending it to East Galway to help them put seaweed up on the land, like. Oh, it's always been—well see these boats then would've drawn [peat] turf in summer months. And then in wintertime, obviously, they couldn't be drawing the turf to sell. So they'd turn over to seaweed then. And then they'd be bringing the seaweed to Galway, to help put on the land on the East—on the far side of Galway, where obviously, they're probably short some minerals.*

Conor's account expands the bounds of the regional network of resource exchange to definitively include mainland communities.

As we observe relationality among the communities in Lettermore's environs, we should note that Lettermore's archipelago itself does not have a name. The islands to the south are organised under the common name 'Aran Islands', and are formally named in relation to one another: *Inishmore* (big island), *Inishmann* (middle island), and *Inisheer* (east island). In contrast, Lettermore and its environs have no formal overarching group identity, and their relational place names are not formal ones. Instead, their relational identities have been constructed informally, flexibly, even playfully. The lack of a common name for Lettermore and the surrounding area points toward a sense of place that is constructed in situ through mutual identification to form an affinitive, flexible, and adaptable network of communities and materialities – without being organised from 'above'. Prejudice and playful or serious rivalries undoubtedly exist between some community groups. However, even as the nicknames highlight differences in the communities' ways of life and experiences of the land and seascape, they also express a sense of mutual recognition. The communities recognise one another as peers at least in their shared experience of lack or want for materials in the region – and in their shared capacity for community-wide social-economic innovation in resource use in response to their particular biogeographical conditions.

Lastly, we can notice in Tom's account of the trade network that, just as the labels assigned to communities do not distinguish between villages, islands, and mainland communities, they also resist categorising the resources. The nicknames do not differentiate, for example, between raw resources from the land, resources produced by craftsmen, the skills of the craftsmen themselves, and the animals a community rears: 'winkles', 'tinkers', 'jumpers', and 'donkeys' are all labels given to groups of people. The nature of the resource is not definitive here; rather, the defining factor is that a resource is provided to the wider network. In the process of relational identity making, then, as a resource becomes a shorthand for a group of people, that group's particular biogeography, knowledges, skills, and labour, exchange and use practices are subsumed indiscriminately within the nickname. This points toward a mutual recognition among the communities that resources are not only definitive in inter-community life; they are also definitive in intra-community life – the self-construction of a community as a community.

We have seen a mutual recognition among the communities in Lettermore's environs of their shared circumstances of a degree of material lack, and their shared capacity for social-economic innovation and the construction of community through the use of resources. We can now look at how these capacities are expressed in the Lettermore community.

The Transcendental Pool of Help on Lettermore

If we move away from the regional scale and return to the scale of Lettermore island, we can see that local natural resources from the land and sea, as well as the customary labour, exchange, and use practices that people attach to them, have indeed been instrumental in producing communitas and

community social-economic life. Under historical conditions of material scarcity, people on Lettermore have transmuted the material resources available to them into a larger social resource, a ‘pool of help’ that may be drawn on by anyone on the island as need arises.

This pool of help is produced through customary practices of labour, exchange, and use that surround material island resources. We can understand this labour to refer to the extraction or collection of the resources, their transportation, and the craftsmanship or manipulation required to make them usable; exchange to the trading or gifting of the resources; and use to the consumption of the resources and the end of their material life cycle. Through the particularities of the labour processes required to prepare the resources for use and the system of resource exchange, the specific relationalities and temporalities of giving and receiving become inextricably entangled. This leads to a general non-differentiation between actors, and a disregard for linear timelines in giving and receiving on the island, giving rise to a diffuse norm of ‘generalised reciprocity’ (Sahlins 1972, 193) in the ‘system of total services’ that comprises community life (Mauss 1990 [1925], 7). For this reason, Lettermore’s system of total services is better characterised as a pool than a system.

We can find all of these processes when we track the social life of peat turf (called ‘turf’) on the island. For its particular symbolic richness, turf is a synecdochic case study among the resources on the island that are involved in the creation of the pool of help. Centring turf as ‘the thing itself’ (Appadurai 2006), we can extrapolate the social-material processes that surround it. The material importance of turf is physically evident on Lettermore, as bricks of dried turf cut from the gelatinous bodies of bogs are stacked near houses and along the dry stone walls. The bricks have been mechanically extracted and piled by hand to dry in the elements. They will be burned in homes like logs of wood when the weather turns cold. Tarps weighed down with fishing nets and stones protect the turf, while dry stone walls keep it dry and ready for burning.

