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Authors	O'Flanagan, Patrick
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7. Placenames and Change in the Irish Landscape

Patrick O'Flanagan

> Words are signals, counters, they are not immortal. It can happen that a civilisation can become imprisoned in a linguistic contour that no longer matches the landscape of fact.[1]

In an age where powerful economic, cultural and political influences are placing what sometimes appear as inexorable pressures on different societies everywhere to conform to specific sets of values and behaviour the distinctive attributes of many societies are being submerged. The visitor to Ireland is struck by the impact of telling modernisation processes as expressed in the revolution in rural housing and reshaping of our cities, towns and villages. A glance at the necrology published by any leading newspaper here may startle the prescient visitor as it indicates not just a galaxy of family names but also a highly varied catalogue of named places, usually the names of townlands. Bilingual road-signs also alert visitor and native alike to the apparently peculiar but relatively limited range of Irish placenames. Our awareness of these facets of the Irish landscape is further sharpened by an examination of any Ordnance Survey county index sheet which depicts the names and approximate dimensions of all our 68,000 odd townlands. In a country where very significant discontinuities exist in the landscape it is impressive to recall the durable and longstanding continuity in certain territorial structures and the placenames associated with them.

A transect across any townland index sheet reveals the kinds of placenames we are dealing with. Starting on the southern tip of the Blackwater estuary in County Waterford, for example, and moving northwards along the river, we encounter such places as Monatray, Prospecthall, Black Bog,

Pill Park, Ticknock, Ardsallagh, D'Loughtane, Coolbagh, Glenassy, Dromore, Ballynacourty, Dromana, Mount Rivers and Affane. How do we make any sense of such an apparently bewildering array of placenames? What do they tell us about the places so named and the people who bestowed the names? How old are they and what factors have encouraged their survival? What have placenames got to do with geography?

Unlike other contributions to this series this essay focuses directly upon a particularly well defined area, that is, placenames which most historical geographers would consider as an auxiliary source material. Placenames present the researcher with exciting possibilities but their utilisation calls for many skills. We can concur with G. R. Stewart's conception of a placename as being one or more words used to indicate, denote and identify a particular place.[2] Many placenames have evolved over time while some few have been bequeathed by identifiable namers. Such a distinction is, albeit, not always significant because placenames form part of the heritage of any society or civilisation. Geographers would consider placenames as being part of a cultural landscape which has been and is being continuously transformed to meet the exigencies of its inhabitants. It is composed of such basic elements as houses, fields, enclosures and roads. Less obvious but no less significant components of cultural landscapes include farm and family names, networks and surfaces of movement founded upon work, leisure and kin.

Our brief is to evaluate how placenames can contribute to our understanding of change in former cultural landscapes in Ireland. In such a quest the geographer must rely heavily on the expertise of other scholars, notably etymologists, who can sometimes date placenames on the basis of their form. In this regard it is important to stress that one of the achievements of medieval Gaelic society was the development of a distinctive discipline referred to now as *Dinnseanchas*. This term is often now inelegantly translated to 'topography'. *Dinnseanchas* in reality amounted to much more than the felicitous description and naming of places; it involved the delimitation of boundaries, occasionally the suggestion of ownership and, sometimes, assessment of land-quality. In all it amounted to a mode of medieval land valuation, a forerunner to the great surveys

of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.

We are fortunate that some of these tracts have survived and they furnish a shadowy glimpse of some elements of the pre Anglo-Norman territorial organisation of the cultural landscape and their placenames. One tract is available for the middle Blackwater valley of Co. Cork and it inspects an area extending into Counties Limerick, Tipperary and Waterford comprising two *triucha* (districts) which are subdivided into ten separate *tuatha* (subregions); these *tuatha* are partitioned into a series of *baile* denominations (place, home, farm, holding and/or settlement). From our perspective the names bequeathed to the *baile* units are most interesting. We may instance some of the following anglicised forms, Clondulane (O'Dillane's meadow), Kilcoran (Coran's church), Ballard (high pass) and Kildrum (church on the ridge). Most of the *tuatha* are given family names, though one of them refers to the glen of the yew trees; this is also the case with some of the smaller denominations, for example, *Sonnach Gobann* (the smith's palisade). Indeed the over-riding concern of the enumerator was to identify the boundaries of each holding, specify its occupants and describe the tenurial conditions. Furthermore the central place in each *tuath* is recognised by naming and locating its church. A substantial number of the placenames refer to the physical characteristics of the area, for example, *Na Rinndí* (the headlands) and *Mónaidh Mhóir* (the extensive heath).

