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In the Way of Development: Tara, the M3 and the Celtic Tiger

Conor Newman

Introduction

The destruction of the past, or rather of the social mechanisms that link one's contemporary experience to that of earlier generations, is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late 20th century (Hobsbawm, 1994: 3).

My wife and I were fortunate to attend the reception in Dublin Castle to celebrate the inauguration of Michael D. Higgins as President of Ireland. There we fell into conversation with an affable and impressive young man who in reply to our asking whether he had been at the ceremony earlier that day said that he hadn't but instead had taken himself off to Tara to offer a prayer for the new president. He felt that it was the right place to make such a gesture.

Lots of people go to Tara to pray. Indeed, I would guess that more than half of its thousands of visitors are drawn there by a sense of its deep religious pedigree and are mindful that it is a place where one can meditate on timeless, universal questions and perhaps attune to an historical and more anciently-earthed order as others have done for countless generations. They go there because of the noble principles that Tara stands for: secularisation has diminished neither the need nor the appetite for spirituality and cultural authenticity. The collapse of the moral and intellectual authority of so many of the traditional institutions in the state seems, in fact, to have accelerated a trend in behaviour that was already evident to those of us who study ancient religious monuments, namely a popular return to such sites to embrace and bathe in the serenity that comes from being in a place that symbolises genuine and enduring spiritual, moral and historical integrity.¹ Tara is such a place.

On August 25th 2003 An Bórd Pleanála gave the go ahead for the M3 motorway to be built along the Gabhra Valley, through the Tara landscape. The circumstances and controversy surrounding this decision has since become emblematic of the loss of compass that characterised 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland; its corporate recklessness, Three Monkeys regulation — blind, deaf and mute — cheerleader-style economic and spatial policy, and, above all, cultural amnesia. Money became king and nouveau-riche profligacy became the public face of 'modern' Ireland. Significant changes in values and behaviour occurred during

those years and serious damage was done to the institutions of democratic governance from a decade-long diet of spin-doctored sound-bites masquerading as public debate and political answerability. The influence over the body politic enjoyed by a small coterie of powerful developer-businessmen and financiers reached its grotesque nadir in the infamous ‘Galway Tent’. One of the more pernicious legacies of this period, however, is, as Hobsbawm (1994: 3) observed, the extent to which the relevance and value of knowledge of the past was undermined by utilitarianism and a fundamentally flawed model of modernity and of 21st century Ireland.



No caption needed (copyright: thepaddie)

This chapter considers some of the circumstances that permitted a motorway to be built through such a historic landscape. It argues that its context was the illusion of an ahistorical, of-the-moment modernity that arose during a ‘perfect storm’ when the sudden availability of cheap money from the creation of the Eurozone encountered a political landscape of soft regulation, clientelism and ideological torpor: in short an intellectual ghost-estate.

The campaign to reroute the motorway, which lasted for nigh on a decade, took place against this background. If column inches are indicative of the scale and significance of an issue or event, apart from the development boom itself, the M3 controversy was one of the biggest news items of the period between 1999 and 2009. Even though there were arguments that challenged the rationale for yet another motorway through Meath, the campaign was not about halting the M3 but re-directing it away from the historic landscape of Tara.

Sacralisation and desacralisation: a brief account

It is probably fair to say that when the motorway was first mooted most people’s sense of Tara was formed strolling amongst the monuments on the state-owned land on the crown of the Hill of Tara. Although the existence of a wider archaeological landscape was and is

referred to in the audio-visual show in the Visitor's Centre and in a guidebook (Bhreathnach and Newman, 1995; Newman, 1997; Newman, 2005; Newman, 2011) it lay beyond the reach and *experience* of the visitor. Instead, it was — and mostly still is — the *views* from Tara that are trumpeted (Newman 2007). This fixation reduces its wider landscape to a mere aesthetic backdrop and opens the door to the fallacy that as long as the motorway is not *visible* from the Hill of Tara then it hasn't impacted on it.

