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Annual Outing 2020

South Donegal

Postponed until 2021

(See page 51 for details)

€5 (Free to members)

Articles

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***Galicia: settlement and
landscape change. Comparisons
and contrasts with Ireland.***

Introduction

The statue of *Breogán* beside Corunna’s famous light-house, *La Torre de Hércules*, reminds us that former contacts between Ireland and Galicia are still alive in popular imagination. Deeper down, comparing social and territorial structures, there are some remarkable shared structures and even deeper contrasts. Galicians demonstrate distinctive DNA profiles not shared elsewhere on the peninsula except in northern Portugal. Also in their profile is a notable North African element – however, there is less than five per cent comparison with Irish profiles. Also outstanding is extreme localisms emphasizing intense territorial endogamy. My task here is to present an outline of the processes at work sculpting modern Galician cultural landscape change citing relevant comparative experiences.

I saw Galicia for the first time in 1965. What did I see? It was like going back to the Ireland of my grandparents. It reminded me of a place where time had stopped and where people were replicating the daily motions of their recent forbearers. Noises and smells were then as distinctive as settlement patterns and rural house types. The sound of ox or cow drawn carts was even more excruciating than being exposed to the loudest pop music. The attractive smell of damp wood burning in the countryside was some compensation for these raucous noises.

As a visitor to what was then a country governed by a quasi-military dictatorship, I asked myself was I experiencing the apparent silence of a forbidden nation? The Galician language was underground. Most people spoke it and it resonated everywhere, especially in the countryside. Forty years later, Galicia now has the status of an autonomous region within Spain. It has its own government and hordes of civil servants, its own TV station and distinctive political parties. Galician is taught in state schools and many courses are delivered through this medium in state universities.

Irish people have been trekking for centuries along the Camino de Santiago, often highlighting in writing their religious experiences. Even in medieval times and beyond few pilgrims have written detailed accounts about the Galicia they experienced.

The most obvious comparison between the two areas is that physically, Galicia looks like Ireland and other parts of Atlantic Europe. It is green, wet and often overcast. Its common lands covered with gorse, heather and broom. Recent introductions such as mimosa and eucalyptus have altered the appearance of many areas.

The ever diminishing proportion of native deciduous woodlands share many species with Ireland. In both areas grass is now replacing maize as a prime improvement crop. Until recently maize was the dominant crop in Galicia whereas potatoes in Ireland were the mark of subsistence agriculture. Population pressure, inherited tenurial structures and farm size ensured that subsistence agriculture was paramount in Galicia until the 1990s. In addition, until then cattle were multi-purpose beasts in Galicia and sheep were virtually absent. Woods and forests still occupy at least a quarter of Galicia’s land area.

Galicia: Monopoly and enlightenment

The trope of peripherality as a metaphor for underdevelopment and poverty in Galicia was introduced into discourse repeating the concerns of enlightenment personalities such as Feijoo and Sarmiento centuries before. From the seventeenth and long into the twentieth century, Galician economic progress had to contend with some major obstacles relating to internal conditions and external connections. It is difficult to accurately calibrate the effects of Spain’s political economy enshrined in its monopoly policies between 1502 and 1786. Its implications for Galicia were stark. Ports were banned from direct trading with Ibero-America for almost three hundred years.

Although the port of Corunna acted as the base for one of Spain’s principal Atlantic naval squadrons, colonial trading prohibition damaged, not only the region’s principal ports, but also Galicia’s entire regional economy by detaching it from acting as a major colonial supplier of raw materials and processed goods and redistributor of colonial goods. One of the great contradictions and paradoxes of Galicia is: why is, and was, this region so economically underdeveloped while retaining an enormous productive potential? Wealth there was epitomised in the elaborate churches and monasteries where rents of rural tenants were transformed into stone.

Another interpretation of this apparent contradiction is that ‘*minifundismo*’ (Galician small scale farming) actually maximised the region’s productive potential. Its high watermark can be set perhaps between the forties and sixties of the last century. Every available square metre of land was exploited. Intricate terraces (*socalcos*) were constructed, and irrigation systems; and with maize ubiquitous except in the eastern uplands. Much of the landesque capital then employed had more ancient origins, however, and its utilisation was maximised during this period.

Where did the money go? Like in Ireland, the nineteenth century was a period of convulsive change in Galicia. Then state expropriation and sale of church lands and buildings marked a critical juncture. Unlike in Ireland, rentiers controlled much of the land and a tenantry still remained trapped on their minute fragmented holdings. Monastic orders and lay land magnates had, over the centuries, carved out enormous landed properties. A copious flow of rents sustained

them and allowed them employ armies of skilled artisans to create elaborate embellishments in stone, wood and other materials. The sheer proportions and number of these enormous buildings, both in rural and urban areas, is a stark reminder of the wealth that they were once able to command.