Some names even refer to land use, such as *Ceapach Ingine Ferchair* (the tillage plot of Fraher's daughter). Another substantial group of placenames refer to secular and ecclesiastical buildings from churches to ring-forts and cahers. A cursory analysis of this tract yields a rare insight into the way a former Gaelic landscape was named and organised and emphasises the manner in which land was defined socially on the basis of kin-groups. Such tracts, infrequent as they are, serve to remind us about the density of history in those parts of Ireland which have been occupied for milleniums and this particular tract shows that many placenames familiar to us today would also be at home in parts of medieval Ireland. Hence many placenames on this island are often ancient and tenacious.

Most placenames in Ireland have undergone linguistic

change. By contrast to many other parts of Europe, language change has been frequent and sometimes abrupt here and etymological studies have revealed several significant changes in form. New placenames have replaced old; major shifts in orthography have transpired as placenames were recorded and anglicised between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The dating of Irish placenames is further exacerbated by the fact that few were documented before the seventeenth century.

Most placenames in official currency have at least late medieval or early modern origins. This is certainly true of the majority of our townland names. By comparison the names bestowed on many prominent physical features such as peninsulas, hills and lowlands are older still. We may say the same about those names given to major water-bodies, for instance, bays, lakes and rivers. Field names, by contrast, appear to be generally of nineteenth century origin. Hence few placenames today indicate either the conditions or the implications suggested by the name. Elm trees are almost surely absent at Ballinlevane (*Baile an Leamháin* – place of the elm) as is holly from Tircullen (*Tír Chuilinn* – land of holly trees). In this way placenames may be regarded as special kinds of archives serving to remind us of the way earlier inhabitants evaluated or perceived their new surroundings.

Successive groups who immigrated to Ireland or who moved around the island were confronted with, in many instances, landscapes which were long settled and named. Indeed many Irish townland names had already been recorded and partially anglicised prior to the intensive colonisation in the second half of the seventeenth century. The net result of the plantations and their aftermath, so far as Irish placenames are concerned, was not to produce a new intrusive reference system but rather the general anglicisation of extant names, though, of course, some new ones were added. The work of O'Curry and O'Donovan brought this process of anglicisation to a close. Their brief, as agents of the ordnance survey, was essentially to provide standardised and acceptable names in English for inclusion on ordnance survey maps. Their research, documented in the so-called ordnance survey *Letter-Books* and *Name-Books*, is a critical source for the student of Irish placenames. The foundation of *An Cómisiún Logainmneacha* in the 1940s, as a branch of the ordnance survey, signalled an effort on behalf of the new state to re-gaelicise our official placenames. This kind of effort may be viewed as part of a wider attempt to recreate a Gaelic milieu at that time.

Essentially all Irish placenames can be divided into two major classes. First we may recognise those names which refer to the inanimate world around us and these placenames can be regarded as *environmental names*. There are also *cultural names* which denote elements which have been modified by human activity. In each case there are a series of basic or generic elements, such as hill or house, which are widely accepted as such. Environmental names can be divided into three classes. To begin with there are toponyms which refer to the leading physical features familiar to us; *cnoc*, hill; *fother*, a headland; *mágh*, a lowland; *rinn*, a promontory and *riasc*, a marsh. Bionyms indicate names with plant or animal associations: *portach*, bog; *tor*, bush; *réidh*, level moorland; *scairt*, shrubbery and *coill*, wood. Finally, hydronyms are names given to water-bodies: *cuas*, creek; *inbhear*, estuary; *loch*, lake; *abhainn*, river and *tobar*, well.