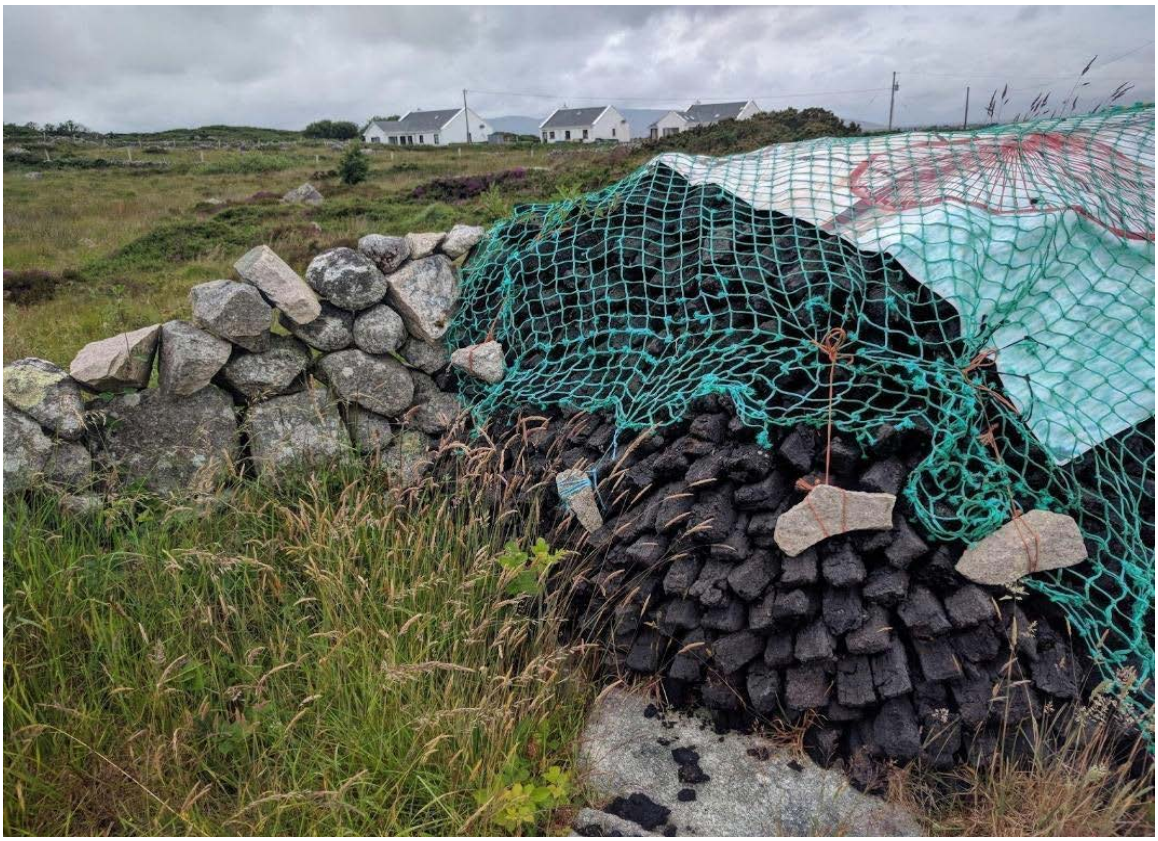

Figure 4. Turf stacked in the traditional way against a dry stone wall on Lettermore. Photo by author.

The piles of turf dot the stark landscape rather like an archipelago of small islands themselves, shaped to weather the conditions of the wind and rain on the island. Tom explains:

> *Footing and stacking turf is an art form. And wherever you go in Connemara, they're done differently. [On the bogs themselves, with 'footed' turf,*[11] *intended to dry in the wind] you'll see pyramids with a piece of turf on top to hold it together, or sometimes you'll see shapes more like boxes, or just sort of a pile to keep it up off the ground. So here, where we're near the sea, we usually stack it up against a stone wall, because the stone walls here have lots of gaps in them, so the wind blows through and helps it to dry. And often, the stone walls are built against patterns of wind and rain, so the rain comes down on one side of the stone wall and protects the turf on the other side from the rain while still letting the wind blow through. If you go out to, say, Spiddal, they build it sort of broader at the base and up to a point, and then cover it at the top with sod to keep it dry.*

Looking at the landscape, we can see peat turf as a key resource for community subsistence and an

[11] 'Footed' turf refers to bricks of peat that have been stacked to dry in the wind on top of a bog. Footing is done after the bricks have been left lying flat on the bog for several weeks, and then turned so that both sides have a chance to dry out and harden in the wind.

embodiment of a symbolic expression of place. The turf is a nexus of the island's unique land and weather conditions, community values and place-based subsistence innovations. Its literal transmutation, through a series of stages of labour, exchange, and use (through burning), from earth into air, parallels the symbolic transmutation through labour, exchange, and use of the material into the social.