Fertility, migration, return migration, fishing, farming, fire and *fariña*

So many of Galicia's current development problems are linked to changing fertility patterns: their cultural landscape consequences are dramatic. After nearly two centuries of growth, radical natural change declines have recently set in. Initially, buoyed up with extra food security provided by mass adoption of maize, natural change in Galicia was positive. By the 1980s natural change was negative and, by 2018, only 15 *municipios* out of a total of 315 registered population increase. Geographically, this growth was confined to an Atlantic axis extending from El Ferrol through to Santiago and onwards to Vigo with the AP 9 motorway acting as spine. Like some other regions on the peninsula, Galicia's population today is both ageing and declining. Over the last ten years, for instance, anecdotal information suggests that more than forty per cent of coastal Carnota *municipio's* population of c.6,000 in the 1990s have left to work in the Canary Islands. This may well be an extreme instance; however it is symptomatic of the difficulties found in many rural areas. So drastic have been these declines promoted by steep falls in fertility and tidal waves of migration that Galicia's traditional cultural landscapes are being transformed before our eyes. This scale of change has not been experienced for nearly a millennium.

Farming, settlement and society

Geographers writing about Iberia have consistently noted that Galicia's rural settlement pattern is characterized by dispersion. But what kind of dispersion? Compared to the great agro-towns of Andalusia or the once solid villages of Castile, Galicia's traditional pattern of settlement resembles that of pre- and immediate post-famine Ireland. Farm clusters were a pivotal and ubiquitous feature of rural Galicia where again, until recently, up to eighty per cent of the rural population resided. On average each parish counted ten of these often formless settlements and only a parish centre discharged some rudimentary service functions. Surrounded by minute open-fields, areas of woodland and commons, these townland-like territorial units acted as the lived universe for most Galicians. Solid houses and outbuildings give an impression that many of these settlements have ancient lineages. These buildings might be compared to some of the settlement zones identified by French geographer P. Flatrés. Galician house clusters are often built with gargantuan stones quite unlike the class four and class three houses recorded in nineteenth-century Irish censuses, descriptions and texts. They appear on eighteenth-century surveyor's maps and they are mentioned in many fourteenth-century monastic extents.

Farming

2 What vintage had this 'system' of clusters and frag-

mented holdings popularly referred to as *minifundismo*? How ubiquitous was it? What kind of food and survival security did it provide in the past? Recent scholarship has confirmed that it was indeed already a reality within the confines of the larger monasteries by the fourteenth century. Its incidence obviously owes much to the nature of tenurial structure of extensive landed estates. Within them, for complex reasons no numerous middle-tenantry emerged. Effectively, the vast mass of the population were tenants at will or landless.

Migration was the answer for many in this crowded land over the centuries up to our own day. It largely involved surplus sons and daughters and sometimes, at times of crises as during the 1960s, entire families. Place-names all over western Castile and much of Portugal record their former presence in many *aldeas gallegas* – 'Galician villages' – recalling former surges of people. Lisbon, at the end of the eighteenth century, registered some forty thousand resident Galicians. Moves were then afoot to expel them; however, it was realized that the city could not function without them. For centuries many moved to Castile as temporary farm-hands and their experiences have been so eloquently captured in the poetry of Rosalía de Castro. The late eighteenth century and nineteenth century witnessed large numbers moving to Argentina in particular, once direct sailing links were established between Corunna and later Vigo and River Plate ports. Venezuela, Cuba and Nueva Galicia in Mexico were also centres for their reception as was Santo Domingo and culturally close Brazil. Movement of Galicians to Ibero-America only finally petered out during the 1970s.

Many came back from the late nineteenth century onwards and several did as rich philanthropists colloquially known as *Indianos*, funding the building of schools, hospitals and libraries. Introducing very attractive colonial house (*Casas Indianas*) designs from Brazil and elsewhere and more importantly exotic plants, trees and shrubs arrived decorating their eccentric gardens with giant palms: their trademark emblem.

The varied migration fields carved out by them are evidenced by the incidence of *Centros Gallegos* around the world. While different contemporary web sites provide contradictory numbers (many may be inactive or closed) a conservative estimate for 2007, yields some fifty worldwide with the largest concentrations in Argentina, Brazil and Switzerland and in addition, some forty active centres in Iberia. Today, these *Centros* offer a wide variety of services for emigrants and their children.

Holy orders, fishing and migration

Holy orders, military service and the sea were other important permanent or temporary migration fields. Holy orders often meant short distance movements. It was one less mouth to feed on the farm and those involved were guaranteed some formal education. The connection between Galicia and the sea requires more extended comment. Up to the eighteenth century, most fishing activity was artisanal in nature, engaged low level technologies underwriting only part-time employment. The arrival and settlement of Catalan fishmasters acted as a catalyst transforming the fishing

sector. It ushered in a period of proto-industrialization leading to the foundation of many new fishing settlements, the so-called *villas sardineiras*. These developments allowed Galicia emerge in the twentieth century as Europe's premier fishing region. The consequences of the changes for settlement and society were enormous. First and foremost, it prompted a rapid hierarchicalization of fishing centres facilitating the eventual emergence of Corunna and Vigo as Europe's premier fishing ports. It acted as a migration field for many young Galician males. *Gran Sol* is a sea area to the south west of Ireland where most Galician boats flock to, and a glance at the Marine Traffic website today confirms the ongoing role of Galician sea-power especially in Irish waters.