Cultural names refer to such items as houses, *tithe*; land units and measures, such as *baile*, place, homestead, lands or *gníomh*, a twelfth part of a *baile*; enclosures which include *garraí*, a field or *fál*, a hedge; land use, *bán*, fallow land or *cluain*, a meadow and buildings such as *eaglais*, church or *muileann*, mill.

Many of the cultural names can be further subdivided into two classes in terms of whether they imply possession or commemoration. Indeed ownership is one of the key connotations of Irish placenames as they serve not only to indicate site but to designate possession.

Commemoration is also important as many placenames recall events, incidents and traditions as seen from within local communities. Two examples may suffice here. *Bóthar na gCiarraigheach* refers to a settlement of Kerry migratory potato-diggers who established themselves on the outskirts of Clonmel in the nineteenth century. The names of many of our early Christian churches bear the names of the founders.

Neat classifications have the advantage of, at least, appearing useful but for most country people they may lack reality.

The people who created our placenames were usually making hard-headed judgements of land capability. While a majority of our placenames may simply indicate sites by utilising generic terms reinforced by descriptive adjectives which refer to colour, shape, size and texture, many adjectives are used to indicate land quality. The following local names from Erris, County Mayo illustrate this point: *An Mhalaidh Shleamhain* (the slippery slope), *An Screig* (the rough stony ground), *An Lag Fliuch* (the wet hollow), *An Fál Garbh* (the rough enclosure) and *Tamhnaigh na bhFeá* (the meadow of the rushes). These kinds of placenames impress us not on account of their lyrical undertones but rather as prosaic and crucial land evaluations. Besides estimating land quality many placenames have been endowed specifically to identify hazards such as submerged rocks at sea and treacherous land for cattle and sheep.

The American essayist, Emerson, once wrote that America 'is whitewashed all over by unmeaning names, the cast-off clothes of the countries from which the emigrants came.' Such strictures imply that we can learn nothing from our intrusive names. In the historical geography of most European countries the processes of colonisation, assimilation, absorption, adaptation, segregation and transformation form some of the dominant themes of research. Each group who came and settled in Ireland in the post early Christian period found themselves in areas which had already been settled and named to a greater or lesser degree. One method of considering the spread and impact of these movements is to assess the degree to which intrusive names have been introduced and maintained. A recent study has shown that aspects of the spatial dimensions of the Anglo-Norman settlement in Ireland can be inferred from an analysis of the distribution of a limited number of generic elements, notably the suffix, *town*, as in Mainstown, Maughanstown and Mortlestown.[3] *Town* in Irish placenames does not signify a large settlement, but simply the farm or holding occupied by a family of Anglo-Norman origin such as Barry, Barret or Roche. Townlands bearing such suffixes are noticeably concentrated in the east of the country, in Counties Dublin, Kildare, Meath, east Westmeath and Wexford, in the area where we know that the Normans gained a solid foothold. Reducing the scale of investigation to a county level

it is possible to suggest, in some instances, that sharp and well defined boundaries existed at one time between zones of Gaelic and Norman settlement. In County Cork, for example, the core zone of Anglo-Norman settlement was established in the eastern half of the county in the valleys of the Bandon, Lee and Blackwater.[4] A north-south frontier extending from Buttevant, through Mallow to Innishannon and on to the coast at Timoleague can be recognised in a line of medieval boroughs and market towns. To the west of this area few *town* suffixes occur and most of the placenames which indicate settlement are of Gaelic origin, such as *dún* (a fort) and *rath* (a ring-fort).

Historians have drawn our attention to the so-called Gaelic resurgence of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It has been argued that this slow but relentless territorial realignment is represented onomastically in some areas by the prefix *baile* (anglicised Bally) replacing the suffix *town*. Such an attractive interpretation must be qualified, however, by the fact that *baile* as an element in Irish placenames predates the term *town*. *Bally* is by far the most frequent element found in Irish placenames and like the suffix *town*, it is employed with a great variety of family names, both Gaelic and Anglo-Norman and with other elements as well, Ballycastle and Ballynamona, for example. Documents referring to places in the fourteenth century show, however, that the elements *baile* and *town* were interchangeable in meaning. In parts of east County Cork, for instance, there seems to have been a transformation of many *town* elements into *baile*. This process was repeated in other parts of the country. There also appears to have been a significant increase in the number of *baile* type names. The evidence, complex and elusive as it is, seems to indicate not only resurgence but also a significant extension of the settled area during this period.

