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LANDSCAPE

Kilgalligan, Erris
County Mayo



Séamas Ó Catháin

Patrick O'Flanagan

The townland of Kilgalligan is situated on the seaward edge of the north westerly extremity of the barony of Erris [Fig. 1] in the north western corner of county Mayo [Fig. 2]. It is located on the northern shore of Broadhaven Bay (*Cuan an Inbhir Mhóir*) [Fig. 1] and is surrounded on three sides by water and on the remaining side by an extensive blanket bog, stretching from sea level to the summit of Benwee Head, the highest point in the locality [Fig. 1]. The insular qualities of the townland are reinforced by the sheer cliffs on its western edge and a small stream which has excavated a deep trough forming the boundary between Kilgalligan and the adjacent townland of Stonefield [Fig. 2]. Kilgalligan covers some 852 acres, making it small by comparison with surrounding townlands [Fig. 2]. The ties linking Kilgalligan with the sea, which has been the principal focus of life for its people for centuries, have, in the last decade, been modified by the construction of a tarred road linking it to the arterial road net of north west Mayo.

John O'Donovan, writing in 1838, stated that Erris was 'the wildest part of Ireland' he had yet visited, and went on to say that 'The extent of Erris is greater than that of Dublin or Louth' and that it would be with great difficulty that he would be able to get through it.[9] Physical factors, including a low band of hills to the east, have helped to isolate this barony from the rest of county Mayo [Fig. 2] Within the barony itself, communications are difficult, as the sea has deeply penetrated the coastline, etching into it a number of bays, inlets, creeks, peninsulas and islands, such as Broadhaven Bay, Sruffadacon and Farsad Beg in the north, and the Mullet peninsula, the Inishkea Island, Blacksod Bay and Tullyaghan Bay in the south of the barony. The farm cluster in Kilgalligan and the area of improved land surrounding it (as in Stonefield, Carrowtigue, Cornboy, Portacloy and Porturlin) resembles a verdant oasis in a desert of heather, bog and cutaway bog (*cabhsae*). Physical contrasts such as these help to account for the presence of many local traits within this area and within the barony as a whole. The isolation of Erris from the outside world confers on it the quality of a *pays* whose people boast a strong sense of identity (Plates 1 and 2).

Internal territorial divisions

From land, sea or air, Kilgalligan looks like an inverted currach, one side of which has been carved by the sea into a series of jagged headlands and upstanding or crumbling cliffs. Here is the seaward

edge of the old pre-Cambrian quartzites, shales, schists and gneisses that fade into the Atlantic four miles north east of Kilgalligan in a series of sea stacks known as *Na Stácaí*—The Stags of Broadhaven.[10] The townland varies in height from 490 ft. in its sheer western cliffs to sea level on *An Machaire* to the south west [Fig. 3]. The dilemma of Kilgalligan is pithily stated in an apt local riddle, *Broc liath, a aghaidh siar agus é ag saighdiúracht*—'A grey badger, facing westwards and soldiering'—to which the answer is *Alt na Cilleadh*—'The cliffs of Kilgalligan'.[11] These cliffs are being relentlessly battered by gale force winds, rain and raging seas, and so remorseless has been this attack that there is not a single tree worthy of the name to be found anywhere in the townland. Aspect and exposure have, therefore, been potent factors influencing man's relationship with the land. The differing physical qualities of parts of the townland have been recognised for generations by its people. This appreciation is exemplified in its major internal divisions [Fig. 3]. To the south lies *An Machaire* which is a low area of sand dunes, billows, troughs and fixed sand running down to the sea and extending eastwards from Kilgalligan as far as Cornboy [Fig. 2], where it ends in two sand spits at the entrance to Sruffadacon. Jutting out from the western end of *An Machaire* is *An Rinn Rua* 'The red promontory' (Rinroe), a low promontory which is joined to *An Machaire* by a tombolo. The area of sea to the east of where this promontory joins *An Machaire* is known as *An Port* 'The anchorage' and it is the only extensive area of easy access to Kilgalligan from the sea [Fig. 3]. Here the currachs lie at anchor during the summer months and are laid up close by in winter at *Na Curraigh* 'The currachs', a series of currach pens. (Plate 3). Abounding *An Machaire* and *An Rinn Rua* to the north west is a long promontory sagging seaward and truncated by a sheer cliff. This is known as *Tóin Rinn na nÉan* 'The bottom of the promontory of the birds'.

