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Placenames as Sources for Cultural Landscape Studies

PATRICK O'FLANAGAN

Geography up to the early 1950s was primarily concerned with the study of Man and his many material creations, such as, fields and farmhouses, factories and cities. To that date, little weight had been given to the presence, the potential and the real influence of Man's non-material creations, such as, ideology, attitudes, religion and tradition. In the last twenty-five years geography has experienced not only significant improvements in techniques of analysis, but also it has witnessed the emergence of a more tolerant view as to what exactly constitutes its subject matter. Atlases and maps have been forgotten, for example, in the recent efforts made to gain an understanding of how people view their own world, or as a group, their universe. An appreciation of such kinds of perception, may through vigorous and careful analysis, provide stimulating insights into the spatial ordering of the behaviour of small groups.1 It may also furnish vital information concerning the nature of the complex and dynamic web of relationships which develops between a society and its surroundings.8

Anybody's image of his own milieu will be deeply "tainted" by the manner in which the view is acquired and sifted. Our images of our surroundings, whether they refer to intimate doorstep situations or vague delineations of distant places, are founded upon the selective infiltration of information from disparate sources. Personal contacts, radio, television, books, maps and package tours, among others, may evoke for us representations of places. People, however, who live and work for most of their lives adjacent to their birthplace and home acquire most of their sense of place by personal experience or through personal contact. Such highly localized groups tend to develop an acutely refined sense of place, and it is regularly testified to by the process of bestowing names on places and their utilization as a system of reference. Such placenames may refer to backyard contexts or to distant exotic locations.

To date most studies beamed upon individual or group perception have highlighted global panoramas viewed from distant vantage points by particular social groups. Scant attention has been devoted to the examination of the functions and significance of placenames designed to serve the exigencies of local groups alone. This paper represents an initial attempt to explore the potential contribution of mainly anonymous placenames in the geographical study of the changing fabric of the cultural landscape.

The value of placenames as sources in historical geography has been recognised for a long time, but they have rarely been earmarked as critical indexes in con-

2 M. Pacione, "Through Irish Eyes: An Examination of Space Preferences", Irish Geography, 8 (1975), 111-121.
temporary rural social studies. The valuable work expended by the Placenames Commission with its associated journal Dùnnaíochais, has largely been ignored by geographers, and few articles have been published in spite of the availability of the raw material. Strangely, the geographical analysis of placenames has been most vigorously pursued in North America and research has been published in all of the major geographical journals there. In addition, a journal entitled Names has been in press since the early fifties. France is another country where geographers have displayed a keen interest in placename research; there the main emphasis has been focused upon settlement terms.

A number of major themes of geographic placename analysis is evident. There are studies which are concerned fundamentally with the evolution of regional cultural landscapes. In such studies attention is heaped upon the distribution of specialized terms, such as those referring to settlements which would indicate the general process of moulding the landscape for the service of man.

Another theme is constituted by topical studies which are riveted upon particular types of names, for example, types of enclosure or agrarian techniques and crops which would provide a picture of former limits of, and methods of, land utilization. In addition, a similar line of investigation is constituted by placing stress upon the distribution of easily identifiable generic placenames so as to clarify the former extent of areas occupied by particular cultural groups, for example, Basque placenames in Spain or France, or, Arabic placenames in Iberia. More specialized studies have employed placenames to gauge the relationship between colonist and colonizer in certain areas. All of these approaches can be applied to large areas, such as regions, through accuracy may diminish as scale increases.

Every area in Europe which has been and still is occupied by man has been bestowed with a countless series of placenames. A number of major classes of placenames in these contexts may be isolated on the basis of their functions and inter-relationships. There are, official placenames, that is, placenames which have been institutionalized by the State from the existing name reserve. All the placenames, for example, which appear on official maps, deeds and other documents are members of this class. In Ireland, townland names are an especially numerous group of this class. Their main function is simply to distinguish one location from another for both external and internal interests. Most of these names are toponyms. Another class of placenames are those which identify large sectors of townlands and these names may or may not be known to the outside world. Rarely are the territories designated by these names precisely defined on maps. Finally, there are those names which have been created and maintained to serve local needs alone, and such names are unknown to the world at large. These kinds of names may be termed corporate placenames, as they are only in use amongst a distinct and localised group of people.