On Lettermore, as in other communities in rural Ireland, turf is laboured over, exchanged, and used in a series of stages. The labour process entails cutting turf out of the bog (done manually in the past using a tool called a *sleán*, now commonly done by machine via hired contractors); returning to the bog at least twice, and sometimes several times over the course of weeks or months to turn and foot the turf for drying in the elements; and collecting it, transporting it home, and stacking it again in a shed or against a wall. The labour process varies by location and weather conditions, but it is repeated annually in a seasonal cycle.

Throughout the multi-staged annual process of preparing turf for burning, and especially during the stages of labour on the bog itself, families and individuals voluntarily help one another in an exchange of labour-time. However, within the community's gift economy, the exact networks of labour exchange – and thereby the exact networks of exchange of the peat turf resources that the labour process produces – are obscured. Due to ambiguities in the land tenure of the bogs and to the common practice of sharing dried turf between households in extended families, it is very difficult to trace a line between the giver of labour on the bog and the receiver of its benefits. As is the case elsewhere in rural Ireland, historically and today on Lettermore some families hold ancestral turbary rights, the exclusive right to collect peat turf from specific patches of bog land. Those who still collect turf but do not hold these rights rent plots of bog land on or off the island. Therefore, the beneficiary of the day's labour could be one of several people in a family who hold the turbary rights to a given plot of land, or who have organised together to rent a plot. But it could equally be someone in one of their households who will ultimately benefit from the same turf-fire, or someone in one of their extended family networks who might later receive the dried turf as a gift if need arises. Thus, labour over the turf can be viewed as an act of service to a known individual or household, or to an entire family, clan, or set of clans. In a sense, then, the benefits of an individual's labour on the bog can be said to extend outward into the entire community – through the obfuscation of labour-giver and benefactor – along the community's interconnected networks of social obligation.

The precise timelines of labour exchanges for peat turf are blurred by the timeframe and stages required to prepare the turf to burn. Turf is cut and footed to dry on the bog years in advance of its anticipated use. Once it has partially dried in the elements and been transported to households, it is left in storage to continue to dry, usually for two to three years. It is therefore generally the turf of at least two years ago – and subsumed within it, the multi-staged labour of those who cut, turned, and

footed it two years ago – that keeps a family warm in the winter. But who would bother to distinguish between the labour of those who had cut the turf two years ago in anticipation of this moment, and those who had cut it last year in anticipation of next year, or this year in anticipation of two years hence? Better, perhaps, to conceptually throw all of that labour in together; the help of everyone who may have contributed somehow, at some stage, in some year past or even future, to the turf fire in one's home, and to feel warmly in their debt.

Thus, in the vagaries that the cyclical stages of peat turf collection, processing, and storage create, specific vectors of relationality are lost, and so are specific temporalities. The material, social-economic, and temporal become so hopelessly entangled that they undergo a sea-change, transmuting from their separate social forms into something that is pooled together within the gift economy. In the moment of use, when the weather gets cold and a household burns bricks of turf to respond to an emergent need, this process of transmutation is completed. Through the obfuscation of the role of specific vectors within the system of exchange, help comes to a household *from the community as a whole through time*, and in accepting that help by burning the turf, that household becomes indebted to the community as a whole, through time. To conceptualise the transmutation of material resources into the social pool of help, then, we can imagine a brick of dried turf burning in a household stove. As the material burns away, providing warmth to a household, all of the mutual effort and mutual care that went into it washes over the community diffusely, as though made one with the form of the smoke. Individual and collective efforts, shared labour time, and acts of generosity are transmuted, but not lost – in fact, they are now everywhere.

