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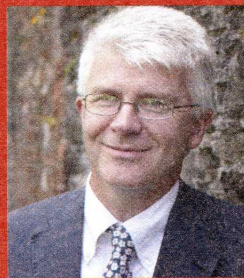
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Future- proofing heritage in Ireland:

community, education
& stewardship



Conor Newman, Chairman, the Heritage Council



Muiris Ó Súilleabháin's memoir of life on the Great Blasket Island, *Fiche Bliain ag Fás, (Twenty Years a Growing)*, speaks directly to us from an Ireland the last rays of which have slipped silently over the horizon, into the realms of history. This and the recollections of his fellow Blasket chroniclers, Tomás Ó Croimhthain and Peig Sayers, were written, or in the case of Peig Sayers recorded, with a sense of urgency in the face of certain change: sensing they were an endangered species, and knowing that their story had value, these islanders recorded their lives for posterity.

Change was indeed in the air. Returning to the Blasket after two years 'abroad' in Connemara, Ó Súilleabháin remarked:¹

There was great change in two years - green grass growing on the paths for lack of walking; five or six houses shut up and the people gone out to the mainland. Fields which had once had fine stone walls around them left to ruin; the big red patches on the Sandhills made by the feet of the boys and girls dancing - there was not a trace of them now.

Yet, despite its ethereal qualities, heritage can also be surprisingly resilient. Eleven years after the publication of *Fiche Bliain ag Fás*, and in what is surely an *homage* of sorts; Evans was not a sentimentalist; to Ó Súilleabháin; one of the founding fathers of heritage studies in Ireland - Emyr Estyn Evans made the following observation:²

The Ireland I am writing about is one which is passing away, and some of the customs and tools described and illustrated in the following pages have almost entirely gone, but I have learnt that it is rarely safe to use the past tense in writing about Irish matters. I have more than once come across customs which were described as dead half a century ago: the old ways are an unconscionable time a-dying.

Evans, like others before him and since, was after the 'real Ireland' - in fact this is the title of the first chapter of his book. He too turned to the likes of Muiris Ó Súilleabháin as witnesses to a real but passing Ireland. In so doing, but inadvertently in his case, he helped create, if not a myth, then a cultural parallax that differentiated out at least two Irelands, one valorized as being more authentic than the other, but for all that, more trapped by history. Here is not the place to discuss how this stigmatism at the core

of Irish identity has played out, except to say that it is ultimately disenfranchising, of all sides.

Heritage is not a new concept, and its guardianship is not a new imperative but given the accelerated rate of change, globalisation and the social isolation of virtual reality, it is something we too approach with a sense of urgency. The wisdom of ages has taught us the value of belonging, and how to recognise and honour the myriad of things that in grounding us, in earthing us in social authenticity, contribute to our belonging to family, community and society.

This, I believe, is what President Michael D. Higgins meant when he said "*Knowledge of history is intrinsic to citizenship*"³.

To paraphrase Eric Hosbawn, safeguarding "the social mechanisms that link one's contemporary experience to that of earlier generations" is the only defence we have against "one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late 20th century, the spectre of the ahistorical, unlocated, non-citizen"⁴.

This, ultimately, is the task of those individuals and organisations interested in safeguarding and promoting heritage. Heritage management is a social service.

We may smile at the thought of Muiris Ó Súilleabháin being wrenched from the Blaskets all the way to Connemara but only because, if you'll pardon the contradiction, our world has shrunk to something a lot bigger. Like any big picture, however, it lacks real depth of field, sacrificing detail in favour of the bigger pattern. But we don't live out our lives in the bigger pattern. The bigger pattern does not offer a genuine homestead or genuine belongingness. We live, instead, in the detail. It is there you will find us. Because it is in the detail of daily lives that heritage is made, the philosophy of the Heritage Council has been to put people first, to listen and respond to the needs and ambitions of communities around their heritage, to ally with existing heritage-related organisations, and to create capacities where none existed before.

The 'ground up' approach adopted by the Heritage Council has made it a highly networked organisation, with an almost bewildering number and range of relationships, from national bodies to parish-level communities-of-interest.

People define what is heritage in the choices they make, consciously or unconsciously, between what vestiges of the past still matter and are worth holding on to, and what is discarded or let go. In this sense, heritage *per se* might be thought of as a process. And a surprisingly dynamic one at that; as more and more people engage with heritage, the range of heritages is expanding, and increasingly novel and often playful, sometimes even irreverent ways of embracing heritage are emerging. This is down to the accelerated rate at which the discovery, celebration and stewardship of heritage is transferring into public ownership. It is a phenomenon that is happening all over Europe right now. Though such a prospect may be daunting, challenging even, to authorities with statutory responsibility for aspects of the heritage, it holds the promise of delivering on ambitions championed repeatedly in international conventions of:

*"awakening or increasing public interest, as from school-age, in the protection of the heritage, the quality of the built environment and architecture [and] demonstrating the unity of the cultural heritage and the links that exist between architecture, the arts, popular traditions and ways of life..."*⁵. This is a goal worth pursuing.

Heritage *per se* is a comparatively young discipline and profession. This is the context in which the achievements of the Heritage Council over the past twenty years ought to be gauged. As a field of endeavour, and indeed an essential dimension of public policy, heritage was in its infancy when the Heritage Council was first established. Over the course of twenty years, the beginnings of a heritage sector have emerged, public consciousness of heritage *per se* has increased, consciousness of heritage as a publically-owned asset has increased,

and awareness of the myriad values of heritage has grown. The Heritage Council has played a key role in these developments. In addition to awareness-raising, advocacy, and the administration of highly successful grant schemes that have contributed directly to the conservation and presentation of heritage assets, an enduring legacy of the Heritage Council is the infrastructures of policy and capacity it has built and is building to manage and develop heritage as a social good.

Whereas there are academic/professional disciplines associated with different categories of heritage and combinations thereof, such as architecture, wildlife, history, archaeology, folklore, earth sciences and so on, heritage *per se* has given rise to a distinct discipline whose focus is on the intersection of these inheritances and the public. Concerned with when, where, how and why people engage with heritage, and in particular the management of those nexuses, the discipline of heritage has developed its own canon, skills set, methodologies and training. Similarly, public outreach and transdisciplinarity have emerged as areas of specialisation in their own right in the case of these other disciplines (e.g. public history and public archaeology). Thus, heritage and the suite of related disciplines are moving in broadly the same direction, guided by the principles of public authorship, public ownership and shared stewardship. ■

¹ *Twenty Years A-Growing* (translated by M. Llewelyn Davies and G. Thomson, Oxford University Press, 1953)

² *Irish Heritage: The Landscape, the People and their Work* (W. Tempest, Dundalgan Press, Dundalk, 1942)

³ Michael Littleton Memorial Lecture 2013. Remembering the 1913 Lockout. 19th June 2013.

⁴ Eric Hobsbawm 1994. *The Age of Extremes: the short twentieth century, 1914-1991*, London: Abacus, 3.

⁵ Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe (1985)