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Vanishing Points: an essay on landscape, memory and belonging

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Abstract: This is a paper about the ambivalent relationships we can have with the landscapes we grew up in, with senses of belonging and nationality, and with memory itself. To approach and specify these themes, the paper aims to practise a particular form of landscape writing, prioritising individualised voice and perception to advance its arguments. Autobiographical and narrative-based in approach, the paper offers a sequence of reflections on questions of religion, culture, migration and identity in an Irish context. A middle section separately identifies and discusses ideas of perspective and the vanishing point as a specific interpretative pivot for the paper. In the final section, the paper situates and more widely re-contextualises its concerns regarding questions of landscape and belonging.

Keywords: landscape, memory, belonging, Ireland, perspective.

1.

At what point in life does a sense of correspondence between self and landscape arrive? I feel like I am still waiting for this to happen. Perhaps it never will – or perhaps it never does. When I left Ireland for the first time, at the age of eighteen, I was (if I remember this correctly) already quite sure I would never return permanently. I didn't realise then that what I had really done was set in motion a certain stuttering rhythm, a kind of irresolvable too-ing and fro-ing. Sometimes in the years since then I've wanted to elevate this into a more general thesis, or an injunction – to argue, for example, that we *must* stand in tension with the landscapes we live in; or that our experience of landscape *is* the tension between approaching and departing, observing and inhabiting, leaving and remaining.

This experience might be seen as stereotypically Irish in some ways. It certainly seems characteristic of some of Ireland's most celebrated modern literary geographies, where writers move and take their distance precisely in order to perceive more clearly, and perhaps more critically, the land they have left behind. Journeys, so to speak, in the opposite direction are perhaps less common in the Irish context, though not unknown, of course. What does seem sure, however, and what forms part of the wider backdrop and stimulus for the present paper, is that we are, right now, living in a golden age for a certain kind of landscape writing in Britain and Ireland. I think that 'landscape writing' is a much more apt term than 'new nature writing'; the now-widespread name for the genre I have in mind, precisely because (for me, at least) 'landscape' signifies a simultaneous enlacing and distancing of self and land, perception and memory, in a way that 'nature' fails to capture. When I read this kind of work – by writers such as Kathleen Jamie, Robert Macfarlane and Tim Robinson, to name three of the most prominent – I often find myself beset by a mixture of suspicion and envy. Suspicion because, despite many sincere protestations to the contrary, I worry that there remains a danger here of succumbing to national or local romances of landscape and belonging. Certainly, this is evident in some of the off-shoots and cash-ins you can now regularly see arranged on the table in branches of Waterstones® in England, or as you scroll along the related titles panel on Amazon® – nostalgic celebrations of British pathways, coastlines, moorlands, weather patterns. But I do feel envy too, because of the sharpened and heightened qualities of attention and remembrance that such writers often bring vividly to the page. What must it be like, to both know somewhere intimately and also to have at your command the power of a mythopoesis of places and landscapes? To live in expert and sympathetic correspondence with your surroundings? To experience intensely and also remember richly?

Questions of corresponding with landscape, or of finding in landscapes fruitful contexts for reflection on issues of belonging, perception and selfhood, are a consistent, significant feature of many recent works in what I am calling the field of landscape writing. This is not an exclusive or overriding feature obviously – other key recurrent tropes include the potentially therapeutic or restorative qualities of 'nature', the temptations (resisted or indulged) of a singular narrative voice (see Matless, 2009), and the enchantments and difficulties of encounters with other, non-human creatures. But the relation of self to landscape is undoubtedly a standout question here. It is very

much so for the best-known current Ireland-based landscape writer, Tim Robinson¹. In his varied, monumental accounts of Connemara and the Aran Islands, Robinson returns over and over again to the question of how landscape can be at once intensively proximate and immersive in experience, and yet, at the same time, still irredeemably distant and alien. Thus, the landscape's ultimate unknowability and alterity comes to stand in his work as the intransigent companion of an equally irrepressible urge to know, name, identify and describe.

This paper is inspired, in part, by the experience of reading Robinson's books on Ireland's landscapes, along with others with similar intent and preoccupations, and by reflecting upon the treatment of questions of landscape and identity therein. It is *not* written in opposition, though, nor as critique. Instead, I attempt to explore further the possibilities of voice offered by landscape writing as a mode of presenting and remembering geographies. These include not only a necessary element of reflection on position, but also a mode of engagement with bodily emplacement – and displacement. I remain convinced that this is an important thing to try to do, if the approaches and insights of critical cultural geographies in particular are to consistently reach beyond a conclave of specialists, interdisciplinary or not. So, in this paper, I present a series of autobiographical reflections and vignettes, mainly though not strictly chronological. Writing through a specifically Irish context, I aim to explore issues of landscape, memory and belonging.

