

Creating Contemporary Photography in a Traditional Landscape: walking through representations in the Irish landscape

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The island of Ireland is a place whose representations have run far wilder than the island is itself. The country was under colonial rule when photography was invented, and in this paper, I am going to discuss how the defining representations of the Irish landscape were formed during this period from a romantic, picturesque tourist gaze. Since then, Ireland has become famous for the greenness of its hills and the wildness of its countryside. I am going to examine how this imagined place has impacted how the landscape is seen, experienced, and continually represented.

In Ireland, there are 42 National Waymarked Trails. These are long-distance hiking trails that can be anything from 30 to 210km long. Combined, these trails traverse about 4,000km across various parts of the country. No one has ever walked them all. On a fairly dry Monday morning on the 17th April 2017, I set out to try and walk every single one. The process was fairly simple we walk a trail, get to the end, and start the next one. What really inspired me to start this project was this longing for a sense of place or connection to the Irish landscape. From the start of the project I decided to document the process of walking, of traveling between trails, of experiencing my homeland and create work that would reflect the varying experiences while undertaking this project. After walking about 3,000km, in October 2018 I decided that this was a project that I wanted to develop to its full potential in regards to both my artistic practice and the depth of my academic research. This project has become a practice-led master by research that I am currently pursuing at the Institute of Art, Design & Technology (IADT) Dun Laoghaire, in Dublin, Ireland.

The working title of my research is On Foot: Photography, Cultural Landscape and Ireland's Waymarked Trails. This title can be broken down and used as a way

of illustrating a number of the aspects of the research I am conducting; On foot referring to the act of walking, looking at how walking as an action has evolved to our current psychological understanding of it, and how walking then relates to a creative practice; Photography as my mode of representation and an artistic expression, and the methodologies that have to be considered when conducting practice-led/fieldwork driven research; the concept of a Cultural Landscape, and which impacts and informs work created in a specific location through historical and current representations of a place, incorporating research within the field of imaginative geographies; and Ireland's Waymarked Trails, being the literal place that all of these methods and concepts are implemented, which through my research I aim to examine what information exists about these specific trails, and how I can contribute to that knowledge.¹

In this paper I am drawing upon the beginnings of this research, examining how the landscape of Ireland has been represented in the past and examining how these representations have affected present-day experiences and representation of landscape in Ireland.

Ireland Imagined

"It has often been claimed that if Ireland had never existed, it would have had to have been invented. That the island of Ireland does exist as a geographical place, however, has not prevented generations of photographers from framing their pictorial representations of the island to form the imaginary image that existed for them in their mind's eye before they experienced it in reality".²

The above quotes are the opening lines to Dr. Justin

Carville's book, *Photography and Ireland*. In this book, Carville examines the multi-faceted aspects of Ireland's photographic history, creating a book that both chronicles the lesser-known photographic histories of the island, but also delves into the multiple geographical imaginings of the country/landscape which have led to the current picturesque views of wild, empty landscapes that are known globally today.

I open this section of the paper with the above quote as I believe it to be the most distilled foundation for the history of Ireland's representation which highlights how it is impossible to discuss Ireland's representations without using the term imagined. Carville dedicates the opening chapter to *Geographical Imaginings*, informing the reader that the tensions between real and imaginary have "been identified as the difference between the alien eye of the colonial or foreign photojournalist, and the indigenous gaze of the native Irish photographer".³ To unpack and develop this quote, I am going to use the work of Eamonn Slater.

Slater's text *Contested Terrain: Differing Interpretations of Co. Wicklow's Landscape*⁴ is an article that investigates the different ways the Irish landscape can be seen; how these viewpoints can be read and represent the terrain differently; and how these ways of seeing either create a sense of detachment or attachment to the landscape. Similar to Carville, Slater argues that "the type of romantic tourism that has emerged in Ireland since the 1800s is more determined by the perceptions of the visiting tourists than by the reality perceived".⁵ Here again is the comparison of the imagined and the real. To develop this argument, he analyses the work of Mr. & Mrs. S.C. Hall, who in the 1800s were proba-

1. I would like to say thank you to my supervisors Dr. Mark Curran and Dr. Justin Carville for helping me further this research.