The monumental record at Tara stretches back nearly 6000 years and far beyond the summit of the hill. The earliest written account of the complex, *Dinshenchas Eireann* (Petrie, 1839), redacting texts as old as the 7th century, includes references to monuments and natural features at the bottom of the hill. What makes this place so special is that it retained its significance throughout the millennia, and by the centuries either side of the Birth of Christ it had become the focus of what is known as sacral or world kingship. The pedigree of world kingship at Tara is Indo-European. Based around the sacrament of *hieros gamos* (sacral marriage between man and sovereignty goddess), it is redolent with motifs of liminality (MacGoilla Easpaig, 2005), equinity, sacred drinks, fire ceremonies, taboos, ceremonial regicide, and so on. These aspects are preserved in documentary sources, archaeology and placenames. For instance, the stream flowing between the symbolically binal hills of Tara and Skryne (aka Skreen) is the Gabhra, which means 'white mare'; thus linking in to the ancient Indo-European tradition of the sovereignty goddess manifesting as a horse (Ní Chatháin, 1991; Doherty, 2005; Oaks, 1986). The demesnes associated with world kingship are typically cosmographical, i.e. they are conceived and developed as analogues of the cosmos, and are imbued with mythological significance that is reflected in placenames and in the way monuments are positioned relative to notable natural features (Newman, 2011). The land itself is sometimes conceived of as the body of a deity. The association of Tara with such an institution, coupled with its advantageous geographical position, good soils and benevolent climate, meant that it enjoyed superior status throughout the medieval period (Bhreathnach, 1996a; 1996b; 2005), being associated with the Uí Néill kings of Southern Brega, decisive battles, and so forth. The 'footprint' of the earlier, sacral landscape is preserved in the later royal demesne, or *ferann ríog*, of the early medieval kings of Tara (Bhreathnach, 1996c; 1999). Based on this long pedigree it commanded particular importance throughout the early modern period as a symbol of Irish nationhood, and was described by W. B. Yeats (et al. 1902) as 'probably the most consecrated spot in Ireland'. In 1992 the Discovery Programme embarked on a major research project at Tara. Central to

its findings was the re-identification of the sacral and historical landscape of Tara. The M3 motorway cuts that landscape in two, prompting Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney to declare in a BBC Ulster documentary, ‘Tar on Tara’:

it literally desecrates an area [...] the word means to de-sacralise, and for centuries the Tara landscape and the Tara sites have been regarded as part of the sacred ground (Fleming, 2008)

The legacy

The M3 is now a permanent fixture in the landscape and will, for decades if not centuries to come, affect peoples’ lives in the Meath area, shape spatial development and influence how this landscape is experienced. In the shorter term it will continue to be a significant drain on public finances. Negotiated into its Public Private Partnership (PPP) contract is a revenue-guarantee provision to compensate the private partner if pre-agreed thresholds of traffic are not achieved annually until 2025. In 2012 the compensation payment was €6.7m from the public purse (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2011). It is unlikely that the gap between predicted and actual traffic levels will close during the lifetime of this clause seeing that the modelling suggested a 2.5 per cent year-on-year increase in traffic volume. Given unemployment and the contraction of household budgets which is forcing drivers back onto the toll-free N3 (Murphy, 2012), the gap may well widen. If it remains consistent the bill for 2025 alone will come in around €12.83m, bringing the total cumulative cost of the compensation package (not including 2011’s payments) to €140.64m. If there is no increase in real traffic volume between now and 2025 the total cumulative bill will be closer to €216m, almost exactly one-third of the pre-construction estimates of cost for the whole contract.

Commenting on the liabilities arising from this and the Limerick Tunnel, Transport Minister Leo Varadkar (2012) explained the purpose of these clauses: ‘[T]o enhance the fundability of these projects and obtain competitive funding terms to the benefit of the taxpayer’. Perhaps it is to credit Dr Varadkar, who was not in government at the time, with too refined a sense of irony to suggest that his phrasing is a mischievous return to the nonsensical political idiom of the Celtic Tiger era. He is undoubtedly aware that the terms of these contracts were based on the same Never-Never-Land economics that drove the Irish economy and its passengers into the barren wastelands of ghost estates, negative equity and bad banks (see Dukelow, this volume). When the M3 controversy was raging the ‘property bubble’ was in full spate and government and media alike were enthralled to celebrity

bankers, developers and economists. Their talk was of solid underlying fundamentals, soft landings and international envy (see Lenihan; Dukelow; this volume). That the economy was overheated and over-reliant on the construction sector was common knowledge but the body politic had no appetite to apply measures to cool it down. Instead, those who expressed concerns were subjected to sometimes quite vituperative attacks by government and media commentators as irresponsible, politically motivated or just plain wrong. Those of us campaigning on the side of historical culture in the face of such dramatic changes to Irish landscapes, townscapes and life-style choices were even further off-script.

I don't know who was there five thousand years ago [...] but somewhere along the way you have to come to an end of a process' (Taoiseach Bertie Ahern speaking about the controversy, January 2005, in Doyle, 2005).

A clash between a new era and old values, the M3 symbolised the knife that would cut the leathery umbilicus tethering bold, new, materially-rich Ireland to the corpse of old, impoverished, historically-enslaved Ireland. The valorisation of instantaneous wealth and celebrity represented a brash challenge to historic, pre-Millennium Ireland, giving birth to the fallacy that by liberating itself from the shackles of history this benighted generation was somehow also self-inoculating against the possibility of economic downturn. When prudence was called for we got steely political and institutional determination to keep this gravy train going, plough through the naysayers and speak up the promise of unending economic growth.