Fire and fariña

The aging and intense haemorrhaging of population especially from rural areas has prompted a breakdown of traditional community institutions. One of its results is manifested in the management of the 'commons'; these are often lands held jointly by mainly local *aldea* ('hamlet / village') or *lugar* ('place / village') communities and also privatised former common lands. Utilization and vigilance of these territories is now no longer possible due to severe population deficits. More than twenty five per cent of all lands in Galicia fall into these categories. Darker social elements have now become involved as actors deliberately kindling massive fires destroying or damaging woods and common lands. Some of these actors here are ensuring, by their incendiary activities, that more land can be planted with quick profit trees like eucalyptus; that cellulose and wood industries purchase damaged wood cheaply; or that others can be involved in lucrative urbanization projects. Extensive swathes of land are now denuded of trees, slope soils have been washed away making remediation expensive, if not impossible, and in addition, shellfish banks have been polluted by being smothered by mudslides. Over a hundred local residents in neighbouring Portugal were killed in 2017 at Pedregos in one of these incidents. Apart from human losses such ecological damage has had dramatic consequences on landscape character throughout Galicia once the shrubs, trees and woods have been removed leading to major acceleration of erosive processes.

Fariña

The title of a recent fashionable Spanish national TV series refers to another related landscape transforming process. *Fariña* in Galician means 'flour' and it is a metaphor for coca or cocaine. The lack of stable employment in many parts of Galicia has allowed more unscrupulous elements popularly known as 'clans' get involved in importing massive quantities of Colombian cocaine for redistribution all over Europe. Built on earlier networks of cigarette smuggling recent police hauls have tallied to more than six tons (2019) arriving indirectly from Cape Verde and Senegal. In order to divert the attention of police from landing these hauls of narcotics, contrabandists have started massive fires in some coastal zones of the region. It is difficult not to underestimate landscape consequences of this form of

ecocide.

Feismo and return migration

Galicians who settled in other Spanish urban centres soon established permanent homes; those who went to Europe eventually returned, with or without their now-grown-up children. Once again important cultural transfers were made such as one-off European style houses, stand-alone blocks of flats in the countryside, or in existing villages, enclosed gardens tightly packed with flowers, shrubs and vines. Among the legacies of these return movements was the erection of massive trophy houses now often inhabited by retired couples or three generation family groups (stem families). Residents often live on the ground floor in a kitchen-cum-garage leaving expensively equipped upper floors vacant.

Urban structure

Galician towns are different to their counterparts in Ireland. Many retain impressive, if spatially restricted, cores. Many developed under medieval ecclesiastical tutelage and hence count attractive arcaded residences and fine churches, convents and sometimes massive monasteries strung around elegant *plazas mayores*. Few Irish small and middle sized towns can boast of such kinds of continuities of built heritage. As in Ireland, numbers of small towns are few and early nineteenth-century administrative reorganization led to the titular appearance of some 315 municipal centres.

In spite of all its contradictions and paradoxes, Galicia remains a lived reality for 2.7 million Galicians. Its cultural landscapes remain utterly distinctive, even if they are no longer instrumental in sustaining most rural livelihoods. The transition, on entering Galicia from Castile, remains extraordinarily abrupt. Galicia is much more than what has been outlined in these pages. It extends eastwards to include much of the Leonese *comarca* (*pays*, 'shire') of El Bierzo. Southwards, Galician influences percolate to the *Arribes del Duero* in the provinces of Salamanca and Zamora. Even more significantly, they extend into northern Portugal.

The Galicia which has been eloquently and encyclopaedically described by French geographer Abel Bouhier (1979) was a portrait of a region as he 'saw' it in the 1950s and 1960s. Like Arensberg and Kimball in Ireland, he emphasised both continuity and antique origins for this '*vieux complexe agraire*'. The jury may still be out in relation to age and origins of the cultural landscape he so dexterously dissected. Immediately after that date, fertility changes prompted its rapid demise. What he prescribed was essentially a health certificate then for socio-economic and territorial organization of rural society. His extraordinary detailed and accurate description and reconstruction of cultural landscapes serves as a magnificent historical gazetteer of rural Galicia's complexities. He placed stress on the mapping of a number of almost ubiquitous elements like the *agras* ('minute open fields') associated with small clustered settlements within the confines of enclosed territorial units, having exactly the same historic implications as Irish townlands.

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Plaque at door of Irish College, Santiago de Compostella

Around rim:

Historic route – University of Santiago de Compostella

Plaque centre reads:

The Irish College of St Patrick.
 The foundation of this College was initiated by Felipe II.
 In the same manner as those of Alcalá, Sevilla and Valladolid,
 it was destined for Irish students
 in order to counteract the advance of the Anglican religious reform.
 Their activities began in the year 1605
 and continued until 1769.
 The Conde de Ramirás erected this house on this site.

*

The fifth centenary of the University of Santiago de Compostella [1495–1995]

*