

Socialists, Savages and Hydroelectric Schemes: A Historical Anthropological Account of the Construction of Ardnacrusha.

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Introduction

During the summer of 1995, I began to conduct research in the Lower Shannon region. In particular, I was interested in investigating the famed hydroelectric works at Ardnacrusha. However, getting information on the Dam proved to be difficult. With some persistence, and more than a little luck, I secured a personal tour of the facility. My guide was a local man named Seán Craig who had risen to managerial level “on the Scheme.” Seán’s circuitous route to management inspired wonderful anecdotes and insights into the institution’s insular class system, from senior management to the more-or-less blue-collar local workforce. I mentioned to him that I had been finding it difficult to get information on Ardnacrusha. He suggested that “the foreign tourists have seen better,” and as for domestic school tours: “Ardnacrusha is no Disneyland.” Seán added that the institution was “going semi-automatic” in the next couple of years, shedding more than half its workforce and echoing global trends of postindustrial labour flexibility. I asked whether there was any chance of closure and he replied, in a mystical tone, “Ardnacrusha will keep going.”¹

As I was directed to the on-site heritage centre the reasons implicit in Seán’s statement became ever more clear. Inside, an archival film related the construction and current function of the Dam. The narrator described how the “immense project” involved the removal of 300 million tons of earth by willing workers housed in a purpose-built village. Apparently, the workers enjoyed such amenities as shops, kitchens, boxing clubs, and facilities for gymnastics. To the narrator Ardnacrusha was an inspired place of nation-building. Built upon the sentiments of an emerging Ireland, this type of construction established the legitimacy and direction of the new Saorstát. Perhaps it is no surprise then that its story is one of conflict and controversy.

In this article, I will critically examine this construction process.

Ardnacrusha was conceived within months of the civil war cease-fire, and was seen by many as an important test for the young nation-state. Indeed, the project was inextricably bound to the public perception of the Saorstát to the extent that its physical construction became a meta-
60 IRISH JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY 3 1998

phor for the nation-building of the era. The imagination of the public was captured as reporters, artists, authors and thousands of ordinary tourists flocked to the construction site.

The Scheme was also noteworthy for the seamless manner in which its architects wove an icon of modernity into the fabric of a nation purported to be rural and anti-modern. In order to appreciate this achievement we need to understand the nature of Ireland's national symbolic currency, and ask which classes accessed and deployed these cultural resources. Anthropological writings provide an interesting window through which to do just that. The work of Conrad Arensberg, in particular, imagined Ireland as an oasis of tradition amid the arid landscape of modernity. Indeed, Arensberg's *The Irish Countryman* situated itself within rural Clare—little more than a stone's throw from Ardnacrusha. What Arensberg's ethnographic gaze omitted raises interesting issues relating to the critical understanding of Irish ethnography.

Socialists

When the Saorstát Government came to power in the 1920s, it inherited a significant body of research on waterpower. Both the British Administration and Sinn Féin rebels had looked into the possibility of national electrification. The concept appealed particularly to the republican Dáil. Their creed of economic self-sufficiency demanded a projection of development based upon indigenous resources. Thus, the historical precedents for the project attest not only to the commercial interests at stake, but also to the more ambiguous national interests. As a “big government” project the idea of hydroelectricity bridged the gap between pragmatic economics and ideological currency. At a projected cost of £5 million (an enormous sum for the post-civil war state), Ardnacrusha possessed a symbolic value far in excess of any economic benefit. Such an extravagant project required that the nature of the ideological impetus for development be resolved in the public domain. Within months of the initial proposal, Ardnacrusha had become the focus of a wide range of debates. Issues of safety and security were addressed as pessimists began to speculate upon the effects of republicans attacking the Dam with pickaxes and spades. Another such question concerned the issue of private versus state control; it prompted one outspoken Senator to see “the cloven hoof of socialism” (Seanad 1925:1047) in the scheme. The politician's words prefigure the significant conflicts over socialism and labour that later raged at Ardnacrusha.