Campaigns of the magnitude of the one surrounding the M3 motorway are complex and multifaceted; a loose alliance of concerned citizens organising petitions, protest marches, letters, position papers, gatherings, etc. They have multiple defining moments. Though their outcome may ultimately be decided in the Dáil or Seanad, at Oireachtas Committees or even in the courts, of absolutely crucial importance is how these different strands are mediated by the press and on the airwaves. These opinion-shapers exist in a hierarchy, with radio and TV probably exerting greater influence on public opinion than print media. Throughout the M3 campaign there was a palpable sense that dealing in the currency of sound-bites, many national broadcasters were paralysed when faced with the apparent complexity of archaeological and historical arguments against the route of the motorway. Even more depressing was the way broader, philosophical concerns were totally ignored. In this respect, TV and national radio coverage trailed far behind the print media in terms of

penetrative and reflective analysis. While more systematic assessment than has been possible here may prove otherwise, it seems that arguments against the proposed motorway route achieved greater purchase amongst print journalists than they did in broadcast journalism. In the long run, however, the latter may have been the more important battleground.

Regardless, the starting point in all such debates is *a priori* familiarity; the extent to which the pump is already primed; which in this case meant the familiar experience of traffic jams versus the unfamiliar one of historic landscapes; the tangible value of a promised reduction in commuting times between Navan and Dublin versus the intangible relevance of a place with historical associations. Stated simply, even though the existence of Tara's wider historic landscape had been published (Bhreathnach and Newman, 1995) and acclaimed as an important breakthrough in our understanding of Tara as early as 1995, it had not yet translated into public awareness or a tangible aspect of a visit to Tara or for that matter residency there. The general concept of *heritage landscapes* was not yet embedded in public consciousness as a normative dimension of public heritage in Ireland, despite being one of the most significant paradigms in cultural geography, heritage management and social science for at least a quarter century. Had, for instance, this aspect of the Brú na Bóinne World Heritage Site been understood, encouraged and grown from the get-go a fuller understanding of the co-dependency of landscape and monument might have emerged, leading to a better appreciation of the *why* of safeguarding different aspects of the wider landscape context and bringing us closer to genuine shared stewardship. Instead, the initial delivery was characterised by an obsession around the passage tombs, in particular Newgrange, and fixation on the Neolithic aspects of the landscape, fuelling perceptions that the only reason one might want to go there was to access the five-and-a-half thousand years old corbelled chamber. But the Boyne Valley has so much more to offer, and likewise Tara, where the best kept secret is that the monuments on the state-owned land on the crown of the hill are only a taster of what this beautiful and historic landscape has to offer. Commendable and imaginative efforts are now beginning to draw out the educational and leisure opportunities present at both places and to reverse some of the negative consequences of the systematic compartmentalisation of what have been decreed as the iconic aspects of the landscape, namely the monuments.

Compartmentalisation is out of step with best international practice, e.g. the Council of Europe's European Landscape Convention (2000) and Framework Convention on the

Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (2005). It runs contrary to common sense which recognises that relic landscapes exist in *living* landscapes: landscapes are temporal mosaics of natural and cultural elements that, because they bear the handprints of by-gone generations, are also pages of our own history book. The past work of women and men preserved in the fields, burial grounds, villages and towns around us represents a unique and irreplaceable historical inscription and contributes enormously to the character of places. The values memorialised and newly forged amongst these are dynamic; consequently managing the historic dimension of the landscape is about navigating and negotiating the processes of change so that values that are of agreed and enduring significance are not unwittingly or unknowingly undermined by the destruction of the antiquities and places that provide access to them or are their touchstones.

Such is also good social policy because the connections that people maintain with places are fundamental to human well-being. The combination of tangible and intangible attachments to physical things that makes up places manifests in cartographies of the familiar, of home (Baek, 2013). The temporalities of the landscape, on the other hand, the presence of the past and the presence of absences that impart a sense of pastness, provide a kind of existential bulwark against social displacement and assume even greater importance in the context of aging populations. Attachment to place is always historical; it always has time-depth. Vestiges of the past are not just portals to historical knowledge and remembrance, they are of *ontological* importance and thus play a primary role in place- and community-making. Temporality is the keystone of place-making: it takes time to make a place, literally *and* ontologically. Our investment in place is so thorough that reciprocal imprinting occurs between ourselves and the world we inhabit. As long as we ignore this dimension of human behaviour, changes to inhabited landscapes will give rise to displacement.