I have to say, though, that at times, in the course of writing this paper, I have felt like I am trespassing. This is the first time I have chosen to write directly as a cultural geographer about Ireland, and my own experiences of Irishness. Many readers of this journal, and many others too, will have been professionally engaged for years with questions of land, identity, migration, memory and belonging in varied past and present Irish contexts. I have not, or at least not in any specifically critical or systematic way. This raises the question of why I might now feel able or entitled to offer here an account such as this, shot through with many personal and speculative elements. Beyond hoping that the paper might be read generously, my further response would be that the paper is, to an extent, an overture. While it is a self-contained set of reflections and arguments in its own right, it is also, at least for me, a stepping-stone towards a wider programme of re-thinking questions of landscape and belonging.

2.

I was lucky – as a boy, from my bedroom window, I had a broad and widescreen view to look at. We lived then in a house set quite far up on a hillside, with a view from on high over the lakes and the town beyond. One lake in particular, disc-shaped and reed-fringed, sat dead in the centre of this view, a constant, indifferent, silver-grey presence. On a daily basis, I overlooked and sometimes noticed it – if a local lake cruiser nosed in and turned around, if some birds flew low across the water's surface. In autumn and winter, these

low-lying Lough Erne lakes would often give rise to mists, and a few times every year, on especially still and cold mornings, these mists grew and spread, engulfing the town, and lapping up all the way to the bottom of our garden. And then it seemed I was looking out at it from even higher up and farther away, over a creamy, phantasmal cloudscape. I would see – I can still see – local high grounds like Portora and Forthill, floating like islands in this mist, and the thin spires of the wraithlike town churches, drifting like masts.

I close my eyes, I strain to remember – and now I can also still see the more mundane and regular daytime view of the town from my bedroom window, almost as if it were framed and hung on the wall before me. And different sections of this picture gather in focus and detail as I train my eye upon them. Later on in life, I started to write about looking at landscapes, looking with landscapes – and I wonder if this predilection was at least partly the result of having enjoyed this relatively privileged and elevated childhood perspective. Everyone who visited our house for the first time was surprised and struck by the view it offered, almost panoramic, of the lakes and the island town of Enniskillen, in County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland. The whole house itself was arranged and constructed around this view. Built split-level into the hillside, the living room and kitchen were on the upper floor, with windows that stretched almost from ceiling to floor. There was a balcony as well, although this was a fairly bare and exposed space, set plain with railings across the flat pitch roof, and not really in regular use. In the face of the northern weather, it was more of a gesture of acknowledgement towards the visual presence of the lakes and the town, framed in every window that faced that way.

We moved into this house when I was eight years old, and I liked it because it seemed so modern, so glassy, cuboid, and different in that sense from a ‘normal’ house, even though it was unremarkable really, just like the wider nineteen-seventies development of similarly-styled houses and bungalows it stood within (albeit with their resonant name: ‘Barranderry Heights’). Even though it was one of the first images that came to mind, perhaps it was misleading of me to begin here with an otherworldly, mist-shrouded perspective. Because when I try to think back, in this picture-building process, to all of the elements that were progressively added to our view of the town and its environs, what strikes me most is the prosaic modernity that characterised and maybe even defined this evolving Northern Irish landscape.

Off to the left as you looked from the house, there lay a set of flat, reclaimed (though in winter sometimes re-submerged) sports pitches. In their midst sat *The Forum*, a mid-seventies leisure centre, all blocky shapes, pipes and protuberances, like a discarded early model for the Millennium Falcon. Towards the end of the nineteen-eighties, a new shopping centre, *The Erneside*, was built on some further marshy ground adjacent to the main town island, and almost in the centre of our view. For months, we had to endure the daily rattling and thumping of piledrivers, striving to secure firm anchorage for the building, the sound reverberating and echoing across the lake surface. The resulting structure presented to the eye an undistinguished low-rise array of Lego-red brickwork, grey concrete-encased supporting joints, and blackened seams of tarmac. And around the same time, a new link-road-cum-bypass was built on the south side of the town island.

This required various older buildings around the bus station to be cleared away, but from my perspective, looking down from Barranderry Heights, the main consequence was that the new road exposed clearly to view a large toystore, converted from an old cinema, on whose upper fascia the owners had erected, in giant, jaunty lettering, the single word TOYTOWN. It seemed like a verdict.

3.