In this way, the labour, exchange, and use of peat turf contributes to a generalised reciprocity within the community, and the obfuscation of specific relationalities and timelines of exchange gives rise to a phenomenon of total exchange in social life, a Maussian 'system of total services' (1990 [1925], 7) that is more pool, or even 'smoke' than system in its form. This process is shaped by the physical nature of peat turf as a material (inherently wet, heavy, and laborious to work with, requiring repeated turning, stacking, and years of storage to fully dry-out). It is also shaped by the place-specific responses that communities have employed through time to work with these physical qualities of peat turf, such as traditional *meitheal* group labour and long-term storage of the turf at home for drying. However, the transmutation of specific material, social, and temporal vectors of meaning into a larger community-wide resource of good will and help cannot happen passively through obfuscation alone. Transmutation also requires generosity and the assumption of good will on either end of the entangled vectors of social meaning. The person cutting, footing, or stacking the turf must be willing to accept that the fruits of the labour could conceivably fall to almost anyone in the community, no matter who the expected recipient is, and the person burning the turf must be willing to extend gratitude to almost anyone in the community in return. A generalised good will, and a trust in the generous intentions of many or most of one's fellow community members must be – at least most of

the time – prioritised over personal grievances or personal greed. Personal agency, taking the form of generosity and reticence – the surrender or repression of one's own priorities in the interest of protecting communitas, which has frequently been identified in ethnographic studies of rural Irish community life (Keohane, Kuhling, and O'Brien 2023; Brody 1973) – is also needed for the creation of the pool of help.

On Lettermore, reciprocity for labour on behalf of others was expected, but the timeline, giver, and form of this reciprocity was highly flexible. Repayment for one's help on the bog might come immediately after the shared labour in the form of shared drinks, or the next year on the bog when it came time to prepare for winter again. It might also come in a form that had nothing to do with peat turf, for example when help was needed to build a new shed or tend to animals while someone was away from the island. It might come directly from the recipient of one's labour on the bog, or from one of their relatives. However, if some clear form of reciprocity did not come for one's help offered, this was no cause for concern, because it would surely come at some point in the future, in some form, from someone – or it might even have already happened at some point in the island's long past. Reciprocity was both retroactive and pre-emptive, and help materialised spontaneously, when some form of need arose, from emergent givers and in forms that could not be predicted. Through the obfuscation of giver and recipient, forms of giving, and the timeline of giving and receiving, then, the pool transcends specific materials, relationalities and even linear time. Through individuals' generalised care and reticence for, and faith in the wider community, it persists.

Accounts of community bog days on Lettermore, days of shared labour and enjoyment on the bog for the extraction and processing of peat turf, are reminiscent of Mauss's (1990 [1925]) characterisation of the potlatch. A Maussian potlatch is a festival that is an expression of a culture of 'total services' an institution of feasting and gift exchange that creates and reinforces community (ibid, 11). Mary Douglas characterises Mauss's potlatch as: 'totalized competitive giving that incorporates in its cycles all things and services and all persons' (Douglas 1990, xii). In Tom's account of the community bog days in his youth and his father's youth, we can recognise some of the key characteristics of the potlatch: a festival shared by distinct social groups, exchange between the groups, and shared consumption – though the element of competition between the groups is absent, and not all materials that are important in community life are explicitly represented. Instead, food, tea, and peat turf stand in for other materials in Tom's account:

> *When you're working, when you have work to do around the house and the land, you'd all go together. And when I was young, the whole family would've gone. It was a lovely day out. It was a long day, but it was nice. You'd have your early tea – like your lunch – in the morning, and then you'd have your lunchtime lunch, and then you'd finish – you'd kinda try to finish by four, and then it takes about an hour to get there and back, so then you drive home, and on the*

> *way home you might stop and get a pint, and you get some sandwiches and crisps and then you'd be home for dinner. So yeah, it was nice, it was fun. And when my father was young, it used to be that everyone in the area would go out together, and make a day of it. You know, people would be working together outdoors, doing other things, and the word would sort of get around, and everyone would go out together on the bog when the weather was right. So they'd all be working in the same general area, but every family on their own plot, like, and then when it came time for tea they'd make a fire with old turf left on the bog or brought from home, and they'd all sit down together and boil water for tea and eat together.*

Tom's older sister, Bridget, emphasised the pleasure of the experience in her own account of community bog days in her childhood, saying:

> *Food never tasted so good as it did on the bog. When I was a kid, we used to bring butter and milk, and put the containers in the soft bog to keep them cold, 'cause it was summer. It worked really well for that. While it was just bread, ham, tomatoes, cheese, and onions, when it was made on the bog it just tasted different; so delicious. Probably a combination of turf fire, fresh air and just being on the bog. I loved it. Dad used to make a small fire and get a kettle of water from the lochs on the bog and boil it to make tea.*

During these community bog days, the community is defined and strengthened through commensality, shared labour, and shared consumption. Although there are no explicit exchanges taking place – no trades or gifts – during the festive event itself by these accounts, the event takes place at the focal place of the larger system of peat turf and labour exchange. The community is strengthened at this nexus point, sharing in the same labour that forms the basis of exchange and subsistence. When Bridget swore that 'food never tasted so good as it did on the bog', she may have been describing, in part, the pleasure of a community nourishing and strengthening itself as a unified collective.