Reflection on the patina and stratigraphy of time and history on the landscape is a recurring theme in the contemplative arts, resulting in a significant and important compendium of poetry, literature, art and music over the centuries. Likewise, analysis of the historical record, in its fullest sense, is a crucial action in the name of self-knowledge and is central to any civilised society. Consideration of the ontological values of the time-depth or temporality of landscape, however, is rare nowadays outside of the world of metaphysics even though it seems to have been a preoccupation of many early cultures, albeit focused through a mythopoeic lens. It also occupies a central position in particular in Heidegger's proposition that the empirical intuitions of space and time are foundational to being-in-place,

vis-à-vis the relationship between humans and the world around them, what Berque (2000) refers to as *écoumène*. Because we so rarely consider its value from this perspective we render the historical record susceptible to categorisation as a dispensable add-on to modern living. Given that temporality is *essential*, and that our consciousness of time-depth issues forth from, inter alia, encountering the things around us, care and attentiveness to temporal inscriptions in the landscape are axiomatic to our well-being as a species. All of these aspects of the historicized world blend together to inform its *phenomenal* (in a Husserlian sense) value. But it is a complex blend and one not easily communicated, which is perhaps why metaphor and symbol are often more effective vehicles for circling the idea. Many of the values of landscape are lost in translation from *poïetic* to scientific language. The qualities of ambivalence and multivalence so crucial to *poïetic* discourse about landscape represent both strength and weakness. While they are sensitive to the synaptic and protean nature of the relationship between people and place, too often to decision-makers they signify romantic idealism instead of empirical cogency, the sort of stuff, putting it crudely, that is ‘soft’ around the edges, defies mapping and measurement and is anathema to one-size-fits-all regulatory guidelines. Thus are the lines drawn.

This shortcoming is by no means peculiar to Ireland. Even bodies charged with and successful at heritage conservation falter when it comes to articulating analytical theses in support of their remit. The autumn 2012 issue of the American National Parks Service quarterly *Common Ground*, comes with a supplementary booklet entitled *The Keys to Preserving America’s Heritage: (1) stewardship, (2) relevance, (3) education, (4) workforce*. Stewardship gets about 2 ¾ pages, education about the same, but relevance gets only 12 lines (Anon, 2012). The complex challenge of parsing metaphysical concepts into plain English notwithstanding, if we are not alive to *all* of the reasons why such things are important we expose ourselves to the perils of compartmentalised thinking and unilateral decisions. In contrast, in the summer 2003 issue of the same journal Jarvis’s editorial reflects on the high calling of the Parks Service voiced by speakers at the Discovery 2000 Conference, St. Louis, Missouri. They declared that it was the Service’s ‘task to make this great experiment in democracy succeed’ (Jarvis, 2003: 2): referring to a genre of stewardship that combines research, interpretation and education, Jarvis observes,

‘[T]he fact that the great places of history, and their associated resources and stories, have been placed in our care [...] carries with it a great responsibility beyond mere caretaking.

In our care are the places where our democratic society has evolved, exploded, retreated and raged’.

He (2003; 2) thus affirms that the aggregate of places in care ‘and the stories that they embody create the foundation of our democracy. It is incumbent on us, as the stewards, to make that connection’. As exemplified with the M3 controversy, this chapter argues that during its final years at the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government the Heritage Services set itself a far less ambitious role.

The true weakness of compartmentalised thinking was revealed during the Celtic Tiger years by the absence of resistance from the body politic to commoditization of land, a phenomenon that utterly undermined the sense of landscape as enriched, shared, human habitus. Driven by profit-first agendas, such thinking de-coupled ordinary people from the landscape, clearing the way for some unconscionable planning decisions. It would be unfair on those years, however, to suggest that every development project was a sociological failure. Quite the opposite in fact, which goes to show that good design, good architecture and the development of integrated, coherent, people-friendly places was not beyond our ken, it is just that too often good planning capitulated to quick profit. My sense, however, is that the post-boom crisis has weakened the grip of this ideology, replacing it with a desire to reclaim Ireland, its landscape and a model of inclusive, participatory citizenship.

But this is now and that was then. Developers ruled and motorways opened up more green fields for ‘development’ than any other government policy. The key to profiting from road building was not in buying land *on* the route of a motorway; which would in any case be compulsorily purchased; but to acquire land around the exits and interchanges, land ripe for housing estates, industrial parks, services and shopping centres. A glance at the property pages of newspapers during the Celtic Tiger years reveals the appetite for development land with ready access to the motorway network. Proximity to Dublin and Navan, which was growing exponentially, turned the M3 into a potential cash cow (Lee, 2005). Between this demand, traffic modelling to identify the configuration that would maximize traffic draw off existing roads onto the new motorway, and cost benefit return (i.e. tolls), the ‘emerging preferred route’ became very quickly fixed. Private partners would want to invest only in the configuration that maximised potential toll revenues, and land-owning developers, having invested in the land, would not want to see the route changed either.