Roads ran out of Enniskillen on cardinal lines. North, towards Omagh and Derry. East to Belfast. West to the Atlantic coast, Donegal and Sligo. And south towards Dublin. We travelled routinely in all these directions, in a succession of family cars. These drives and excursions, in memory, seem almost a primary means of landscaping a life; biography unfurling from repeat trajectories, there and back again. I can still see our silver Ford Sunbeam estate, sitting sadly on the forecourt, as we drove off in a newer Toyota. We would have taken that car and others up to Omagh, in particular, many times – it was my father's hometown, and home to most of his family; my aunts, uncles and cousins. 'The Omagh ones' as we called them. The drive up to Omagh only took about forty minutes, but it was still frustratingly long to me as a child, partly because it was so familiar, a steady but slow crawl through some of the dreariest farmland and villages in Ireland. A journey that arrived at a town nearly indistinguishable from Enniskillen in its churches, streets and shops.

The other points of the compass offered more novelty and difference. The road east to Belfast, for example, eventually became the motorway, and this was already for me a symbol of future escape, a straight-edged funnel towards cities and airports, leaving behind the humdrum rural west. Today, the road south to Dublin similarly graduates up to motorway status as it goes along². But when I was young, this was our least frequent direction of travel, because it took over three hours. Around the border in particular, through a stretch of country benumbed by partition and conflict, the roads were often in a state of open neglect, twisting and guttering through the forlorn, waterlogged fieldscapes of south Fermanagh and Cavan. Thus, as a child, I associated travelling south, to 'the South', to the Republic of Ireland, with a sort of backwards motion. If the road to Belfast was almost a futuristic highway to me, bizarre though this may sound, then travelling southward to Dublin had an opposing archaic quality. We ventured here into a landscape where the past was visibly sustained in the present, in the countless tumbledown roadside cottages for instance, and where road signs, depending on their age, gave distances in either miles or kilometres. The same was true of travelling west, into Donegal or more frequently for me to Mullaghmore in Sligo, where my aunt had a caravan close to the strand. This presented the same intrigue of crossing a threshold into a distinctively different space and time, as it seemed to me then.

As I grew older, though, I came to realise that others felt quite differently. Almost all of my friends had close relatives in the South; in Donegal, Leitrim and Cavan especially. I

did not. For many of them – and I hope I don't infer too much here – the island of Ireland was a living, breathing unity, and the maintenance of cross-border relationships was an everyday or weekly matter. The border was not a barrier, demarcating two distinct domains; it was a passageway, and an opportunity for exchange and connection. I felt much less connected to the South, though. While I was raised a Catholic, and so in a general way a 'nationalist', all my family were Northern Irish (and one grandfather Welsh). I turned my back, while still too young to realise it. I quit studying the Irish language at school as soon as I was able. I chose not to spend summer weeks at the Gaeltacht schools in Donegal. Later on, I gave no serious thought to applying to Universities down South. All through this time, the border, the North-South divide, appeared to me like a blank, mute fact of life, and I would not have thought of myself as concerned by it, or as influenced by it. In hindsight though, I lived – and I still live – a deeply partitioned life, as the title of Nash, Reid and Graham's (2013) work suggests. Not that I was directly affected in my family life or livelihood, or had my life blighted by the disputes, difficulties and sometimes violence of the borderlands that their studies document. But the angle, so to speak, of my existence was turned and tuned north and eastward, a bit like the giant TV aerials many houses in the borderlands South used to display, searching for stations beyond RTÉ. Now the older I get, the more conscious I seem to become of the myriad possible geographies foreclosed by partition, the potential Irelands that never came to pass.

4.

If a prosaic and even thoughtless modernity characterised the visible landscape in which I grew up, this was counterbalanced, in a sense, by a pervasive religiosity – so pervasive, in fact, that I was only really able to see it once I'd gotten some perspective by moving away. Which is not to say it was invisible, really; the entire landscape was cluttered up with churches and chapels and saint-named schools. When I was growing up, everybody went to church, of one kind or another. Brought up a Catholic, I was taught in schools run by priests and brothers, and I was woven, like everyone was, into a rhythmic, incantatory world of feast days and holy days, confessions and confirmations.

When I was fourteen, I was taken, along with my classmates, on a pilgrimage to Lough Derg, in Co. Donegal. This is only about forty minutes' drive from Enniskillen, on the road through Pettigo, a village bisected by the border. On Station Island, in the centre of Lough Derg, sits St Patrick's Purgatory, the site of the pilgrimage for almost a thousand years – and this was once one of Europe's most famous pilgrim sites. We were ferried over to the island in large open boats with outboard motors. I cannot remember why we were doing this – whether it was something every school-year did, or whether it was it was a one-off, just for us. I do remember it involved fundraising for charity and sponsorship, doing the rounds of family and neighbours for their pounds or sometimes two – but for whom the monies were intended, I cannot recall.