It is this final category of placenames which offers the geographer a virtually untapped source for the study of the contemporary and former organization of the cultural landscape. They also offer the opportunity of clarifying current relationship between distinctive groups and their habitat. Such placenames, as well as the people who use them, are highly defined territorially. In Ireland the townland is the primary areal setting for such placenames. Too often in the past placenames recognised in the literature as belonging to such contexts were disregarded; their frequent categorization as minor placenames symbolized their relegation as sterile sources, unworthy of serious attention.

The analysis of corporate placenames may be usefully conducted by scrutinizing them in terms of their origin, form, function, and distribution as a group. Such an investigation must make a generous field-work commitment as it is in this milieu that these placenames thrive. It should be feasible in an area which is rich in such placenames to establish their present role, and it should also be possible to establish the nature and rate of change in the cultural landscape, besides isolating modification in social organization and orientation. Difficulties abound in such a procedure, not least in arriving at a satisfactory operational definition of corporate placenames. Usage and awareness of such placenames are the fundamental parameters necessary for definition, as well as the fact that certain placenames will denote group location relationships. The geographical study of corporate placenames requires that each individual placename must be reckoned with in terms of its membership of a group, just as every individual who is familiar with each name is also a member of a special group.

Under each of the above headings (origin, form, function and distribution), a number of research problems are isolated, and, following this, a series of research procedures are suggested in an attempt to resolve some of the problems. Regarding origin, a range of questions require clarification, for example, that of identifying the special attributes of the bestower of placenames. What are the factors which govern the naming of certain features and, conversely, why others are apparently not given names? There is also the problem of identifying the manner of exactly how placenames become accepted among a group of people and thereby gain their currency.

Regional and local variations, in terms of generic placenames, should facilitate the estimation of the nature of inputs by different cultural groups into the making of distinctive cultural landscapes, and, perhaps, also provide some indication of the kind of acculturation which may have occurred between different groups in certain areas.

For the geographer function is perhaps the most challenging aspect of corporate placename analysis, for example, what roles do placenames presently discharge? How far and to what degree does function of a placename determine its life span? Or alternatively, in what manner does place function underwrite the currency and maintenance of a particular placename? Does a change in place function result in
the creation of a new placename? A crux in this respect is that both placenames and
the places associated with them may possess several different functions. Another
area which requires attention concerns the isolation of the processes which engender
the obsolescence of placenames and ultimately brings about their death.

Finally, a series of research procedures may be invoked in the study of placename
distribution and density. Such an approach could involve placing emphasis upon
individual names, special categories of names, or, indeed, the entire body of place-
names littered over a particular territory. Studies of this kind ought to aid in revealing
the dynamic nature of the group place relationship. Density analysis should clarify
the factors responsible for the internal variation of place usage, or alternatively, its
avoidance. There remains also the task of devising a system of placename classification
so as to facilitate pursuit of some of these objectives. The making of such a taxonomy
will depend upon the objectives of the study envisaged. Potentially, it could be founded
upon any of the four main approaches or various combinations of them.

Live placenames offer enormous possibilities for behavioural research, the only
major handicap associated with them as sources being that a generous commitment
to field-work is essential. Moreover, it is quite unlikely that the placenames alone will
convey adequate detail to the researcher in his efforts to piece together and arrive
at a satisfactory explanation regarding their pedigree and role. For a full explanation
all available evidence is potentially relevant, whether garnered from the archive or
the field.

Each placename is created and bestowed by a “namer”, but obviously such an
individual must possess some special attributes if his creations are going to be accepted.
Every member of a rural community is a potential “namer” and everybody in such
groups participates in the naming process. However, it would appear that some
people in certain Irish rural communities have attained special status by common
assent within the group. This kind of rank has been attained by them through an
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acknowledgment of their peculiar skills and dexterity as story-tellers, or their pro-

ciciency as mediums interpreting the relationship between placenames, places and

people. Such people, invariably men, vaunt their special expertise concerning the
pedigree and origins of placenames in heated discussions, in their own homes, as
cuartarlocht held locally or even in public houses. In rural Irish-speaking West Mayo,
as, indeed, through the remainder of Irish-speaking Ireland, such boisterous dis-
cussions are commonplace between the acknowledged experts, each one of whom
is listened to eagerly by audiences of all ages and sexes, and, generally, the most
plausible and persuasive agreement holds the day. It is more than likely that such
people are believed to possess the ability to originate new placenames, even in areas
which are already relatively densely named. In Kilgalligan, Co. Mayo, as a consequence
of subsequent investigation it was only possible to identify the namer of less than a
half dozen names out of a total of more than 800. In each case, it turned out to be
one of the primary informants.