Such are the commercial opportunities and machinations surrounding developments of this nature. The case of the M3, however, was different in one crucial respect; the chosen route passed through the archaeological, historical and mythologized landscape of Tara. One might reasonably expect that the state's regulatory body, the Heritage Services, would have a lot to say about that, that it would prepare a dossier, and that it would either stand over or critique the research that demonstrated the heightened importance of this landscape. But this watchdog did not bark. As far as can be ascertained, no dossier of any substance was prepared. Signing off on the archaeological methodology agreed with the National Roads Authority (NRA), the state service in effect put its imprimatur on testing followed by excavation as an appropriate conservation measure in respect of these monuments and this landscape. This illustrates the very narrow definition of conservation and heritage management, by international standards, adopted by the Heritage Services at this time. One would be forgiven for thinking that rather than seeing it from the perspective of a motorway threatening a landscape and its monuments it was the other way around, the monuments represented an impediment to a motorway and the role of the Heritage Services was to facilitate the latter. Moreover, contrary to pronouncements about the exceptionally close scrutiny and exacting archaeological constraints applying in this development (Minister Dick Roche, RTÉ News, 2005), the archaeological conditions that were imposed were quite routine. In any case, applauding the archaeological methodology is to miss the point which is that excavation ahead of development was an utterly inadequate and inappropriate action in respect of the conservation management of this unique cultural resource.

The Heritage Services collectively refers to three offices: National Parks and Wildlife, Built Heritage and Architectural Policy, and National Monuments. The extent to which the three offices work in concert, as best international practice would expect and advocate, has varied historically. To encourage an integrated approach to heritage management on the part of the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, the former minister Michael D. Higgins combined these functions into one executive agency called Dúchas. Assembled as such, however, this triad seems to have posed too coherent and united a front on behalf of heritage and was duly dismantled by a subsequent Minister in the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Martin Cullen. He also ushered in a series of extraordinary amendments to the National Monuments Act (Newman 2007: 83-4). Described by Cullen as 'rationalisations', they were designed to ease the passage of development projects through the planning process and fend off appeals and objections. The now infamous provision

conferring on the Minister authority to order the destruction of a National Monument - paving the way for the removal of the National Monument at Lismullin which was located on the M3 route - detracted attention from what is surely one of the worst cases of malign and vindictive engineering of the legislature. Section (3) of the 2004 amendment of the National Monuments Acts reads as follows:

Where an archaeological object is found as a consequence of work undertaken by Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council relating to work on the South Eastern Route, then *section 8 of the National Monuments (Amendment) Act 1994 shall not apply* to the land or any premises under which or in the vicinity of which the archaeological object has been found. (emphasis added)

The relevant section of the 1994 Act says:

8. (1) Where the finding of an archaeological object has been reported to the Director or a designated person under the provisions of the *National Monuments Acts, 1930 to 1994*, the Director may inspect, or cause to be inspected by a designated person, the land or premises under which or in the vicinity of which the said object has been found.

(2) The Director or a designated person may enter on any lands or premises and there do all such things as may be reasonably necessary for performing his functions under the *National Monuments Acts, 1930 to 1994*, including carrying out an inspection or excavation where the Director considers that an archaeological object or the site thereof is in immediate danger of destruction or decay.

(3) No person shall impede the Director or a designated person in the exercise of his functions under this section.

The back-story to this is that the National Museum of Ireland had publicly queried the position adopted by the National Monuments Service (NMS) over Carrickmines Castle which stood in the way of part of the South Eastern Route of the M50 motorway in Dublin. The exception created in the 2004 amendment effectively debarred the National Museum of Ireland from further ‘interference’ and removed the prohibition against impeding the director of the Museum from entering the land.

Martin Cullen’s legacy was to steer heritage management through an 180° turn and drive it in the opposite direction to all international best practice and recommendations.

United they stand, divided they fall

From what little there is available to read on the NMS's response to the impact of the M3 motorway it seems that most of its observations concerned excavation and recording methodologies. No real cognisance was taken of the historical, literary or mythological record or to the manner in which, as discussed already, such remain attached to and enrich the landscape. For the NMS and, as we shall see, the NRA this was about a narrow definition of archaeology and individualised archaeological sites. This is evidenced most starkly in the spread-sheet supplied by the NMS but completed by the NRA in respect of values attaching to sites where archaeological material had been found during test trenching along the route of the M3. Its main purpose being to identify monuments/sites meriting National Monument status, fourteen criteria are listed (more than half of which do not feature in the definition of a National Monument in the 1930 Act). In all 38 cases under headings of 'Historical Significance' and 'Cultural Significance'; distinctions that are highly dubious in the first place; the values are listed as 'NONE'. Likewise, to the question 'Group Value/Relationship with other Monuments', the verdict is 'NONE' in every case. Under the heading 'Known/Informed Archaeological Potential' the answers are more variable but consequently serve only to create the fallacy of sites having archaeological potential but no cultural value. Absurdity aside, this latter speaks to the separation of archaeology and archaeological values from the mainstream of scientific research into and management of the interwoven complex of assets and values that is heritage. As argued in the final section of this chapter, this separation evolved into an isolation that has damaged the standing of archaeology.