IRISH JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY 3 1998 61

On August 13, 1925, a contract between the German firm, Siemens-Schuckert, and Saorstát na hÉireann was signed. It provided for the construction of a hydroelectric power station and dam at Ardnacrusha, and later for the electrification of the whole Free State. An army of Hamburg engineers soon descended upon Ardnacrusha. Novelist, Valentine Williams was commissioned by the *Structural Engineer* to forge an account of their arrival:

A Titan task confronted these peaceful invaders. Ireland could bring almost nothing to her aid save the more or less willing arms of her unskilled labour. The German engineers found themselves in a virtually roadless tract of desolate pastureland with naught save a couple of miserable hamlets all along the way from Limerick to Killaloe. There was no power station they could utilize, no railway.... As they inhaled the soft and sluggish Shannon air and watched the ragged natives pottering about their wretched hovels and dim cabbage patches in the leisurely manner particular to the west of Ireland peasantry. Hearts less valiant than those of the professional engineer must have quailed before the magnitude of the undertaking. [Williams 1929:19]

Williams' words resonated with the well-established tone of the colonial travelogue to form an index of both the Teutonic relationship with the Irish, and the gulf between the urbanized élite of the Saorstát and the west of Ireland peasantry. The author also points to the immense difficulties faced by the Siemens engineers in an impoverished European periphery. During a stint in Limerick the German engineer, Reinhold Zickel penned the reflective novel *Am Shannon*, in which he comments upon the underdeveloped *mien* of Ireland: "Electric light in Irish cow-sheds—what a joke!" (Zickle N.D:8).² Regardless of these views, the Germans soon marshalled a workforce of some 3000 men. However, before the first machines were unloaded upon Limerick's docks a strike had broken out. By and large the workforce consisted of demobilized Free State troops, many of whom took umbrage at the rate of pay. Within hours, all the major unions in Ireland had called for a cessation of work.

In recognition of the severity of the situation, the Government appointed Joe McGrath as a labour relations consultant to Siemens. A former Director of the Irish Secret Service and one time union boss with "Big" Jim Larkin, McGrath was known as a shrewd and tough negotiator. By employing a divide-and-conquer policy, he set about tempting the more "patriotic" ex-servicemen back to work. On Friday, October 2, 1925, the ex-servicemen who did not subscribe to the labour movement broke the picket. Later that night six of the "scab" workers were involved in serious clashes and were fortunate to escape with their lives.

The Irish Times described the riot:

A crowd assembled outside the Strand Barracks and an attempt was made to assault some of the ex-service men as they were leaving. The Civic Guard dispersed the crowd with their batons, and two civilians were reported to have

been injured. [The Irish Times, September 29 1925:7]

As the strike wore on German workers became favourite targets for the strikers. Though mass-meetings called for solidarity and nonviolence, both Siemens' employees and Irish policemen were frequently attacked. It was not long before the Limerick Dock Union joined the strike, leaving the Germans to unload their ships surrounded by detachments of Saorstát troops.

The strikers soon began to boycott those businesses known to supply the Germans. The local merchant and shopkeeping classes had been looking forward to a bonanza, and they were predictably outraged. The pulpits of the region also came out against the strike tactics by condemning the immorality of the boycott, and by endorsing Ardnacrusha as the one hope for a "great Irish Industrial revival" (Limerick Chronicle, January 20 1925:2).³

In many ways, the strike highlighted the existence of a powerful class of urbanized Irish who welcomed development and despised socialism. In his programmatic work on the *Irish Political ...lite*, A S. Cohen comments upon the emergence of this class by drawing attention to the fact that the overwhelming majority of state officials were urban-born and unaffiliated to either side of the civil war (see Cohen 1972). More specifically, the political party that gave birth to Ardnacrusha represented this particular social stratum. F. Powell described Cumman na nGaeldhael's supporters as:

[A] socially conservative regime rooted in traditional Catholic values and wedded to the interests of the large farmers, professional classes and businessmen who supported Cumman na nGaeldhael. [Keogh 1994:38]

IRISH JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY 3 1998 63

These asymmetrical social relations are confirmed through an examination of the government debates of the time. On December 14, 1925, Senator John T. O'Farrell put forward the following legislative motion:

"That the Seanad regrets the unhappy auspices under which the Shannon Scheme has been launched." Referring to his suspicion that nationalist rhetoric was obscuring real social inequality, O'Farrell suggested that "we heard a lot of mawkish humbug recently about a Gaelic Ireland." What was in fact emerging, according to the Senator, was an "Irish China" (Seanad 1925:37). Continuing upon a theme of international comparison, the politician insightfully suggested that: We are inclined, I suppose, to look upon the working man as the British in India would look upon the native, who was intended by nature and providence to have his children brought up in suffering and ignorance, as if that was his allotted place in life. [Seanad 1925:38]

These words sparked off a lengthy and fascinating debate in both houses of state regarding the role of labour in the national economy. The employers' point of view was put forth by the Earl of Mayo who described the occupation of the labouring classes as: "Wheeling a barrow with clay up along a narrow plank." He added that "this is exactly the difficulty we have in Ireland—to get men who are trained to do that" (Seanad 1925:43-45). This rather gruff attitude was augmented by the more acceptable economic rhetoric of Senator Bennett.