On landing at Station Island, we took off our shoes and socks, in a muddled group of teenagers, elderly Irish folk, and what looked like tourist groups, like the Americans

you saw in Ireland, middle-aged people with bright cagoules and guidebooks in hand. So began two nights and nearly three days of barefoot penitence. We cycled through the stations; a set of ritual, repetitious prayers, enunciated at significant specific spots in and around the main basilica. We did this over and over, for hours on end. Purgatory was crowded but silent and shuffling. The rain was constant. As well as going barefoot, we had to fast, and on the first night observe an overnight wakeful vigil – a traditional recipe for communing with site and spirit, for clarifying yourself like you would a soup, extracting the fats and impurities. Though in my case this was effective in an unintended way – the experience clarified, for the first time, the possibility of disbelief, of rejection. There was plenty of adolescent cynicism and crudity in my class group, no fledgling priests amongst us, and lots of cursing and grumbling about Lough Derg. It took a while for this to separate out, for me, into a wholesale loss of faith. Damascus in reverse, it seemed like at the time, a new disbelief that arrived quite suddenly and decisively. But today, when I look back, it seems to me that this was not only a loss of faith in Jesus and St Patrick, it was also turning my back on an entire cultural landscape.

I doubt very much if I will ever go back to Lough Derg. It is even less likely that I will ever go back to being a churchgoer again. The sense I developed as a teenager, of the church as a sinister and stifling entity, has only deepened over time. The landscape of Ireland has been revealed to be nothing less than a Gulag archipelago of industrialised abuse and torture, organised and maintained through the complicity of the Catholic church in particular. It is impossible now to walk past any church, school or hospital in the country without thinking about what must have once happened behind its doors. What must still be happening, somewhere. It is very hard to see what of the sacred and the spiritual can survive this institutional desecration of body, land and memory.

One thing perhaps, for me. A PhD student I recently supervised struggled for a while to find a way to talk about the Siberian landscape. Her work was on the experience of travelling the Trans-Siberian railway, and I had asked her to consider a chapter on the relation of journey and landscape. She found this relation, remarkably, in faces. The faces of four people she had met along the way, strikingly narrated³. It was a renewed lesson for me that landscape crystallises – or emerges – sometimes in very specific things, in bodies, fragments, glimpses. I found my own version in the pages of the local Fermanagh newspapers. *The Impartial Reporter* and *The Fermanagh Herald* – every time I go back to Enniskillen, one of the first things I do is read them. I don't know why exactly, but I'm drawn in particular to the pages of obituaries, church announcements and anniversaries. Here you will also find shorter, anonymous prayers and petitions – at the bottom of the page, beneath the remembrances and the grainy pictures of the dead. Pleas for God's intervention, for Jesus to heal and bring succour, and calls for spells and ritual words to ensure that prayers will be answered. Here it is – the land that will always be a mystery.

5.

I have been using the language of perspective in this paper – I will be using it again, in later sections. Perspective and landscape are tightly-linked terms, of course. Across many books and papers, Denis Cosgrove (especially 1985, 1998, 2001), showed how perspectival landscapes – the dominant form of landscape representation for several centuries in Western art – were cognate with ideas of clarity, certainty and authority. Perspective above all renders the world visible in a particular way; it organises and configures spatial relations in a systematic and knowable manner; more widely, it heralds the advent of a progressively more rational geography and subjectivity. So, to ‘get things in perspective’ means to reach a vantage point from which the land is visibly arrayed before you. Or, to arrive at a stage in life where mature reflection is possible. Or, to remember things with a degree of accuracy and a sound appreciation of context. Or, in general, to be reasonable and rational in your approach.

But it could also be argued that when perspective was invented – in early fifteenth-century Italy as is widely accepted – then a new kind of strangeness and distancing came into the world. In perspective, after all, the landscape is organised around a *vanishing point*. The visible world funnels towards this inaccessible and unimaginable point of disappearance – a point which finds its counterpoint, on the other side of the picture frame, somewhere deep in the eye of the beholder. What might it mean, for landscape to be a kind of vanishing act, for a sense of absence or disappearance to characterise the experience of landscape?

In a book titled *The Arrière-Pays*, Yves Bonnefoy (2012) offers one response to this kind of question. This phrase, the *arrière-pays*, might translate most literally into English as ‘back-country’ or ‘hinterland’, but Bonnefoy invests it with a larger, existential and even metaphysical significance. The *arrière-pays* is a perpetually inaccessible yet endlessly beckoning elsewhere, ‘the place further in or beyond’ (p. 56) as Bonnefoy puts it. Or, as he opens his text by saying:

‘it seems to me that *here*, or close by, a couple of steps away on the path I didn’t take and which is already receding – that just *over there* a more elevated kind of country would open up, where I might have gone to live and which I’ve already lost’ (p. 25, original emphasis).