The entire western facade of the townland is called *Alt na Cilleadh* 'The cliffs of Kilgalligan'. In the north western corner these cliffs culminate in a bowl-shaped inlet of the sea known as *Na Príosúin* 'The prisons', overshadowed by Benwee Head (823 ft.). The area adjoining the cliffs is divided up into a number of sectors. Beginning in the south west, there is *Croc an Chaisleáin* 'The hill of the castle', overlooking *Tóin Rinn na nÉan* and *An Rinn Rua*. Then there is *Croc an Watch-house* 'The hill of the watch-house' and *An Gleann Beag/Mór* 'The small/big glen', the latter being great troughs which have been excavated by water erosion; finally, there is *An Láir Bhán* 'The white mare', the name given to an area of bog near *Na Príosúin*. The entire area of bog in Kilgalligan is known as *Bogach na*

Cilleadh 'The bog of Kilgalligan'. The eastern sector of the townland from the tarred road southwards and *Croc an Watch-house* is called *Talamh na Cilleadh* 'The (arable) land of Kilgalligan'. Here, tillage patches, interspersed with pastures and fallow land are found in the form of long strips separated from each other by high sinuous clay and stone baulks, all sloping down to the boundary with Stonefield along *Abhainn na Cilleadh,* 'The stream of Kilgalligan'. Various stretches of this river are also known as *Abhainn na gCarragán* 'The stream of the cairns', *Abhainn na mBrianta* 'The stream of the *Brianta*' and *Abhainn an Teampaill* 'The stream of the graveyard'. Here, in the shelter of the cliffs and the hills, most of the farming is done. An irregular cluster of 18 houses also evidences man's presence. No distinction is made in name between the area where the houses are sited and the rest of the townland, both being referred to as *an baile.*

In Kilgalligan, today, many of the basic necessities of life are won locally from the land and the sea. Each household works a strip holding (Plate 4). The nearest shop is in Stonefield while two other shops (one of which is also a Post Office), a church, a primary school, and a Gaeltarra Éireann knitting unit are situated in Carrowtigue. The two nearest public houses are located in Stonefield and Carrowtigue respectively. Today, the survival of Kilgalligan and the other communities in the area is underwritten to a very large extent by seasonal fishing, especially the salmon catches made in early summer; the salmon are fished with drift nets from the beginning of June to mid-July as they make their way along the coast, heading for the rivers which flow into Donegal Bay and Broadhaven Bay [Fig. 1].

Settlement

In common with the seaward ends of Donegal Bay, the region with Broadhaven as its focus seems to have been settled for quite an extensive period of time. A number of Court Graves in the vicinity, one of which is located at Rosport and another at Glengad, form part of a small cluster of megalithic tombs found on the southern shore of Broadhaven Bay, and probably indicate an early intrusion by Neolithic people.[12] Excavations recently carried out at Belderrig and Ballycastle [Fig. 1], a few miles due east of Benwee Head, have confirmed the presence of early Neolithic people who seem to have been tillage farmers.[13] Further telling evidence of early occupation and settlement in the area is represented by an earthen mound, probably of Bronze Age date, which dominates the graveyard in Kilgalligan. In addition, nearly every headland between Falmore, at