No one would deny the economic doctrine which underlies this: the right of every man to live and the right of every man to enjoy the amenities of life. But, it is also the duty of the State and the nation to see that not one particular section of the nation, but that the nation as a whole is kept in reasonable comfort. [Seanad 1925:47-48]

Failing to notice his repetition of O'Farrell's earlier criticism, he went on to discuss the "degrees of civilization" to which the various classes should be accustomed. Sir John Keane took up this point by announcing that labour and capital were commodities and that such were the "inexorable laws of economics that you cannot get away from without ruin to the State" (Seanad 1925:52). When we consider this dogmatic ideology and the more ill advised comments regarding "degrees of civilization," it becomes readily apparent that the new administration

64 IRISH JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY 3 1998

was governing Ireland with much the same institutional and ideational resources as the previous "imperialist" regime.⁴

Throughout the country there were several support rallies held in urban working class strongholds. Delegates from the Free State and Northern Ireland attended the Annual Trade Union Congress in the Mansion House where they condemned the attitude of the Government. However, the combination of left-wing apathy and a willful government conspired to end the strike within a few months. According to the Radio Telfís Éireann historian, Michael McCarthy, "The defeat (of the strike) was a crucial blow for Irish labour in general, coming as it did only four years after the foundation of the State" (1983:220).

The prevailing view amongst the Government and élite was that the economy had the right to be harsh—in the national interest. If people suffered, it was not the duty of the nation-state or those who controlled it to provide for them. This reactionary culture was soon to be put to the test, again at Ardnacrusha.

Savages

One of the more serious issues to arise during the construction of Ardnacrusha related to the provision of housing for the workforce. There was accommodation for 720 workers on the Shannon Scheme in

1928—a time when more than 5000 were employed. The relatively short duration of most employment contracts exacerbated this situation. Indeed, this early controversy at Ardnacrusha prefigures many of the contemporary debates over labour “flexibility.” During one layoff period in 1928, for example, 280 men were “dispensed with” (see *Limerick Chronicle*, May 13 1928:4). Many travelled to Ardnacrusha with little hope of work; others were reluctant to leave in case they might be rehired; few could afford the price of proper accommodation. By 1926 an average of 10 people per night sought temporary shelter in Limerick City Home. In a bureaucratic move borne of frustration, the Regional Health Board refused to admit non-Limerick people. Before long it was revealed that some workers were subsisting in “cow houses, piggeries and barns” (*Dáil* 1926:2018-2020). Jim Mullane of the Regional Health Board singled out O’Grady’s yard in Clare as a particular blackspot. By 1927 the 94 people inhabiting the farmyard were suffering from hunger and typhoid. “Surely to God,” one Counsellor exclaimed, “we are not going to let them die with the hunger” (McCarthy 1983:16). Echoing the colonial response to the famine, his more IRISH JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY 3 1998 65 reactionary colleagues asked: “Are we to feed the hungry of every county in Ireland?” (McCarthy 1983:16-17). The national papers took up the story in June 1926 forcing a government statement. Few were prepared for the tone of Minister Paddy McGuilligan’s reaction: If people go to Limerick to wait on the chance of getting work ... that’s their own look out.... If people have to die and die through starvation ... so be it for the good of the nation. [*Dáil* 1926:2027]

McGuilligan’s words were underscored with the sense that the national economy had an inherent logic – a narrative of development—which apparently allowed Irishmen to starve and live in pigsties while building the Irish nation-state.