In other cases the identification of the “namer” may be more easily traced,

especially when additional information is available. Placenames which refer to past
incidents are a case in point. One difficulty which must be initially resolved is to
attempt to establish whether the placenames refer to authentic or fictitious events or
incidents. At the outset fictitious event names would have to be omitted from the
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where a small farm economy is being practised and where numerous daily inter-
personal contacts are frequent? These, and many other research problems, require
urgent clarification before the social fabric associated with the small farm economy is
enveloped by change.18

There are other aspects of the naming process which beg for explanation. For
example, there is the question of explaining the selective emphasis of the process.
Potentially every space, both visible and invisible in any territory may be bestowed
with a name, but it is common to encounter many features that are apparently not
named. Usually, all of the prominent physical features have been named, such as the
headlands, cliffs, river valleys and hills, as well as the majority of the significant man-
made features, such as the houses and roads or tracks. Besides these, many seemingly
featureless areas are named, and names which refer to past residents or particular
biotic species are quite common in these areas. Taboo seems to be one of the most
important factors influencing the non-naming of places; however, only supporting
scenarios can shed light here.

In Kilgalligan, a fairy path is recognised as extending between two points, yet this
path has not been bestowed with a name.14 At the same time other visible and
invisible features of the supernatural landscape have been christened with a name. It
would appear that the relationship between the taboo and the naming process is a
topic which merits more attention than it has heretofore been given.

Another factor which may influence the naming process is the general principle
of rarity and abundance.15 In most of Irish-speaking coastal Ireland, most of the
easily recognisable physical features have been endowed with straightforward
generic toponyms such as, alt, fahan or cairn. Few rare generic terms crop up.
Similarly, most of the most frequent biotic species, including man, are represented in
the placenames, but in some areas the numerically predominant ones are sometimes
strangely omitted. By itself, in any area, the existing placename evidence alone spells
a clear warning. It is that it would be always unwarranted to attempt to infer relation-
ships from placename evidence alone, even in areas where living placenames are
vibrant. Neither would the exclusive dependence on placenames provide a balanced
insight into past economic or social conditions in any given area. Hence the vital
importance of other evidence. It is clear that the naming process is highly complex
even in areas where new names are being born. Further complexity in the unravel-
ning of the naming process is added by the varying perceptions of different societies, even
in an area as small as Ireland, with its spatial variation expressing, for example, rural
economic and social organization, population density and settlement type.

In the study of placenames, form is an area where the geographer must work in
close co-operation with the linguist. Much collection is required before the geographer
can make a contribution. In a recent publication,19 the wide-ranging and bewildering
variation of generic names given to Man's creations on, and modifications of the
landscape are meticulously outlined. This kind of work highlights the potential of the
study of form in disentangling contributions of varying cultural groups to the nomen-
clature of the agrarian landscape. The study of form also offers opportunities for the
establishment of how different societies have accepted, rejected, or modified, innova-
tions. In addition, the arrival of an immigrant group into an already occupied area
may be reflected in placename form. The kinds of names which such new people may
spawn are among the first registers of their presence, and the form in which they
survive may often be viewed as a sensitive indicator of the fortunes of the group in
question.24

The analysis of placename function is a domain where the geographer can make a
distinctive contribution. In an examination of the role of corporate placenames a
two-tiered approach is warranted, firstly focusing upon individual placenames, and,
secondly, clarifying the role of the body of placenames. On the level of the individual
placename, an initial difficulty needing attention revolves around establishing how
many separate roles each name has, and which, if any, is the principal function. The
range of potential functions for placenames has been considered elsewhere. However,
individual placenames show a common purpose as they all serve as points in an
overall reference system, each one denoting a distinct location. In this way each
placename may be considered as a signpost, acting as it does as a symbol for those who
are conscious of its existence.