the southern tip of the Mullet peninsula, and Portacloy [Fig. 1], shows the remains of ruined Promontory Forts, which could have been built and occupied anytime between the fifth century B.C. and the seventeenth century A.D.[14] North western Erris appears at one stage to have been on the edge of a nucleus of early Christian settlements, and while Kilgalligan is not mentioned specifically in this context, Dú Chaocháin is noted in Norman documents dating from 1318.[15] As such, it contrasts sharply with some other western coastal areas, Cois Fhairrge and Western Donegal, for example, which do not seem to have witnessed Norman settlement. It seems that the Barrett family, or the McPhillips, a branch of that family, built a fortified residence on the site of an earlier promontory fort in Kilgalligan in the course of the 14th century,[16] and the area seems to have been continuously inhabited from then until the present day.[17] It seems that parts of Erris and Tirawley were occupied by the Normans at this period and evidence of their presence is confirmed in Norman elements which are found in the names of the townlands surrounding Kilgalligan as at Carrownaglogh (Stonefield), Carrowtigue and Dooncarton [Fig. 2].[18] The Barretts seem to have given 'township' or 'manor' status to Dú Chaocháin and Kilgalligan, Carrownaglogh and Carrowtigue were amongst some of its other minor territorial units.This evidence suggests the Normanization of preexisting Gaelic territorial units which subsequently emerged as townlands. The Norman intrusion into the area does not seem to have led to any significant social changes; in fact, their arrival seems to have created very little upheaval as the verse by Mac Firbis implies.[19] This verse, written probably in the year 1418, describes the presence of settlements on either side of the entrance of Srufaddacon, and implies that, a century later, the Normans had become Gaelicised. The effects of the Cromwellian confiscations were much more significant, for the Barrett title was transferred to Sir James Shaen, the Surveyor-General of Ireland.[20] Sir James's son, Arthur, introduced Protestant colonists into Erris in the first decade of the 18th century so as to consolidate his hold on the area and establish the Protestant religion there. These new intrusive elements came mainly from other parts of Ireland as was the case with the Knox and Carter families, and the Binghams from Newport in Co. Mayo, and they were apportioned land, chiefly on the Mullet peninsula. The Shaen estate subsequently descended by marriage to the Carter and Bingham families in the middle of the 18th century.[21] Other families such as the Bournes of Castleconner, Co. Sligo were given leases by Arthur Shaen.[22] In a lease dated 1707, the Bournes family received land in Rosport and

later they came to control many surrounding townlands.[23] Kilgalligan never came directly under their control; it formed part of the larger, more scattered Carter estate which included much of the northern portion of the Mullet peninsula. The Carters and Bournes and Binghams, as 'improving' landlords, were engaged in modifying the face of the agrarian landscape and introduced many innovations including planned settlements, such as Binghamstown and Belmullet, roads, and coastguards.[24] The occurrence of surnames like Wallace, Monday, Blake and Jenkins as landholders in Kilgalligan, evidences the presence of other intrusive elements;[25] these people came with their families from such areas as north Co. Dublin and Co. Wexford.[26] In this way, Rosport became a centre of innovation in the first quarter of the 19th century as a consequence of 'improvements' such as 'the use of the Scots plough, the introduction of wheeled vehicles, the building of roads and above all the means of making peasant tenants the producers of marketable produce.'[27] Yet, in the course of the last two centuries, these landlords and many of their innovations, such as the coastguards and some planned settlements, with the exception of Belmullet, have vanished completely.

Kilgalligan, outside the Bournes estate and distant from the centre of the Carter estate, did not, it seems, experience the introduction of such novelties. Within a century, the Bournes family, like the Norman Barretts before them, became part and parcel of the local Gaelic world, and their descendants there today are indistinguishable from the local people, being both Catholic in religion and Gaelic in outlook and language.

The Cromwellian confiscations also led to the arrival of 'transferred' people from Ulster in the latter half of the 17th century.[28] These settled mainly in Ballycroy, in the southern sector of the barony.[29] In the course of the following two centuries, their descendants spread all over the barony and family names such as Doherty, O'Donnell, O'Boyle, Reilly, Ginty, Curley, Gallagher, Henry and Geraghty all of which are, or were, found in Dú Chaocháin,[30] emphasize the extent of this Ulster presence. Further telling evidence of their impact may also be found in the Irish dialect of the area.[31]

Migration and change

It would be wrong to believe the community in Kilgalligan to have been so isolated from the rest of the barony as not to have shared similar experiences. Such is the case with migration, for example, which seems to have already been current here in the latter half of the 18th century, if traditional sources, recalling seasonal

migration to the province of Leinster at that time, are to be believed.[32] The next century saw harvest migrations take place to the Foyle valley, between Derry and Donegal, and later, by the middle of the 19th century, to Tirawley and Sligo.[33] By the beginning of this century, the predominant migration field had altered in favour of the central valley of Scotland and southern Scotland. This was to remain a popular destination for migrants until the middle fifties. It must also be stated, however, that from 1850 or so onwards, many people left this area for North America (*An tOileán Úr*), particularly for the coalfields of Pennsylvania. This flow reached a peak in 1883, which is known locally as *Aimsir an Free Emigration* 'The time of the Free Emigration': Free Emigration was a scheme providing a free passage to prospective migrants to North America.