2. Carville, J. (2011). *Photography and Ireland*. London: Reaction Books

3. Ibid 9.

4. Slater, E. (1993). *Contested Terrain: Differing Interpretations of Co. Wicklow's Landscape*. In *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 3, 23–55.

5. Ibid 23.

bly the most famous travelogue writers to visit Ireland.⁶ The Halls' spent their time in Ireland in county Wicklow, an area that is colloquially known as the garden county of Ireland. It is a mountainous region very close to Dublin that in the 1800s contained many large estates held by the landlord class. The landlord class in Ireland was almost exclusively from the United Kingdom, who were the ruling colonial power in Ireland. In the extracts Slater focuses on from the Halls' text, they describe the landscape as having a "wild grandeur, healthful and refreshing," with first their gaze landing on the "bleak mountains", then sweeping down into the "rich and fertile valleys" and along "the most romantic rivers" that carved its way through the wooded landscape.⁷

As the reader follows their words down the page it can be assumed that the reader has been placed at a high vantage point, looking out at the landscape. This height creates distance from the landscape being viewed as if the reader is standing back to look at a painting. Slater goes into a deep analysis of comparing the writing techniques and descriptive style of the Halls' text to that of Roman landscape painters, showing how the way that the reader is taught how to view the landscape is based on a Claudian compositional structure.

Based on the time period that Mr. and Mrs. Hall were visiting Wicklow, this was not an uncommon practice. As Rebecca Solnit explains in her book *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, the landed estates of this time were going through a period of making "nature itself cultural".⁸ As the gardens lost their formality, this new 'landscape garden' was a cultivated space "that need no longer

produce anything more than mental, physical, and social stimulation".⁹ These views were made possible because of the large hunting parks that surrounded the estate houses, which had acted as a screen between the leisure classes and the land worked for agriculture and lived on by the poor native tenants.

As the Halls' traveled to these picturesque locations and gazed upon specific aspects of the landscape, they were choosing what aspects of Ireland would become the world wide representations of that place. The contrasting dualism of their descriptions; the beautifully crafted, fertile lowlands, and the sublime wildness of the bleak mountains were used to balance the scene in front of them, enabling the viewer to move beyond passive viewing of the vista, to an active reconstruction of the landscape within their imagination, in accordance to the principles of the picturesque. Slater reasons that the consequences of mentally composing the landscape to fit within the viewer's definition of picturesque results in "objects on the actual landscape" being "manipulated into new relations with each other" so as the landscape could be made to fit within the prescribed visual standards.¹⁰ When something does not fit within the composition it is seen to ruin the rest of the 'picture'. The example the Slater uses from the Halls' text regards a small moss house in a short valley that, in the eyes of the Halls, disrupted what they otherwise saw as an empty, peaceful landscape. According to Slater:

"The destruction of the moss-house is a mere consequence of the decision to redesign the landscape from within the framework of the picturesque. With this in

6. Hall, Mr & Mrs. S.-C. (1835). The work Slater is referencing being: *S.C. Hand-Books for Ireland: Dublin and Wicklow*. London: Dean and Son

7. Slater 1993, Ibid 26

8. Solnit, R. (2014). *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. London: Granta.

9. Ibid 87. This transformation was aided by inventions such as the "ha-ha", which was a small walkway sunk into the ground so that servants could cross through the gardens without interrupting the view across them, as well as acting as an invisible barrier to the outside world.

10. Slater 1993, Ibid 29. A consequence of this is that objects within the landscape are then determined important (or not) by their ability to fit into the picturesque standards of matching beautiful and sublime, which can change how someone views certain things to have new, unrelated meanings to the object's actual function.

mind, it can be argued that the picturesque framework is not interested in how the picturesque came into being [...] but only in the appearance of the final product - the picture[esque]”.¹¹

Within Ireland, a picturesque landscape dissolved into representations that excluded any trace of activity or work that would impact the landscape.¹² What causes this to shape so much of the landscape, is the evolution of walking that was also underway at this moment. Those who were judging the landscape within these constrictions were now also moving through the landscape, and so expecting the landscape to transform around them into the next iteration or vista. Solnit describes this transition as moving from the pictorial to the cinematic where gardens were “designed to be experienced in motion as a series of compositions dissolving into each other rather than as a static picture”.¹³