Most placenames also possess some sort of evaluative designation, for example
toponyms are either prefixed or suffixed by adjectives which often highlight
some of the qualities of the places in question, in terms of, for example, aspect,
colour, shape and size. Frequently, the primary function of each name is indicated by
its supplementary adjectives. These adjectives may refer to possession, commemora-
tion, utility or hazard. Carraig an tSrotha, The Rock of the Current, provides an example:
its distinctive name separates it from all other rocks, and also may locate it; the name
also refers to the presence of a current which supplements its hazard qualities.12 It
is rare that any name possesses more than three functions, though additional
information available in such cases may intimate additional roles such as commemo-
ration or possession, actual or former.

Many placenames which were originally created acknowledging occupational roles
or as denoting ownership have been maintained in spite of change. Such changes
may involve the discontinuance of the activity in question or, perhaps, transfer of
possession. Strangely, no new placenames have been created mirroring the new roles
of the locations. This emphasises that placename function and place function are not
always identical. It is likely that some kind of relationship must exist between place-
name function and the life span of a placename. It would not be unjustified to assert
that placenames which discharge several key functions are likely to outlive those
which simply distinguish one area from another.

The demise of certain categories of placenames may sometimes serve as an index

13 Few painstaking observer anthropological studies have been conducted in Ireland
exception of R. Crusewells, Une Communaute Rurale de l'Irlande, Institute d'Ethnologie,
Paris 1969.
14 O Cathaíin and O'Flanagan, op. cit., pp. 188-196.
16 I. H. Adams, "Agrarian Landscape Terms: a glossary for historical geography", Institute
17 M. Kaups, "Finnish Placenames in Minnesota: A Study in Cultural Transfer", Geographical
18 O Cathaíin and O'Flanagan, op. cit., p. 113.
of more general social change. One of the most significant processes at work today throughout parts of rural Ireland is the strengthening of ties between town and country, and this process is simultaneously weakening the bonds of localized tightly knit societies. In the literature this aspect of contemporary social transformation is frequently referred to as the alternation of closed societies into open societies. Corporate placenames are usually associated with closed societies. The demise of commemorative placenames is likely to be indicative of such changes. Commemorative placenames act as archives for closed societies and, when local history no longer enshrines any didactic overtones or immediacy as a norm governing local behaviour, they will pass out of general usage. Archives of this kind are only significant for local reference as they embody the essence of an event in a name, and in this way they provide local history with a physical existence. In closed societies commemorative names display an apparent contradiction, that is, they refer to a completed past and to the present where they thrive still. It is likely that the non usage of such a name class would serve to spotlight changing rural social organization and occupation. It is doubtful whether a large body of corporate placenames could be accommodated in open society conditions as in the main they would serve no critical function.

Recent language shift within a community must also be reflected in the status of a body of corporate placenames. The relationship between language shift and placenames has received scant attention. What, for example, have been the fortunes of such placenames throughout the barony of Erris which has recently experienced a massive shift of language? On the other hand, a body of placenames may exercise several functions at different levels for individual members of a community. Occupation, age, sex and status, will be among the major factors controlling who knows and who uses different names in a community. A follow-up sample of six people in Killalagan yielded the following results. Each was asked to indicate awareness of each name and whether they could locate it or not. Fifty names were chosen randomly, and the results were as follows: the children were aware of about 40% of the names but could locate only 17% of them while the adults knew 87% of the names and could locate 74% of them. From such a limited exercise it would not be worthwhile to suggest even tentative conclusions, except to call for further analysis of placename awareness within a community.

In grappling with placename function the fundamental task involves the isolation of the group of placenames in question. Field observation, noting especially awareness and usage, is the primary basis for definition. In some parts of rural Ireland, including some of the principle Irish-speaking areas, the townland serves as the fundamental stage for community life. In some areas, however, a series of townlands may be strongly linked to each other by economic, social and traditional bonds. Each townland has, like its inhabitants, a number of placenames which live only in the minds of the people there. A novel definition of community in such areas could utilize placename consciousness as an index.