In some ways, the *arrière-pays* might seem like a typical holy grail – an image of unattainable perfection. But this land that Bonnefoy invokes is not, he stresses, somewhere out of this world. Rather than being a utopia, a *nowhere*, the significance of the *arrière-pays* lies in the relation it sets up between here and there, here and elsewhere, the familiar and the strange, the proximate and the distant. The *arrière-pays* seems only just out of reach. This is the danger of perspective, for Bonnefoy: ‘perspective is most definitely dangerous, since it is capable of creating in thought the idea of an elsewhere... it can [now] happen that images... apparently bring news that this elsewhere exists; more, that it is not even as remote as one imagined’ (p. 156). In this way, he expands ‘the geometrizing of space can install the metaphysical over there as easily as it can a here

which has about it no vestiges of illusion', (*ibid*). And, in consequence, 'it can turn our life on this earth into an exile' (*ibid*).

The lesson of the vanishing point is that, running alongside the visibility that perspective establishes, there is always and inevitably an element of the invisible. Just as it makes the world appear, so it also must make it vanish; just as the presence and defined location of things in the world are mapped out for us, so they are equally rendered absent and distant. Alongside its clarity, the perspectival landscape invokes mystery; simultaneous with visual revelation, perspective points to the hidden. I am arguing, therefore, that far from presenting us only with a reasonable, worldly and knowable landscape, perspective may actually also configure landscape as something strange and otherworldly. It configures landscape as a space of not-belonging. When perspective was invented, in other words, a new kind of strangeness and distancing came into the world.

6.

I moved to England when I was eighteen and have never lived anywhere else since, but I've always gone back to Ireland, and Northern Ireland especially, at least once every year. This is a trip that most often involves taking the ferry from Wales to Dublin or Rosslare, and then driving up to the north. And I've often thought that this is an odd journey, because while it ends up in the same place as it begins – that is, within the United Kingdom (of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) – *en route* it passes through four territories at least partly distinct from each other: England, Wales, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland.

When I was a student in Manchester in the 1990s, I often travelled back home overnight by coach, and in those days, the cheapest coach running between the city and the port of Holyhead was run by a company called Slattery's. At holiday time, the bus was full of returning Irish students like myself, also a fair crowd of longer-term emigrants, veterans perhaps of decades of this particular journey. And it was a gruelling journey: four hours to Holyhead, with a cassette tape of traditional Irish favourites on permanent loop, an hour's wait in the joyless shed in which Irish Ferries corralled its foot passengers, another four hours on the ship itself in total darkness, lumbering through the winter swell, chaos at Dublin ferryport as we transferred onto shuttle coaches into the city, frustration and tedium in the blighted dawn at the central Dublin Bus station. And then finally, three more hours at least of hard labour on another coach, from Dublin up to Enniskillen.

Sometimes, usually when I was with friends, I managed to enter into the spirit of it. A few drinks on the bus (and you could smoke on there too, as I recall), a few more in the boat's pub. If you pitched it right, the last leg of the journey up to Enniskillen was long but bleary, rather than a torment. When I was travelling by myself, however, I had a clear idea of the person I wanted to avoid inadvertently falling in with: the lone, male Irish traveller in his forties or fifties, overjoyed to be going back home, all the more so as the drink took hold, and eager to find a fellow national with whom to bolster these feelings, and other

feelings too, mostly negative, mostly directed against the English. I didn't always succeed in avoiding him. I haven't turned into him, though, at least not yet.

There is something about watching the landscape through the windows of a bus, something that seems forlorn and even wretched when compared, for instance, to watching the landscapes that glide serene and assured past the windows of a train. I knew the old road north-west from Dublin well, the N3: Navan, Kells, Virginia, Cavan, then across the border and home to Enniskillen. Despite this, though, it always tended to grey away, and become ever more inaccessible and indistinct as I travelled along it. Yet, in this distancing, I couldn't help but feel that my eye had become clearer, sharper, precisely as the landscape smudges and blurs recessively. I would see, quite clearly and suddenly, that we all come from nowhere, that there is no homely being-in-the-world, if by this term we seek to indicate a place of living and dwelling that is native or proper to a given people, or even if by this term we simply refer to an existential landscape of known and familiar things, pathways, objects, around which we fundamentally orient and know ourselves. Being-in-the-world is a concept intrinsically freighted with senses of nearness and proximity. It gathers the world around the self, brings the world in close as a locality of concerns and involvements, as a landscape that matters to us; being-in-the-world thus positively codes, on one level, closeness, familiarity, settlement.