In these community events, as in this paper, peat turf may stand in as a synecdoche for other resources on the island. Not all materials that are important in community life are explicitly represented in this potlatch-like event on the bog – only peat turf. But as we have seen, due to the symbolic charisma of peat turf to represent community life, the bog can serve as a community focal place, and the labour over peat turf as a focal practice, around which the community frames and organises the priorities of social life (Borgmann 1984; Cuffe 2022). As is the case elsewhere in small Irish island and coastal communities, other land and sea resources, such as seaweeds, sea foods, livestock, wood and driftwood, tools and fabrics, also generate their own vectors of relationality and temporality in social life (O'Carroll 2021). We should imagine that the vectors of social reciprocity attached to the collective labour, exchange, and use of many distinct resources will become

inextricably entangled with one another, along with those of peat turf, in a small community where households have historically managed overlapping seasonal cycles and rhythms of labour for distinct naturally-derived resources. Through this obfuscation and the extension of good will by community members, then, all resources have the potential to undergo transmutation and become amassed in the pool of help.

Today, Lettermore's shallow blanket bogs are largely depleted from a long history of community turf extraction. People usually travel off-island to access workable bog plots. We might imagine that the pool of help may ebb through time as turf and other natural resources decline, or as modernisation transforms material availability and land-based livelihoods. Perhaps it was stronger in the past than it is today.

However, this is not necessarily the case. I would argue that it is likely not: a strong spirit of spontaneous helpfulness and generalised reciprocity persists on the island today. Community members still engage to a lesser degree in shared labour on the land or bog and natural resource exchange, while also incorporating new or more 'modern' features of island life into their generosity. To give a few brief examples, people often offered to go to the island's relatively new shop on one another's behalf, and Tom's extended relatives offered me car rides as needed and the loan of a bicycle when I arrived on the island. Tom stayed late each week at the farmers market to accommodate the school-run schedule of one of his customers who was a single parent. When our car broke down on the bog, a neighbour towed us home, and we all stopped on the way to buy bags of crisps and fizzy drinks and enjoy a group celebration of the bog day – a bog potlatch in a different form.

In a particularly transcendental passage of *The Gift*, Mauss writes:

> *In short, this [potlatch, and a community system of exchange more broadly] represents an intermingling. Souls are mixed with things; things with souls. Lives are mingled together, and this is how, among persons and things so intermingled, each emerges from their own sphere and mixes together. This is precisely what contract and exchange are.* (1990 [1925], 25-26)

At risk of being called sentimental – a risk that should be taken, because sentimentality is a beautiful and instructive feature of rural Irish social life – Lettermore's depleted bogs and other natural resources, and the generations of people who offered up their labour for their neighbours and the greater good of their community, and extended their goodwill to see the best in others, are not gone from the island, but subsumed – permanently – into social life. Time in the pool of help is not linear; it does not matter who and what is on the island now and who and what is not. Each 'emerges from their own sphere and mixes together,' becoming one.

Commodity and Community in Rural Ireland

In *A Sentimental Economy: Commodity and Community in Rural Ireland*, Carles Salazar (1996) describes a similar situation in rural farming communities in County Galway, in which informal economies based on the reciprocal and community-wide exchange of both labour and resources help to form something akin to a pool of help in rural, landlocked social-economic life. Salazar applies an economic systems-based conceptual framework to explore the informal economies of the rural West. However, he expresses that these frameworks fall short of satisfactorily explaining some elements of the socio-economic life that he observed and experienced during ethnographic research in Galway. He writes:

> *Farmers exchange all sorts of things on a regular basis without taking any account of what is given in return. No customary regulation seems to govern this unsystematic flow of exchanges except a diffuse norm of generalised reciprocity. In the absence of explicit contractual agreements, there is a certain feeling of moral obligation that induces one to reciprocate the help that one has obtained. This feeling of moral obligation never seems to harden into a precise normative conduct, though.* (Salazar 1996, 126)