We will probably never know the influence the spread-sheet exerted on the NMS's deliberations. Had the form been filled out by the Heritage Services some independent value might be claimed but the fact that it is the work of the NRA suggests that it has none. Would that this was an isolated instance of operational failure regarding a regulatory body, but unfortunately it is not. We are all too aware nowadays of the consequences of the soft and naïve regulation that characterised the Celtic Tiger years but lessons will remain unlearned if we focus only on the bodies officially charged with regulation and not on the other dogs who, in failing to bark, continue to make the role of independent and professionally qualified critical observers more difficult.

While it may be surprising to learn that the NMS all but ignored any other than the most narrow archaeological considerations, its position suited the NRA because it allowed it to frame this as a fight between two different schools of archaeological thought. Some in the media swallowed the line. Writing about the M3 controversy John O’Keeffe (2004), then *Irish Independent* property editor had this to say:

The debate of course highlights the important distinction between professional and non-professional archaeologists, often academics. Academics are often criticized for living in ivory towers with a very weak grasp of reality. This is of course entirely correct.

He continues:

Unlike their colleagues who criticise [meaning ‘academics’], they are on the coal face and do not have the luxury of never having to make a decision or professionally access digs or finds.

On the coat-tails of this offensive, the late Daire O’Rourke (2004), then Head of Archaeology with the NRA, wrote:

A number of academic archaeologists are opposed to the M3 Clonee to Kells scheme, as the area round Tara is their particular study area. The main opponents to the NRA’s archaeological programme are non-archaeologists, including a number of historians.

This effort to play down the number of archaeologists opposed to the routing of the motorway notwithstanding, the important point is its implicit dismissal of the views of historians and others whose concerns spoke to internationally accepted definitions of tangible and intangible heritage.

O’Keeffe (2004) was not the only journalist who failed to realise that most of the senior archaeologists in the country had voiced concern about the impact of this road on the Tara landscape, or that virtually the only archaeologists arguing against the existence of the wider historical landscape of Tara were employed either directly or indirectly by the NRA. Such is reminiscent of the kid-gloved treatment of economists working for the major property lending houses whose talking up of the economy was rewarded with unfettered airtime: Jim Power’s (Friends First) now infamous countering of Morgan Kelly’s predictions of a 50 per cent crash in house prices on a Prime Time Special (RTÉ, 2007) is mirrored by Marie Hunt’s (2007) dismissal of Richard Curran’s prophetic documentary *Future Shock – Property Crash*:

[I]t is simply technically incorrect to assume that that Irish house prices will decline significantly simply on the basis that this has occurred in other economies where the fundamentals were so different. [...]The sensationalist approach of last night's programme is in our view irresponsible.

The principles of free speech and unbiased, non-judgemental journalism are axiomatic, but so is the imperative to discriminate between vested interests and disinterested, expert advice. Discrimination between the two is what underpins democracy. Central to this is good investigative journalism and connectivity between decision-making and research-derived expertise. For this to occur we need to recognise the important role that an independent research community can and ought to play in democratic governance (Robinson, 2004). There is something sycophantic about the way we trumpet the value of education and yet at the same time deride intellectualism. Rather than speaking to qualities like qualified, considered, knowledgeable and objective, the terms 'academic' and 'intellectual', particularly when referring to humanities disciplines, have become by-words for out-of-touch, eccentric, mildly comical, privileged and somewhat irrelevant. We need to integrate insights arising from the humanities into public policy in a more holistic way and put an end to the notion that they do not belong to 'real life'.

A radio programme broadcast in 2004, *The State We Are In: If These Stones Could Speak* (RTÉ, 2004), illustrates both the power and the vulnerability of the media. During the programme Frances Shanahan discusses what is known as 'archaeological mitigation' along the route of the M3 with the project archaeologist who counts aloud the number of new archaeological sites found by geophysical prospection during the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) stage of the development: one, two, three, four, five, six. These were the six with the most clearly legible signatures. Including these, however, definitive and suspected archaeological remains were recorded in 26 of the 30 areas closely surveyed geophysically (reported to the NRA in January 2001). By the time the programme was broadcast test trenching had already confirmed archaeological remains at 38 different locations in the Gabhra Valley. This was widely reported almost a month before the broadcast (O'Brien, 2004). In all 167 archaeological sites were excavated along the 60km between Clonee and Kells.

In a similar vein NRA press officer Brian Cullinane (2004) wrote to the papers declaring that just two archaeological sites were impacted along the M3, and that geophysics

had identified a further three. In the virtual world of media contradictory truths can exist concurrently as long as they never come into contact with one another. The role of the regulators, including the press, is to highlight contradictory information and to play their part in protecting the public from what former Minister for Environment, Heritage and Local Government Dick Roche referred to as ‘misinformation, disinformation and downright distortion’ (Newman, 2007). The fact that this remark was directed at the campaigners is telling.