The extraordinary gulf between those controlling the hegemonic discourse and practices and the labourers and peasants lead me to ask questions regarding the power relations within those marginal social groups. In my previous discussion of the writings of Reinhold Zickle and Valentine Williams, I alluded to the hierarchical relationship between the Germans and the Irish at Ardnacrusha. This asymmetrical relationship is underlined by the litany of robbery, assault, and, even murder on the construction site (see McCarthy 1983, 1985). There is even remarkable evidence of quasi-ethnic tension occurring amongst the indigenous labourers. During the years of construction, large numbers of Connemara men were hired as unskilled labourers. The men from the West excelled at labour that often required an 85-hour week, and their

work rate set them apart from their colleagues. Added to this was the fact that they spoke little or no English. Reports suggest they were looked down upon as an “uncivilized ... dirty lot” (McCarthy 1983:16). On September 4, 1927, more than 40 Connemara men, fed up with their “savage” label, rioted and set fire to worker’s huts, leaving several in hospital and a further 14 in prison cells.

Incidents of ethnically motivated attacks at Ardnacrusha point to the production of marginality inherent in the process of nation-building. The Germans regarded Ireland as a backward country; the Government regarded the working class as half-savage, fit only to wheel barrows, while the Limerick labourers regarded Irish speakers as an “uncivilized ... dirty lot.” In constructing a dam near Limerick, the Saorstát was both producing and reproducing particular versions of the nation that had embedded in them social relations of domination and subordination.

66 IRISH JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY 3 1998

Hydroelectric Schemes

The controversy and disputes that characterized the early phase of construction at Ardnacrusha highlight some of the cultural themes raised by nation-building. Active human agency produced representational space at Ardnacrusha. The development project came to reflect not only the subjugation of the working classes to the hegemony of the urbanized elite, but also the reification of an “official” national discourse. This project occurred somewhere between nation and state; it legitimized state-driven modernization through an appeal to the nationalist sentiment for the past. This national currency owes much to the productivity of imperial repression, as expressed in Gaelic revivalism. Mythic Ireland, rural and timeless, had already been imagined through the writings of Yeats, Lady Gregory and Synge. All sought the real “Celt” before committing him to paper. The search for pristine otherness was to run at least one artist into trouble during the Free State period. Paul Henry’s paintings sold Ireland as a tourist destination to metropolitan Britain, yet during an interview with *The Irish Times*, he recalled how he was stoned out of rural villages for “stealing the souls” of the natives. However, he could comfort himself with the fact that “the primitives of all lands have their legends based on such superstitions” (*The Irish Times*, July 14 1925:11). The artists words link the cultural motifs of colonial rule with the symbolic currency of the independent nation-state. Certainly, there were some modifications to suit the pragmatic conservatism of the time. W.T. Cosgrave’s words, “the captains and kings have left the task of reconstruction to less picturesque people” (*Limerick Chronicle*, March 23 1925:11) form a near perfect epitaph to the era. It was within this “less picturesque” period that Ardnacrusha first appeared. It was also an era that was accompanied by a powerful

folkloric discourse—anthropology.

In many ways Conrad Arensberg's ethnographic snapshot of rural Clare encapsulated in language the dominant myths and realities of the Saorstát. Rich ethnological portraits of patriarchal kinship, superstition and pious rusticity colour the pages of *The Irish Countryman*. However, on occasion, another Ireland emerges through this romantic gaze.

Arensberg had some difficulty in theorizing urbanization. The powerful influence of the town spelt modernity and change—the very antithesis of his structural-functionalism.

The life of the (town and) country meet and mingle.... That mingling represents the latest stage of an age-old struggle in
IRISH JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY 3 1998 67

which the countryside has won out at last. It has been a conquest of assimilation.... The town in Irish history was originally ... and often long remained a foreign growth.

[Arensberg 1937:146]

The ethnographer suggests the divide between urban modernity on one hand, and timeless rusticity on the other. He also explicitly deploys a powerful *grand récit* of absorption to suggest “how this people preserves an unbroken ancient tradition” (Arensberg 1937:16-17). It is possible to see exactly how this cultural currency was deployed by examining some of the writing that appeared coincident with, and as a consequence of, Ardnacrusha.