But still today, driving back now in my own car, the deeper into the Irish landscape I go – and crossing the border into the North is going deeper here – so the faster it seems to recede and withdraw. Proximity induces not familiarity and recognition (let alone communion); instead it gives life to a distance and an estrangement. The closer you get, the more an unbridgeable gap seems to impose itself. I was closer, in truth, when I was setting out. And this isn't to say that the journey is conducted between two opposing poles of attraction, homes old and new, now and then. If anything, the opposite is true: just as the north of Ireland grows somehow more distant as it unfolds before me, so my current settling in the South-West of England equally appears fragmented and unreal when I try to bring it to my mind's eye. What remains is a perspective that is sharper, clearer, exactly because it is, momentarily, unmoored – a perspective that is able to perceive landscape as otherwise than correspondence of self and world, as otherwise than home.

Of course, it can be argued that journeys 'home' always have these kinds of vexed, elegiac, existential qualities. But I do not think that my feelings of estrangement are simply or only the product of my own ever-increasing distance in time from my childhood. When the town I grew up in finally hoves into view, firstly on road signs and then in itself, a little stragglier every year – the graceless suburbs that have grown up around it in the last twenty years having altered its character not at all – the mood is inevitably a touch uncanny. Uncanny, that is, in its literal, Germanic translation, 'unhomely'. An affective compound of familiarity and strangeness that is unsettling exactly because it takes-place as the out-of-place, it displaces place in the very act of configuring it. This is home-not-home, inducing the suspicion that there never was a first home to begin with.

7.

A few weeks after my father died, in autumn 2013, I had to return to Ireland once again. This time the trip was for professional reasons – I was external examining a Master’s programme at NUI Galway. I flew to Knock airport, and hired a car from there. But instead of driving straight down the N17 to the city, I headed out west, to Westport first, where I stopped for a late-ish lunch, and then down towards Leenane, and on into Connemara.

I don’t think I’d ever visited Connemara before I left Ireland, for good as it seemed then. Over the past fifteen-odd years, though, we’ve holidayed there four different times I think, my wife and I having first discovered the place on a cheap, pre-children camping trip, when I was still a PhD student. I’d never been there outside of summer though. As I drove on, climbing up out of Killary Harbour, and glancing repeatedly at the colossal vistas opening out to my right, there looked to be some patches of snow already in the highest hollows of the Mweelrea range, gleaming in the low sunlight that was pouring into the harbour, and cupping and catching all along the mountainside’s chiselled flanks and faces.

A few miles further on, having turned right off the main road to Clifden, and driven alongside a black lake, and through a narrow cleft between two more high hills crowned with sunlight, I arrived at Glassilaun strand. I pulled up beside the one other car in the park, perched on a rise in the dunes overlooking the beach. Standing by the car, and taking in the scene, I could see a couple walking close together along the shoreline, far off in the distance. A Pacific-perfect crescent of white sand, the strand was fringed with deep pink rocks, and enclosed a lagoon of lustrous green and blue waters. It was set, maybe a touch incongruously, amidst an epic Celtic surround: grey rocky outcrops, and grey stone walls enclosing nearby bright green fields liling down to the sea, and the land all around rising everywhere upward to wilder heights and dramas.

It was the first time I’d been there for several years. It was a year or so since I’d read the writer Tim Robinson’s (2008) account of this locale in his masterwork *Connemara: The Last Pool of Darkness*. And a year or so later, when re-reading the nature writer Robert Macfarlane’s (2007) *The Wild Places*, I realised that this was also more-or-less exactly where he fetches up in one particular chapter, having descended on foot from the mountain-top of Binn Chuanna, one of the most prominent nearby peaks. But unlike Robinson, I didn’t have the chance to speak to anyone; I couldn’t learn to gauge the place through another’s eyes. And unlike Macfarlane, I didn’t swim out to one of the small islets just offshore, to spend the night there alone. I only had a few minutes. I had to be in Galway later that evening for dinner.

And it was cold, really quite bitterly cold. It was a bright, sharp autumn day, and as I walked down over the dunes and onto the crescent of sand I could see the island of Inishbofin, miles out at sea, clearly silhouetted by the westering sun. But there was a chilling breeze at my back, an easterly wind, quite unusual for this place I imagine – a flow of eastern European air reaching all the way to this, one of the westernmost points in the continent. It made everything seem a little unreal, or maybe that was just my mood. I wheeled around on the sand, taking pictures of the sea, the mountains, the

curving shapes and the graduated colour planes of the landscape: greens, pinks, greys, dark browns. I think I remember this well because I was, on that particular day, alert with the exhilaration of the place, but at the same time in a dislocated frame of mind. It was difficult to leave Glassilaun after what seemed an absurdly short visit, but there's always (for me) a sharp and poignant clarity in leaving too. I drove the long miles down to Galway, past Clifden, where my father used to go once every year with friends for a golfing weekend, and out of Connemara once again.