Such bullish interventions became something of a hallmark of government in the years leading up to the economic collapse, and describe the landscape and climate that the regulatory bodies operated in during these years, some more closely influenced by the body politic than others. While the record speaks to the sympathies of the chief archaeologist of the Dept. of the Environment, Heritage, and Local Government, it is also fair to say that heritage protection was some way down the list of priorities during the ten years of Fianna Fáil/Progressive Democrat government (1997-2007). This is reflected in a succession of ministers who brought the cabinet’s pro-development ideology to the environment/heritage portfolio: as already observed, Martin Cullen’s interventions in Dúchas and the National Monuments Act sent out an unambiguous message. It was echoed in his successor to the environment/heritage portfolio Dick Roche’s acrimonious dispute with An Taisce, which included the threat to rescind the prescribed status of An Taisce under the Planning Act. At around the same time (2004) Martin Cullen cancelled funding for An Taisce’s work in the area of planning. An indefatigable critic of planning policy throughout these years, An Taisce was a thorn in the side of government and developer alike and was now paying the price; archaeology likewise, with the 2004 amendment to the National Monuments Act (Fenwick, 2005: 19).

Bullishness was not confined to the government, lobbyists and hubristic developers. In deciding to ignore the opinions expressed even by their own archaeological consultants and go so far as to *contest* the evidence that the Gabhra valley is an intrinsic part of the Tara landscape, the NRA placed their own archaeological staff, associates and sub-contractors in the unenviable position of having to defend the indefensible. Despite avoiding a handful of sites, the determination of the NRA to drive this road through forcefully asserted a view that was implicit in the NMS’s approach to the M3— that the mandate and imperatives acting on professional archaeology could, in the final analysis, always be satisfied by excavation. More importantly, it reinforced the notion that this principle could be applied independently of

other considerations, such as history and heritage, so that when it came to ‘archaeological’ sites, excavation-as-a-form-of-conservation trumped all other concerns. Hence we get the very dubious term ‘preservation by record’, not the NRA’s invention but one that suited its purpose perfectly.

The term ‘preservation by record’ is spin in its purest form: a virtually meaningless phrase that makes something unpalatable sound positive. It is most prevalent in the lexicon surrounding pre-development excavation but, for obvious reasons, has not been universally adopted by archaeologists. While no-one disputes the importance of salvaging information that would otherwise be lost forever, nor the commendable advancements that have been made in the arena of pre-development/rescue archaeology, such is not preservation but rather the compilation of an archival record of data for analysis and interpretation. Contravening all principles of conservation it represents *a compromise of last resort*, however it became so normative where motorways were concerned that it seemed to be the default action of *first resort*. This highlights the shallow embedding of the principles of heritage conservation in Irish spatial policy and, importantly, how development of those principles stalled during these years. Above all it testifies to a fairly wholesale capitulation to ‘development’. If the Tara landscape could be run over what hope was there that heritage could ever out-value development?

Conservator-Restorers are mandated to preserve the materiality of cultural heritage and, at least in other countries, do so in the context of cross- and trans-disciplinary dialogue surrounding the values of heritage (what Dúchas was beginning to do). Not so, apparently, in Celtic Tiger Ireland, where decisions regarding conservation of the monuments and heritage landscapes through which this and other motorways ran were pretty well left up to archaeologists in the NMS. Their failure to apply modern conservation and heritage management theory meant that the archaeology-trumps-all perspective came to dominate. As a consequence, a lop-sided view of the value of the material heritage, including sites and monuments, emerged. Archaeologists found themselves variously in-step with a public who tolerated archaeologists pursuing their own concerns as long as the net result was unencumbered development, or out-of-step with a public who questioned the desirability of archaeological interference with sites and monuments if that meant attempted cultural sterilization ahead of development (of course no place can ever be culturally sterilized). Not only did archaeologists become harbingers of development but many in the public became

increasingly uncomfortable with the maxim that once archaeologists got what they wanted from a site there was nothing left worth preserving.

Archaeologists have always rightly maintained that public good is created from the knowledge generated and disseminated through research, even research that is destructive. However, there is no algorithm regarding the optimal balance between knowledge gained through destructive scientific processes (e.g. excavation) and consequent loss of material integrity. Research excavation is materially destructive but the extent of impact is modulated in order that the knowledge gain is a reasonable trade-off vis-à-vis material loss. In any event research excavation is always only a sample, the site or monument is returned to its former appearance and the context remains undisturbed. Rescue excavation ahead of development, where in the end every trace of the site/monument is erased, raises the ante considerably because it usually heralds substantial changes to the context as well: the site/monument is gone *and* the landscape setting is changed utterly. In such cases knowledge gain from excavation is manifestly only one consideration. In the case of the M3 the knowledge gain should have been gauged against the effect of an impermeable linear concrete barrier bisecting the entire length of the landscape on the ability of ours and future generations to experience, understand and benefit from that landscape. Leaving aside the considerable legacy of mis-information propagated by denying the existence and relevance the wider landscape, this is the nature of the impact. In real terms it is measurable case-by-case: parts of a once sacred river, named after a sovereignty goddess, flowing through a cosmographical landscape between two hills associated with the ancient institution of sacral kingship have been culverted; an ancient burial ground (*fert*) placed deliberately on the banks of the Gabhra is under a motorway; and instead of standing sentinel over the valley, the ancient defensive earthwork of Rath Lugh now overlooks a motorway. The *scale* of the impact, however, is more difficult to calculate because it involves appraising a wide range of existing and potential cultural and economic values. Gone, for instance, is the possibility of planning an intact heritage trail across the valley from Skryne to Tara. The scale of the impact on public sensitivity to the value of protecting heritage is immeasurable.