The *Saorstát Éireann: Official Handbook* was first published in the early 1930s. Essentially, it acts as a guide to the economy, history and culture of the new state. An entire chapter is devoted to the construction of Ardnacrusha. The mandate for this affectionate gaze is established early in the text: “For the first time since the middle ages the needs and wishes of the Irish people now shape the policy of the Irish Government” (Saorstát Éireann 1932:15). This national mandate is grounded in a particular vision of Irish history—one that legitimates the present. We are assured that “in Gaelic times Ireland was entirely rural” (Saorstát Éireann 1932:123).⁵ The continuity of immemorial rural life with the present is confirmed by the representational spaces produced by the “soul stealing” artist Paul Henry. Sketches of tidy white houses dwarfed by an emerald natural landscape discreetly embellish the periphery of the text. However, this legitimizing narrative is at risk, as the chapter on folklore forewarns:

We cannot give a further lease of life to our folk-tales, or to the beliefs and customs of a genre that is fast passing away, but, it is essential that every phase of this folk culture should be recorded before it disappears. [Saorstát Éireann 1932:265]

It is from within this context of vanishing Gaels and rural idylls that

Ardnacrusha appears to provide a future “distinct from imported fuel” (Saorstát Éireann 1932:123). This remarkable text is encapsulated in the use of a *Book of Kells* style cover on what is, essentially, a development plan. Luke Gibbons (1988:218) echoes this theoretical sense of nationality and modernity in a recent work on Irish development policy. Using the international examples of Reagan’s “return to the range” and Thatcher’s “Victorian values,” he remarks on the ubiquitous green stamp which

68 IRISH JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY 3 1998

modernization receives in Ireland. Gibbons makes considerable use of the Bord Fáilte sense of modern Ireland as a *mélange* of misty past and economic modernity. Ardnacrusha was depicted according to this technique in early Bord Fáilte writings. D.L. Kelleher’s *The Shannon Scheme* describes Ardnacrusha as “evolution-revolution.” Kelleher conjures up images of the rural Ireland upon which Ardnacrusha was constructed: “A house here and there, white and tidy ... poetical ... and unreal” (Kelleher 1996:254). Now, according to the author, diesel engines are the “deities” and “kilowatts the acolytes” (1996:254). This is the “modern magic” of an evolution-revolution.

Ardnacrusha in 1928.... Little German children play on the old road ... where once the untidy, timeless Irish fairies owned the thorn bush.... Now the steam hammer and the drill, inventing new landscape and energy here ... they are eloquent of the new spirit in Ireland, or, rather, the old spirit. [Kelleher 1996:254]

John Breuille describes this phenomenon employing the term “nationalism as development” to suggest that development, usually labelled modernization, “requires the partial or complete abandonment of traditional values and practices” (Breuille 1993:269). This abandonment of tradition is, according to Breuille, paradoxically based on the “allegedly traditional features of society” (1993:269).

Breuille’s sense of how national ideology and development relate is illustrated in a dramatic fashion by peripheral incidences in the history of Ardnacrusha. In the same month as the opening of the Shannon Scheme, for example, the fate of Saint Mo Lua’s Oratory featured in the newspaper headlines.⁶ The Island-Oratory stood in the way of the headwaters of the soon to be opened hydroelectric dam. Archaeologists, historians and clergymen rallied to the cause. Bishop Fogarty of Killaloe suggested that it should be valued as “the monastery where St. Hannan, a prince of the Dalacassians, received his religious education” (McGuilligan Papers 1929). In view of this support, the Oratory was removed, block-by-block, and relocated to Killaloe. A substantial ceremony was organized to commemorate the occasion. The protagonists gathered in Killaloe and, bearing banners with such slogans

as “God save the Pope” and “Remember O’Connell” (Limerick Chronicle, June 29 1929:3), they marched *en masse* to the Island. Along the way, the Boher Boy-Band provided musical accompaniment. A *Limerick Chronicle* reporter provided the epitaph, stating that “for centuries” Mo
IRISH JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY 3 1998 69

Lua’s had “witnessed the ravages of time,” but had now to be “sacrificed to modern progress” (Limerick Chronicle, June 29 1929:3). Clearly, this “sacrifice” allows one to trace a narrative line of inevitability from ancient Celtic life to *Saorstát Éireann*’s vision of modernity, pointing towards a future of industrial progress. Such performances married a past-saturated nationalism with a development-oriented future. In this way, Mo Lua’s final Mass and texts such as the *Saorstát Éireann: Official Handbook* imbued the space of the hydroelectric dam with the cultural motifs of the time.