I spent most of the next three days ensconced in a vacant, bare office at the University in Galway. With its empty bookshelves and odds and ends of furniture piled up, it already had a mournful air: a Professor retired, but not replaced; the future uncertain. I sat drifting between recent memories of illness, death and burial, and the student dissertations I was charged with reviewing. These studies were chiefly archaeological, and mostly focused upon medieval ruins and prehistoric remains in the remoter parts of western Ireland, in places like Donegal, Mayo and the Burren. Images of passage tombs, mass rocks and stone circles recurred; lugubrious in the context of my own mood. And I felt at times more like a student myself, or even like a supplicant, rather than an examiner. Reading these studies, mostly empirical in tone, but each in its own way also a kind of act of devotion to *Irish landscape*, made my own journey down seem almost sacrilegious. Connemara in three hours flat, a drive-thru Connemara: the antithesis of a patient, mature, layered attentiveness to questions of land, living and remembering the dead.

My father's passing away, and in particular the events that followed it, churned around in my mind. He had been unwell, but not, as we had thought, seriously unwell. Despite this, his swift decline into an insensate, terminal condition, cocooned in an intensive care bed, was accompanied, for me (as I arrived from England), by a strong, strange sense of clarity and lucidity. Everything took on a very definite, clear-edged, ontic quality. He was evidently dying and there was no prospect of recovery; I accepted this, calmly as I thought, as an incontestable fact, wholly apparent in the signals from the hospital staff and the medical information they relayed. Others however – his many friends and relatives from the town and around – were blindsided and disbelieving, right up to the end. On the morning of the day that he died, I had to intercept a close family friend who had come to visit at the entrance to the intensive care unit, and tell him the end was only hours away. He was so shocked he physically staggered, falling forwards against me.

But once my father had gone, then it was as if everyone suddenly knew exactly what to do, and precisely what roles they had to play. A two-day wake ensued, and over the weeks and months that followed, I replayed scenes from it over and again, as I sat becalmed at work, or lay wakeful in the small hours of the morning. The mass cards, the women, the chairs and the sandwiches. The house packed with people, many of whom I'd not seen for over twenty years. The priests, several of them, still being fussed over, settling down with cups and saucers into the best chairs. All of this still here, still happening; an elaborate Northern Irish choreography, still fully-functioning. And only then did I start to shake my head in disbelief. *I could not believe* what was happening – that all this could still be happening. As if the whole past twenty years of life had been but a dream.

And sitting there in Galway, some weeks later, with the addition now of this obligatory return trip through Connemara, and with all of these archaeologies of Irish landscape in front of me, it felt like I was being given some kind of lesson – in Ireland, in Irishness – just when I was least expecting it. Some kind of signal, some kind of summons. Or if I were to be fanciful, a kind of message that could read either as, you’ll never escape, or as you’ve lost your way. At the end of the week I drove north from Galway, taking the long road up through Sligo and back to Enniskillen.

8.

Maybe one day I’ll move to Ireland. And somehow, it’ll be for the first time, a completely fresh migration, erasing the past and starting over anew. Just like the other first-time moves I’ve sometimes thought about – idle daydreams of moving to North America, or to Scandinavia. We’ll find somewhere out in the west, maybe even with a view of the ocean, maybe even somewhere like Connemara. And perhaps in this westward-facing afterlife, I’ll experience, finally, a communion of self and landscape. Though it would still be just another kind of vanishing act, turning my back on the rest of the world.

I am hardly alone in entertaining these kinds of thoughts and fantasies about Ireland, or, more precisely, a particular Irish landscape of the imagination. Catriona Ni Laoire’s (2007, 2008) studies of return migration to Ireland show how idealisations of family, community and landscape inform decisions to return – and equally how experiences of return are then in actuality compounds of familiarity and estrangement, belonging and apartness⁴. Ireland in general, north and south, past and present, and at home *and* abroad, is often characterised as a culture and a landscape sharply marked by migrations, as Mary Gilmartin’s (2015) recent work explores. In this sense, a trip to Ireland would be recommended for anyone in search of the eerie, of dwelling’s absence. The land isn’t short of abandoned and derelict places, or of sites of concealment and forgetting – or of homes never even inhabited⁵.