It is also worth mentioning that by the seventeenth century such townland elements as *caher* (a fort), *ráth* (a ring-fort), *farran* (a ploughland), *ceapach* (a cleared tillage plot), *gort* (a field) and *trian* (a third part) were all interchangeable in meaning with *baile* or *town*. They all referred to owned, leased, occupied and/or worked land or holdings held jointly or by individuals.

The so-called New English who settled during and after

the major seventeenth century plantations opted almost at once to use the pre-existing townland structure as their land allotment system. This development had many important implications, not least the fact that the townland names became institutionalised though many experienced the process of anglicisation. It is mainly as a consequence of this that they survived to this day. In some cases there was considerably greater alteration as new placenames replaced older ones. Among the most frequent New English elements are the folowing: *brook, close, court, dale, demesne, grove, hill, lawn, park* and *ville*. A former traditionalist professor of the National University wrote about these in the following way. 'Can anything surpass the absurdity of our Lakefields, where there are no lakes, our Hollywoods without holly or woods, our Prospects and Belleviews from which nothing can be seen.'[5] Pinpointing those areas where significant displacement occurred has crucial implications. It may help us appreciate the local and regional nature of New English settlements and besides, where the evidence allows, enable us to reconstruct elements of the landscape prior to its modification by the settlers.

Let us take the zone around Tallow in the Cork/Waterford borderlands as an example of an area where the study of placename displacement can be meaningful. Parts of this district experienced late Elizabethan and early seventeenth century immigration and settlement.

Extant form	*Gaelic form*	*Translation*
Snugborough	Baile na mBodach	Churl's home/place
Moorehill	Baile Mic Sheonaigh	Jenning's home/place
Janeville	Tír Cuilleann	Hollylands
Fountain	Cill Fionntáin	Fintan's church
Glencairn	Baile an Gharran	Place of the holding
Rasberryhill	An Ceathramha Láire	The middle quarter
Ralph	Baile an Ráithe	The place of the rath
Waterpark	Baile na Glaise	Holding/place of the stream

With some names in this area it is feasible to trace various stages in their metamorphosis; one such example is *Ceann Muice* (the pig's head) which became Canmucky in the early seventeenth century. By the eighteenth century it had acquired

the more genteel form of Headborough which it retains today. The degree of displacement has been most intense on the best lowlands of the area and concealed below the new names is a layer of older placenames which indicates pre-plantation settlement. The presence of these kinds of intrusive names stresses a novel dimension in the creation of an anglicised milieu and they furnish a spatial reference system to suit the tastes and the requirements of the settlers.

By way of contrast, on the poorer uplands to the south of Tallow few New English placenames are found. Much of this area was reclaimed from bog and moor in a piecemeal manner in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and most of the placenames are toponyms of Gaelic origin. They echo its difficult character both for farming and settlement, for example, *Gleann na gCloch* (the glen of the stones), *Corrán na Sceithe* (peaked hill of the white thorn) and *Móin Fionn* (white bog).

In this way it is possible to derive a crude outline of the nature of sequent occupation in this area. Clearly the earliest settlements were associated with the array of medieval ecclesiastical foundations which are all located on the rich lowlands of the zone. The evidence also firmly indicates that most of the placenames bearing *bally* as a prefix denote pre-plantation occupation. Subsequent transformations in the area are confirmed by the presence of New English names and the placenames of Gaelic origin which record the high water mark of settlement on the inhospitable uplands.