Nations and Monuments

The past two decades have seen a sustained attack upon the *grand récit* of the national project.⁷ In particular, the writings of Benedict Anderson have done much to highlight the manner in which people “think” the “*imagined community*” of the nation. Anderson has consistently focused upon the contribution of print-capitalism and standardised language for national consciousness. The evident problems in this approach, however, has led French Marxist, Henri Lefebvre to write: Some people—most, in fact—define it as a sort of substance which has sprung up from nature.... The nation is thus endowed with a consistent reality.... There are other theorists, however, who maintain that the nation and nationalism are merely ideological constructs.... The nation is on this view scarcely more than a fiction.... Both of these approaches to the question of the nation ... leave space out of the picture. [Lefebvre 1991:111-112]

In both cases, according to Lefebvre, nations are considered to be purely mental abstractions. His proto-Marxist analysis focuses upon the rise of vast cultural webs held together by hierarchical centres of power, and representations of space. Lefebvre expands upon this point employing the seminal concept of “*monumentality*” (1991:220-223). As nodal points in power-laden webs monuments require people to actively partake in their ideology, whether in the form of collusion or dissent.

This vision of the nation contrasts with the literary-based research which characterizes the study of Irish nationalism.

A spatial work attains a complexity fundamentally different from the complexity of the text, whether prose or poetry....

70 IRISH JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY 3 1998

What we are concerned with here is not texts but texture. We

already know that a texture is made up of a usually rather large space covered by networks or webs; monuments constitute the strong points, nexus or anchors of such webs.

[Lefebvre 1991:222]

As texture, the monument may produce discourses in the form of texts (the example of the *Saorstát Éireann: Official Handbook* springs to mind), however, such texts describe space, and, as important practices within that space, and they are dependent upon it. Alone, they cannot produce the nationscape.

In his second edition of *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson approaches aspects of this issue. According to Anderson, a state endorsed version of identity and history may be instilled in national consciousness through the “*logoization*” of certain symbolic spaces. Capitalist manufacture ensures that such logos are infinitely reproducible for public consumption (usually as stamps, letter-heads and post cards).

Norodom Sihanouk had a large wood and papier-mâché replica of ... Angkor displayed in the national sports stadium in Phnom Penh.... It served its purpose—instant recognisability via a history of colonial-era logoization. [Anderson 1991:183]

Much the same phenomena may be observed in relation to the Shannon Scheme. The Saorstát financed the movement of large numbers of people, on guided tours, to see the “*wonderful feat of engineering*” (Electricity Supply Board 1978:15), and, more specifically, to take home a visual impression or logo. The demand was so vast that Great Southern Rail had to lay on special trains to cope with the numbers. This burgeoning travel industry is even more extraordinary considering both the cross-section of the population involved, and the lack of precedent for such a tourist destination in post-civil war Ireland. The *Limerick Chronicle* refers in depth to the unusually broad appeal of Ardnacrusha:

The harnessing of the Shannon has attracted the attention of capitalists, engineers and scientists in varying parts of the world, and in the past two years or so it has seen a large number of them, apart altogether from the thousands of

IRISH JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY 3 1998 71

ordinary visitors at Ardnacrusha. [Limerick Chronicle May 4 1927:6]

The impact on the “ordinary” visitors to the Shannon development is described in the 1990 edition of Paul Duffy’s *Ardnacrusha: Birth Place of the ESB*. Duffy incidentally talks readers through the type of sights that would greet a tourist. Starting at the weir at Parteen Villa, he lingers over precise engineering details and measurements, referring habitually

to several dozen pictures dispersed throughout the text. These photographs appeared as popular postcards in the 1920s and frequently depict, for the purpose of scale, a labourer dwarfed by either machines or the dam at Ardnacrusha: “A splendid example of Teutonic architecture” (Duffy 1990:10).

In asides, Duffy notes that the Connemara men employed *currach*--building skills to manufacture turbines. This historical ramble captures the dominant performative theme of Ardnacrusha—national construction, envisaging both a past and a future. While Ardnacrusha was built early in the nation-time of the Free State, in having thousands visit the construction site, the Saorstát was producing a potent image of a nation--state “in the making.” Stories of accomplished boat-makers from Connemara using their traditional skills to weld turbines turned potentially crass modernization into *bona fide* national development.