The phenomenon identified by Salazar as a 'diffuse norm of generalised reciprocity' in rural Irish communities in 1996 bears distinct similarities to the pool of help independently identified here on Lettermore. For Salazar too, in rural Ireland generalised reciprocity governs exchanges of help – both in the form of labour and of material things – which are not easily tracked along relational, material, or temporal lines, and which seem to bubble up spontaneously and unpredictably. Salazar's three anonymised field sites of ethnographic research in Galway were not island communities, suggesting that pool-like systems of total services are not unique to Lettermore or to small island communities along Ireland's coast. Most likely, pool of help economies very similar in form to Lettermore's (blurring the temporal, relational, and material vectors of giving and receiving) exist in other communities in rural Galway or in other rural Irish communities more broadly.

As on Lettermore with its golf course and holiday homes, traditional processes of land-based labour and resource exchange sit alongside the modern commodity market at Salazar's field sites. He observes that:

> *Farming communities in the west of Ireland are deeply integrated into the world market economy, and they undoubtedly participate in the individualistic and profit-maximising ethos that characterises all capitalist societies, but they still have a substantial sphere of non-commodity transactions. It is in this domain of economic relations that neither the moral economy nor the political economy approach provides, in my view, an entirely satisfactory*

perspective. (Salazar 1996, 126)

He expresses here a dual capacity of the communities to flexibly adapt social-economic life to forces of modernisation, while at the same time comfortably maintaining their own distinctive forms of exchange. This dual capacity is observable on Lettermore as well, where work-from-home salaried positions and tourism income coexist with the continued tradition of informal exchange of labour on the land.

I believe that the capacity of many rural Irish communities to adapt readily to the shifting rhythms of labour, transportation, time, and lifestyle that modernisation brings (Keohane and Kuhling 1990) may arise from the presence of pool of help economies. The shifting temporality of a nine-to-five workday, with set hours outside of the community, for example, need not interfere directly with the social responsibility to repay a friend for help on the bog or the land, if the precise timeline and form of repayment for that help is not specified in the community's social contract. Likewise, the addition of new material resources and commodities to the social landscape cannot disrupt an 'unsystematic flow of exchanges' (Salazar 1996, 126). The strength of Lettermore's pool of help lies in its vagueness: It makes Lettermore resilient to cultural change, easily incorporates outsiders, and can even integrate exchange with distant economic networks, as Salazar describes. If the repayment obligation is not temporally, materially, or inter-personally specific, then social obligation is adaptable to different rhythms of life, timelines, regulations, working schedules, networks of roads, points of contact, languages, and technologies. Change does not threaten the spirit of generalised reciprocity, generosity and goodwill in social life.

Conclusion

Informal economies of labour exchange, and flexible systems of *meitheal* – shared group labour on the land – are recognised to be important features of social-economic life in rural communities across the island of Ireland historically and today (Carroll, Edgeley, and Nugent 2021; Boyle et al. 2022). In spite of predictions by anthropologists in the 1970s of the imminent anomic collapse of these practices and the rural, traditional communities they support (e.g., Scheper Hughes 1979; Brody 1973; Messenger 1969; McCarty 1968), rural Irish communities have displayed an unforeseen level of social-economic resilience under pressures from modernising forces. Decades after Scheper-Hughes's 1979 pronouncement of Ireland's death and the 1969 claim in the ethnographic film *The Village* that 'in ten years nothing will be left' (McCarty 1969), many marginal rural communities are still populated, still Irish-speaking, still in possession of many traditions that serve to support or enrich life, and still largely considered by residents and visitors alike to be pleasant places to live and raise families. Some of the observable persistence of rural Irish *Gemeinschaft* (small community life) in contrast to its predicted demise can be attributed to the well-organised and successful political agitation of rural communities for autonomy and self-governance, including land and fishing rights,

and other forms of political resistance to decline (Coleman 2021; Okley 2005). The unforeseen persistence of Irish *Gemeinschaft* has also been connected to ethnocentric projections in the anthropology of Ireland itself during the anomic turn that led to the false predictions of cultural death (Peace 1989; Egan and Murphy 2015; Coleman 2010.) However, I believe that the persistence of rural Irish *Gemeinschaft* can also be attributed to highly flexible systems of gift and exchange within rural Irish communities, which, in their pool-like non-differentiation of actors and temporalities of giving, can absorb unpredictable and changeable conditions in social-economic circumstances.