POPULATION OF KILGALLIGAN

Classification by sex, as recorded at each census from 1841 to 1971[34]

Year	Total	Males	Females
1841	199	106	93
1851	88	43	45
1861	105	49	56
1871	100	48	52
1881	115	53	62
1891	88	43	45
1901	86	43	43
1911	78	39	39
1926	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
1936	88	41	37
1946	90	51	39
1951	97	54	43
1956	95	51	44
1961	91	55	36
1966	92	58	34
1971	85	49	36

N.A.—Not available.

Migration was not the only phenomenon, however, which brought the people of Kilgalligan into contact with the outside world. Such events as the arrival of the Bournes family in Rosport and their attempts to reorganise settlement and agriculture in that townland, the establishment of the coastguards at Rinroe at about the turn of the 19th century, the actions of the Congested Districts Board in building a pier, boathouse and fish curing station, and the later agency of

the Irish Land Commission must also be taken into consideration. The Irish Land Commission was responsible for the purchase of the Carter estate, the eventual replacement of rundale in the townland by lengthy strips [Fig. 3] and the transformation of a community of tenant farmers into owner-occupiers.[35] So thorough-going has been the replacement of one old tenurial system by another, and so radical the social changes, that many of the visible cultural elements, customarily associated with rural communities on the western seaboard of Ireland, have vanished completely; there is not a single house of the traditional type, nor a single pig, in Kilgalligan. Such factors as the availability of grants from the Department of the Gaeltacht for building and improving houses have assisted in the decline and disappearance of many of the manifestations of traditional material culture. However, many other diagnostic spiritual and symbolic elements of Irish western rural society are still strong, elements such as the Irish language or the degree of kinship in the townland where most of the families are related to each other in one way or another.

In addition, the presence and strength of many localized institutions such as wakes, *comhar* (mutual aid), visiting and fireside storytelling sessions serve to emphasise the corporateness of social and and economic life in Kilgalligan, and supply some of the reasons for so many of Kilgalligan's residents spending so much of their lives within the confines of their own townland.

The rural economy

Today, agriculture and fishing are still the basic ingredients of Kilgalligan's rural economy. On the strip-holdings, such diverse items as grass, potatoes, onions, turnips, rye, oats and sometimes barley, are sown. A few head of cattle, occasionally a flock of sheep and even a horse or a donkey, as well as a variety of domestic fowl and domestic animals, are also found on many holdings. The sale of young cattle and sheep constitutes a major source of cash-inflow.

The various tasks associated with both agriculture and fishing are shared out as evenly as possible within each household in Kilgalligan; so the young, the old, and even the incapacitated, all have vital rôles to play, whether it be in the houses, on the land, or even at sea. The saving of hay and the beaching of fishing boats in late autumn are occasions which call for inter-household co-operation. Kilgalligan is a hive of activity throughout the daylight hours for most of the year: cattle and sheep have to be tended on the *bogach*, water has to be drawn from Kilgalligan's wells by those who do not possess water storage tanks, the land has to be dug and weeded and crops have to

be harvested. The repairing of fishing boats and the mending of nets usually takes place in winter when there is a lull in land-working. Turf from the *bogach* is the chief fuel utilized in Kilgalligan, though the traditional hearth fire has been replaced, in some instances, by turf-fueled stoves or bottled gas cookers.

The introduction of electricity has helped to make man's presence in Kilgalligan more permanent, and agriculture and fishing have also served to tie the residents of Kilgalligan to the land. Visits in the evening by the men to the nearest public house at Stonefield, or to Mass on Sunday at Carrowtigue by men and women alike, break the rhythm of life within the confines of the townland. Travelling shops, banks and libraries operating from Belmullet, Glenamoy, ballycastle, Killala and Ballina provide some of the essentials and luxuries of life for many people in Kilgalligan.

Today, Irish is still the first and favourite language of the majority of the inhabitants of Dú Chaocháin, though some of the younger people are gradually turning to English. In Kilgalligan, the westernmost townland of Dú Chaocháin, Irish is the everyday language of young and old, and there are several relatively young monoglots among the population.[36] The close relationship between man and the land in Kilgalligan is vividly illustrated in the placenames and lore which follow.