The familiar retort that ‘the majority of sites were unknown before the development and shouldn’t that make the archaeologists happy’, blithely ignores the fact that the sites would have been discovered eventually, and in more benign circumstances, when considerably more of their values could be developed. And, it is not about ‘making archaeologists happy’. Regardless, the quantity, range and calibre of the sites has confirmed

beyond doubt the exceptional historical importance of this area and proven correct informed predictions that, owing to its superior historical importance, multiple sites would be impacted along this route. A very high price has been paid to confirm this.

By treating the sites/monuments as entities unrelated to one another or to anything else for that matter, such as the nearby hills of Tara and Skryne, the assessment of gains and losses was restricted further; there could be no compound loss because there was no compound whole to begin with. Again, fault lies with the regulatory body but it also places a question mark over the suitability of existing regulatory processes. As Stocker (2013: 95) has recently observed ‘the cultural meaning of this landscape was too complex to be resolved by an Environmental Impact Assessment’. This is only partly true because *sensu stricto* an EIS is only as comprehensive as the regulatory body requires it to be. It is incomprehensible that, knowing about the findings of the Discovery Programme (Bhreatnach, 1996b; 1999) and unequivocal warnings in preliminary reports by two separate archaeological consultancies against routing the M3 through this landscape, the regulatory body accepted an EIS from which such warnings were effectively excised, reducing it merely to a list of affected sites.

In an effort to close the gap between theirs and traditional research excavations, perhaps to present a more positive face, the NRA framed the work along the M3 corridor as research. Accordingly, in July 2005, along with Meath County Council it published *The M3 Clonee to North of Kells Road Scheme Archaeology Research Framework*, declaring that the results would be, inter alia, integrated into a ‘wider archaeological landscape study’ (Anon, 2005: 6) undertaken collaboratively with the UCD School of Archaeology. Ordinarily such would be applauded, except in this instance, contrary to established protocols of research no direct reference was made to the on-going research on the Tara landscape, the existence of which is visible only indirectly via the *Select Bibliography* at the end of the document. Ironically, Tara is present throughout this document by virtue of the fact that it is studiously and glaringly omitted. On the other hand, the frequent references to landscape in the *Research Framework* (Anon, 2005) reveals the centrality of this paradigm to contemporary archaeology, serving only to reinforce the betrayal perpetrated on the Tara landscape.

Research is as much about why as about how, because, as in any field of human endeavour, knowledge gain can be eroded or negated by the manner of its contextualisation: the unearthing of so much useful archaeological data in the Tara landscape is somewhat

cancelled out by the denial-in-kind of its context. Mentioning the word ‘Tara’ only once, the *Research Framework* (Anon, 2005: 3) effectively wound the clock back on existing research and, skimming across chronological lines, inadvertently or otherwise positioned the archaeological sites along the M3 ‘away from sacred space on the Hill itself’. The language, as one might expect, has been very carefully crafted and could, at a stretch, be interpreted to mean almost anything. As such it speaks to discomfiture surrounding an inconvenient truth.

Now that the motorway has been built it is gradually becoming safe to mention the sites and monuments excavated along the M3 and Tara in the same breath. The extraordinary complex at Lismullin has evolved from being a site whose ‘location beneath the important ceremonial complex on the Hill of Tara may suggest that [it] is a ceremonial site serving smaller or lesser political units’ (Anon, 2007: 4) to being ‘just one component of a wider archaeological landscape [...] dominated by the extensive remains on the Hill of Tara’ (O’Connell, 2013, 4) and a place where excavation has provided ‘a rare glimpse of settlement evolution and ritual practices in the wider Tara landscape’ (O’Connell, 2013: 1). In time its place in the sacred landscape of Tara will be reclaimed, except that it is too late to experience the natural amphitheatre chosen so carefully for it. As another precious link between past and present is severed, President Higgins’s words (2013) seem relevant: ‘[K]nowledge of history is intrinsic to citizenship. [...] Knowledge of history allows us to debunk myths and challenge inaccuracies, as well as to expose deliberate amnesia or invented versions of the past’.

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ⁱ Throughout this essay I use the words 'history' and 'historical' in their broadest senses.