In the 1970s, in rural Ireland, few townlands remain wherein most of the people spend their entire lives. Rural depopulation, technical improvement and structural change in agriculture, tourism, rural industrialization and changing occupation aspirations of the young, are among the most potent influences promoting the decay of townland-based communities. Collectively, these and other processes are leading to the diminution of the importance of townland boundaries as the frontiers of local social and economic networks. An assessment of the vitality of corporate placenames in such areas, in the light of the encroachment of these agents of change, helps to build up a more general view of the processes governing continuity and change in certain sectors of rural Ireland.

Geographers have not been idle in the analysis of placenames distribution, though, strangely, most of the work has involved large rather than small areas. Micro distributional studies are likely to reveal much about the relationships between groups and their intimate surroundings. These approaches may be envisaged in such confines. The analysis of the overall distribution in such territories would yield a general measure of Man's taming and modifying the landscape. Furthermore, a study of the distribution of a particular name class, supernatural names for example, would provide an insight into interrelationship between behaviour and taboo. Finally, emphasis on the distribution of particular types of placenames, those referring to improvement for example, would shed light upon the former and current structure of the rural economy. Origin and distribution of names is significant as these factors may influence placename function.

The colonization of an area for the first time by an immigrant group potentially offers unlimited opportunities for naming, and the type of names bestowed by such a group, may encapsulate their first impressions of such a territory. Secondary internal colonization and consolidation may be signalled by the presence of different types of names. The arrival of a new immigrant group in an already occupied area, for example the Palatines in Ireland, might prompt the sowing of a new crop of names, and the analysis of the spatial relationship, if any, between the different placenames may produce vital clues regarding the type of connections between the two or more groups of people. Most locations given names do not appear to possess definite boundaries with their nearest neighbours, some agrarian units excepted, enclosure units and their names for example. Thus, as usage ebbs and flows so may also the size of spaces occupied by the names and consequently their distribution and density. Density of placenames in any area will be strongly related to the nature of the activities undertaken at these locations. The more complex the activities, the more likely it is that more names will mirror the activities concerned. It is likely that such a complexity, and hence a high density of placenames, will be most frequently found in coastal areas where the activities of communities is more wide-ranging, involving both fishing and farming pursuits. Only further field-work will test this assertion.

Most groups of placenames, whether obsolete or alive, are usually characterized...
by extraordinary heterogeneity, hence the necessity of sorting so as to facilitate their analysis. Classification is amongst the most expeditious methods for telescoping a complex set of data into some general order. Many avenues of classification are available, and ultimately the kind of method chosen should be governed by the ultimate objectives of the study involved. Systems of classification can be devised on the basis of placename origin, form, function or distribution. Linguistic criteria would require to be invoked in the cases of classifications based upon origin or form, while behavioural and spatial characteristics would be noted in functional or distributionally oriented taxonomies.

To be effective, a scheme of classification focused upon the functional attributes of corporate placenames would be obliged to draw heavily upon all other available information, as well as the names. In this way the roles of both individual and groups of placenames can be isolated and interpreted. Such a group of placenames, functionally classified, would help to reveal the general view of a distinct group of people to their surroundings and also to each other. It would also facilitate an estimation of the nature and rate of local socio-economic change. Placenames of this kind, like people, wax and wane and the understanding of the forces which prompt their maintenance or decay must be of prime importance to the geographer.

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6 D. McCourt, "The Use of Oral Tradition in Irish Historical Geography", Irish Geography, 6 (1972), 394-400.

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TWO FLAT BRONZE AXEHEADS FROM KNOCKANINAUN, CO. CLARE

In 1971, Mr James Hickey of Ivy Hill, Inch, Ennis, Co. Clare, discovered a pair of flat axeheads of bronze under a large boulder on his land at Knockaninaun. The boulder, which was incorporated in the base of an old stone field-wall, was described by him as being huge, having a hollow on its upper surface and as taking “days to remove”. The axeheads were found lying flat, side by side, under the stone and presumably constituted a small hoard. No measurements of the boulder were made at the time of discovery and whether the rock occurred naturally or whether it was a collapsed standing stone is a matter for conjecture. If the former, the axes may merely represent personal possessions concealed for safety, if the latter, then it might be argued that the hoard represented some form of ritual deposit. The lack of evidence on this point emphasises once again the necessity for prompt reporting of all archaeological discoveries to allow of scientific recording.

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FiguRe 1. Bronze axeheads from Knockaninaun, Co. Clare.

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