It is true to record that few institutions have left their mark on placenames on this island, the great exception being, of course, the Christian church. As yet, few attempts have been made to examine thematically the onomastic contribution of the church. The anglicised element *kill* is a frequent prefix, and, as we would expect, it is the commonest element in civil parish names. It has been shown that names with the *kill* element often date as far back as the sixth century, but not all of them are as ancient. There are several other prominent ecclesiastical terms in Irish placenames; these include: *eaglais, domnach, lann, congbáil* (a church); *cillín* (a graveyard); *dísert* (a hermitage); *gráinseach* (a monastic farm); *mainistir* (a monastery); *tamhlacht* (a burial place) and *tearmann* (church lands). The presence of these elements attests the location of former

central places. But a note of caution must be sounded here; that is, most Irish ecclesiastical sites have names often without any ecclesiastical implications, for example, Armagh and also Deevinish, Co. Fermanagh. We are fortunate that the late Dr Deirdre Flanagan has shown that the most common toponyms associated with ecclesiastical elements are *cluain* (a meadow), *inis* (a water-meadow, an island) and *druim* (a ridge).[6] She has also argued in the case of the element *cluain* that it pre-dates the ecclesiastical term thereby indicating that the early Christian church was attracted to areas which already had settled communities. This may have been the case at Clonfert and Clonmacnoise on the Shannon. Today many of the places bearing placenames with ecclesiastical associations stand out as ruins in the landscape, reminding us of one of the great unconformities in the Irish cultural landscape.

While many parish and townland names are relatively old, this is not usually the case with the names which have been bestowed on fields, enclosures and many smaller topographic features. Indeed, the majority of these kinds of placenames have never been or will never be recorded and their analysis poses different types of problems. They are difficult, for example, to date as few of them have been documented. Many of these placenames tend to function as community archives especially in those parts of Ireland where traditions are transferred orally from one generation to another. In other words, in the absence of archival material, it may be possible, using local placenames and the lore associated with them, to identify some of the forces and processes which have led to change within the community and to reconstruct their expression in the landscape. In this regard some aspects of a recent study undertaken in the Irish-speaking townland of Kilgalligan, Erris, Co. Mayo merit our attention.[7] Placenames there refer to the practice of a distinctive mode of sheep-herding which entailed the erection of temporary shelters for these animals on the mountain commonage called *mannrachaí* and other kinds of shelters were devised on the commonage for shearing sheep in late spring and early summer. These are referred to as *seoil foscaidh*. Many of the areas where useful wild plants thrived were also named, for example, heather for making lobster pots, sorrel for dyeing flannel and linen and certain

types of sweet rushes which were formerly employed as a curative for cattle illnesses. Other placenames in this Mayo townland recalled a former mode of irrigating tilled land. A series of dams were erected on sloping land so that in times of water shortage a mixture of cattle manure, seaweed, clay, *clachmhóin* (the bottom layer of a turf bank) and water were sluiced through a series of improvised channels on to the tilled land. In addition, a significant number of placenames had 'otherworld' associations as they indicated certain places which possessed ominous taboo associations. These kinds of implications helped to preserve these sites. For example, up to quite recently townland and stripe boundaries were regarded by many with an especial type of awe and hence the land, irrespective of its quality, adjacent to these enclosures remained fallow at all times.

In these contexts placenames act as a general reference for a community and they testify to the intricate and often very durable relationships that have evolved between a community and its territory. An analysis of these kinds of placenames and the local lore belonging to them also enhances our appreciation of how local communities view their collective development as each placename functions in a dual sense as a time/space benchmark.

Townland names by contrast rarely yield information about social conditions. There are, however, some exceptions. Ballynateigue (place of the Teigue's), a townland name in County Waterford refers to a group of O'Sullivans from the west of County Cork, who were initially migrant labourers. Joulterspark is a townland in Dungarvan named after a squatter settlement of itinerant fish retailers, called *joulters,* who used to live on the outskirts of that town. It is, however, relatively rare for townland names to indicate occupational status.

To date few attempts have been directed towards examining names which in some cases have become placenames and in other cases are still in the process of becoming placenames. Here we are referring to street names in urban areas and house and estate names, which have been endowed by individuals, private developers and corporations. The relative anonymity of some local authority estates, where individual residences are usually denoted by number, sharply contrasts with the

often highly pretentious names bestowed on individual residences and entire estate developments. These are our new placenames whose story must also be told.