Clearly, not all citizens were free to travel to Ardnacrusha to see Irishmen build the nation-state. Hence, images of construction had to be brought into the realm of public observation and dialogue. The newspapers had a significant role in this process.⁸ In a more direct form of logoization, the Saorstát Administration augmented the growing collection of postcards by employing the artist, Seán Keating, to visually document the construction process. His etchings form a more highbrow alternative to the carnival of power-scheme models produced by the Electricity Board.⁹ In this way, the temporary building site, which was billed, rather grandly, as “the eight wonder of the world” (Duffy 1990:9), became a visual image in its own right. The point of monumental sites is for citizens to visit them; as that is not always possible, the monumental sites must be brought to the people—even if, in the case of Norodom Sihanouk, they are made of papier-mâché.

Conclusions

In this article, I have tried to understand the construction of Ardnacrusha as an “official” project appealing to nationalist sentiment
72 IRISH JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY 3 1998
in order to legitimise a young state. Through the activities of agents of this state, new sentiments became imbedded in national space. The Shannon Scheme was also an important assertion of independence for the new nation-state. It projected a tangible future of economic progress (based on traditional values) to an international and domestic audience. It became a sort of tourist Mecca in an Irish society hungry for the spectacle of “Gaelic” development. Where the tourist gaze was absent, models and logos of all kinds were produced for public consumption. In this way, Ardnacrusha reified a particular discourse, one which subordinated the interests of the working classes and rural peasantry with a claim to the legitimacy of the Irish nation.

Socialist agitation and worker starvation interrupted this comfortable narrative. I hold that such dissent and suffering is crucial to understanding the importance of monuments within national consciousness.

The discourse of a “Celtic” modern Ireland, described by Breuille as “nationalism as development,” was produced by a powerful set of cultural assumptions and political resource which fixed the agricultural peasantry as primitives in need of development, while pointing to them as a source of legitimacy. This vision of the nation received an important contribution from anthropology in the structural-functionalism of Conrad Arensberg. I hope that my research illuminates this important juncture in Irish history by highlighting an Éire of development and modernity amid the rustic anthropological snapshots that characterize Irish ethnography.¹⁰ Understanding Saorstát nation-building, moreover, has many current implications. The lack of socialist agitation in modern Ireland can, I suggest, be attributed to the serious blows it received during incidents such as the Shannon Scheme Strike. Such conflicts resolved Ireland as a place where the national interest obscured marginal voices.

It is fitting, then, that today the Shannon Scheme resonates with postindustrial malaise and labour insecurity. Representing only a tiny fraction of national electric output, Ardnacrusha functions more as historic space than an industrial force—a theme park once again. Nonetheless, even in this new era, we can understand the Dam as the first chapter of the current bestseller titled the “Celtic Tiger.”¹¹ In light of the current applause for economic progress, it is increasingly important to appreciate the socio-cultural complexity of such development projects. Similar projects are scheduled in China, Sri Lanka and elsewhere in the “Third World.” As a modern European nation-state Ireland exports and underwrites these projects through aid and example. In such a climate, it

IRISH JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY 3 1998 73

is particularly appropriate to appreciate the problematic history of Ireland’s own developmental past.

Notes

1. The above conversation was recorded during an interview/tour in 1995.
2. I would like to thank Ms. Siobhán Kerr, LSB College, for her assistance in translating passages from this work.
3. The State reaction was somewhat less measured. Minister O’Higgins claimed that the whole business was the work of secret societies run by undercover foreign agents!
4. See also Saris (1997).
5. In truth, Gaelic Ireland was not rural in the agricultural sense, but was pastoral and seasonally nomadic in parts. I also must question the

eyesight of an author who describes “roads as good as any man could want” (Saorstát Éireann 1932:123).

6. See *Limerick Chronicle* 1929; and *The Irish Times* 1929.

7. For a full critique of Anderson’s approach see Chatterjee (1995:404-406).

8. On March 19, 1925, *The Irish Times* ran a full page article with drawings and maps explaining the goals and progress on the Shannon.

9. One such model – cast in solid silver – is kept on display at the Electricity Supply Board Head Quarters in Dublin.

10. See Peace (1989:89-111).

11. I note in passing that the idea of Ireland’s comparison with a “tiger” economy formed the theme of a recent Central Bank Conference held in Dublin titled “The Celtic Tiger in the Global Jungle.” However, for a more corpulent explication of Ireland’s feline commercial qualities it is necessary to refer to Ruane (February 10 1997:15-16).

74 IRISH JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY 3 1998

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