At the start of this paper, I worried about being presumptuous in speaking chiefly through personal experience, as I’ve done in this context. Now, in concluding, and reading back over, my anxieties are more about tone and mood. The paper runs the risk, in my eyes, of seeming lachrymose and a little adolescent even in parts. I did not intend to write mostly about childhood and adolescence when I began to plan and compose the paper, but that is how it has turned out. In that sense, acknowledgement also needs to be made regarding the specificities of place and time that are at work here, my own experience being a fairly particular one. Many people like me, who grew up in the late nineteen-eighties and early nineteen-nineties, left Ireland, north and south. At least two subsequent generations have found themselves faced with different, sometimes even starker sets of choices around remaining and leaving, and, of course, in this time there has also been notable immigration into Ireland (north and south) from elsewhere.

But I would be wrong to deny that my thoughts have turned back to Ireland more frequently in recent years, as I've moved into my forties. Like last Easter, for example, when we climbed the new pathway to the summit of Cuilcagh mountain, on the Fermanagh-Cavan border. This was another rare moment of renewed perception for me, a perspective from on-high that clarified a for-once undivided landscape. The mountain top was a stark plateau of scattered rock, seams of peat, and icy pools. It seemed astonishing that this was only fifteen miles from where I'd grown up, and yet I'd never been anywhere quite like it. The entire borderland clarified: you could see all the way to Tyrone and Armagh, and all the way to the Atlantic coast too.

Many memories still often feel inchoate and episodic, though, and I seem to genuinely struggle to get the past into perspective. I seem to have forgotten so much – the names of classmates, of parent's friends, the streets and districts and lakes of the town. For years, I would worry about walking up the main street in Enniskillen, or walking into one of the pubs, and being greeted there by someone whose name and face I couldn't remember. It has happened once or twice – as have other uncanny things, like being told about events and occasions I clearly took part in, yet cannot remember at all. But I am safer now; there are not that many people still living there who might know me, or still venturing out by day or night for me to come across.

A wider, fairly common verdict would be that Northern Ireland and the borderlands, in particular, remain unsettled and unreconciled landscapes to a degree. With respect to conflict and violence, they remain mired in recurrent patterns of deliberate recall, equally determined amnesia and sheer forgetfulness. I might want to argue that this is *the very condition of landscape*, however, and not a specific Irish state that could ever really be surpassed. More specifically, I have said little explicitly in this piece about the Troubles, which were clearly a charged element of the affective atmospheres I grew up in. I have little to directly report – except that I was fourteen, and at home in bed on the Sunday morning in autumn 1987 when the Enniskillen Remembrance Day bombing occurred. The explosion was a concussive soundwave amplifying across the lake to impact upon our house, bowing but not breaking the windows. I still seem to recall this moment clearly, and also that it took a surprising number of years for the consequent, distinctive gap in the view to be filled in.

A landscape cannot be a homeland. This is an argument I have made more formally elsewhere (Wylie, 2016), and will briefly revisit here, to conclude. By this phrase, I mean to say that we should not and indeed cannot identify a people who somehow belong to a land. Localism, nativism and nationalism in general are, in my view, deeply problematic modes of thinking, and not really susceptible to any progressive or enlightened re-imagining. Far from identifying any homeland where we might dwell and belong, landscape, as a way of writing, watching and depicting, is instead a spacing and a distancing, a mode of not-belonging that offers both a kind of perspective, and a perpetual displacement. We cannot conflate being and location. In no way do I feel 'British', though I've lived in England for more than half my life, and in the UK for all of it – and even though a British passport is the only one I've ever (yet) held. Do I feel 'Irish', then, through and through; 'Irish John' as the people I play football with now in Exeter sometimes call me? Not exactly – not really.

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Endnotes

- ¹ A list of Robinson's key works is included in the bibliography, and see also Gladwin and Cusick's (2016) recent collection, *Unfolding Irish Landscapes*, including chapters by Irish geographers Nessa Cronin and Patrick Duffy.
- ² And for a quite different account than mine, see here Denis Linehan's (2013) work on motorways as symbolic landscapes in Ireland.
- ³ Please see the reference list for further details of Dalia Kuoraite's work.
- ⁴ And see here also Sara Hannafin's (2016) recent writing on cognate themes in *Irish Geography*.
- ⁵ I am thinking especially here, of course, of the numerous unfinished apartment blocks and ghost estates that have emerged as a distinctive feature of the Irish landscape post the 2008 financial crisis – I have been informed by the varied work of Cian O'Callaghan, in particular, on this (Kitchin, O'Callaghan and Gleeson, 2014).

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