The main contribution of this paper, then, is to posit the existence of these highly flexible pool of help gift economies in rural Irish communities. I also highlight their role in buffering those communities against pressures of change and decline. This flexibility in gift-based social-economic life is an expression of social-cultural islandness (Foley et al. 2023), a social innovation that can likely be found in many rural and, historically, relatively isolated, coastal and mainland communities in Galway or all across the larger island of Ireland. By linking observations of social-economic life today on Lettermore with strikingly similar observations made of mainland communities by Salazar in the 1990s, this paper thinks archipelgically (Pugh 2013), highlighting a likely archipelago of rural communities with pool of help economies across Ireland. This paper has also documented a historical exchange network of island–island and island–mainland movements in Lettermore's environs. The construction of relational group identities within this network of resource exchange points toward a mutual recognition of shared social-economic circumstances, further indicating a shared capacity for social-economic innovations such as pool of help economies in rural island and mainland communities. Lastly, this paper has posited that the transmutation of material resources into the pool of help takes place through the social processes of labour, exchange, and use enacted upon resources by rural Irish communities. Through the case study of peat turf as a resource, we have seen how time, and individual identities in the community retreat into the background, so that something greater – a mutual care without end or beginning – can wash over the community in a form like smoke.

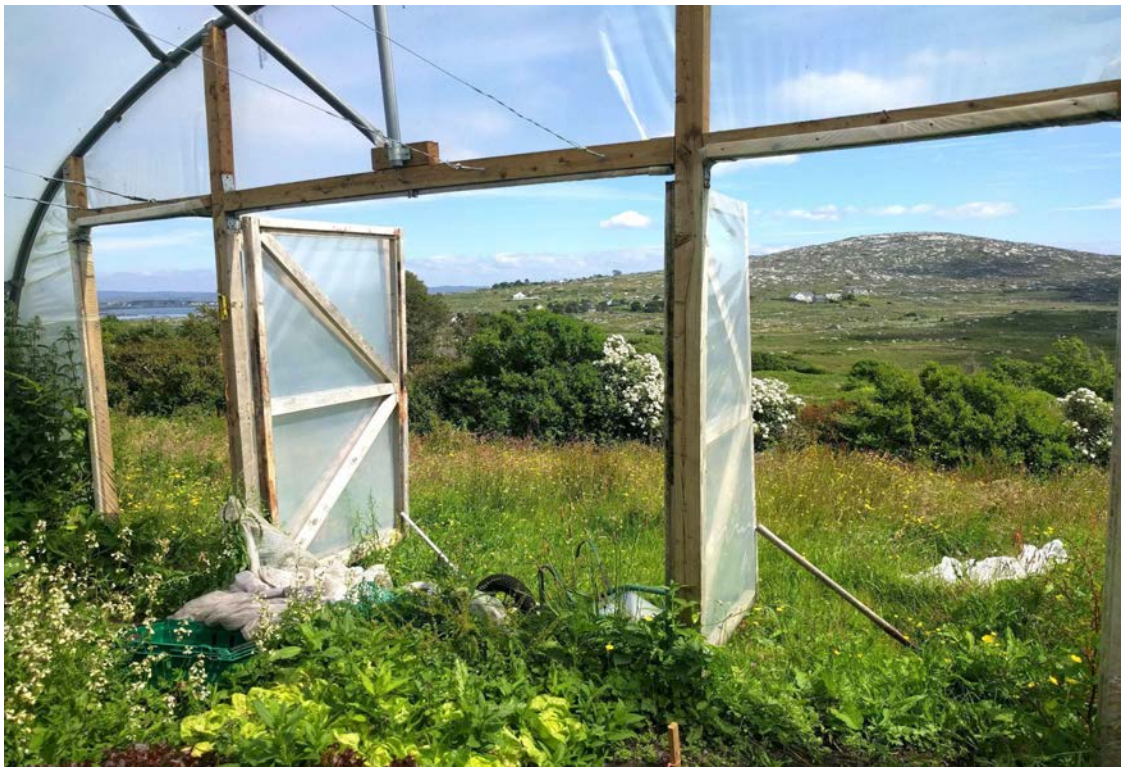

Figure 5. Lettermore as seen from the polytunnel on Tom's farm. Photo by author.

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