Solnit asserts that “such an influence is the Romantic taste for landscape, for wild places, for simplicity, for nature as an ideal”, that when these viewers transitioned to walkers, being able to look out at a landscape become “the consummation of a relationship with such places and an expression of the desire for simplicity, purity, solitude”.¹⁴ People were entering the landscape, but still requiring it to be a separate entity, still looking out at it, as opposed to being within it. To accommodate such viewing, larger and larger areas of the landscape needed to be “re-designed” to fit within the picturesque ideals of those looking upon them.

Solnit goes onto discussing other factors that allowed for this “naturalization” of the English garden. She pro-

11. Ibid 31.

12. Such things as livestock herding were excluded, as it only passed over the landscape and already carried idyllic connotations. In general, the perilous legal position of the Irish tenants on the land, and the meager size of their allotted areas “prevented them from painting the landscape on such a large, picturesque scale”. Ibid 32.

13. Solnit 2014, Ibid 90.

14. Ibid 85.

poses that there is an equation of the landscape garden with English liberty that the English elite who were “cultivating a taste for nature were politically positioning themselves and their social order as natural, in contrast to French artifice”.¹⁵ Applying this argument to the Irish landscape, the creation of a beautiful, naturally empty landscape, one that the English landlords were naturally part of, can be seen to vastly aid in this erasure of any evidence of the native Irish from having lived in their own terrain, creating this landscape that has been shaped and carved to look like a naturally empty place, sublimely bleak and poetically picturesque. This argument is further strengthened by Carville’s writing on the use of photography during the late nineteenth century in Galway as part of the Congested Districts Board,¹⁶ describing how the photography they made was ruled by the duality of poverty and the picturesque. In Congested Districts Board imagery “progress became collapsed into aestheticization” and “the clearing away of unsanitary housing [...] were projected as the visual modernization of the landscape”.¹⁷

Taking this understanding of how the romantic representations of Ireland were formed, I will now look at how this style of representation and land ownership affects how people interact with, and therefore represent the current Irish landscape.

Ireland Represented

The country of Ireland has only existed completely separately from the United Kingdom since 1937 (only becoming a republic in 1949). In this short lifetime, Ire-

15. Ibid 90.

16. Congested districts were places in the west of Ireland that could not sustain the population living from the land, and the Congested Districts Board was given the power to compulsory purchase land and rehouse people, along with many other abilities. Carville 2011, Ibid 72.

17. Ibid 72.

land has had to define its ownership over the land and landscapes. Ireland is predominantly privately owned¹⁸ meaning that there is a landowner for every landscape, and many legal questions in regards to access rights for those looking to walk the land. In my experience of walking through the Irish terrain, I have seen many gates brandishing bright red “no trespassing” signs. I believe that having been a colonized nation for several hundred years, there is now a deep-rooted relationship in Ireland between people and owning private land, and keeping it private.

Unlike many other European countries¹⁹ there is no official ‘right to roam’ in the countryside of Ireland, which then affects those who want to walk through a wild, ‘natural’ Irish landscape. I have found that the most accessible way for one to walk in a rural location off of roads, is along pre-made walking trails. In Ireland, three major trail bodies are recognized - the National Waymarked Trails Programme by Sport Ireland, the Slína Sláinte Scheme under the Irish Heart Foundation, and the outdoor recreational areas developed by Coillte.²⁰

My research and creative practice focuses on the National Waymarked Trails of Ireland, which is a network of medium to long-distance walking trails throughout the country. The first trail was established in 1982, and since then a trail network of over 40 trails (totaling to approximately 4,000km) has been developed across the country. The aims of these new walking routes were

both to attract increasing numbers of international travelers, but also to create ways for local people to interact with their environment.²¹

One of the seminal pieces of writing that look at Ireland and walking is *The Way that I Went* by Robert Lloyd Praeger.²² One of Ireland’s greatest field botanists, Praeger is famous for having walked 5,000 miles all around Ireland over the course of five years as he conducted the most comprehensive flora catalog of Ireland of that time. His book, *The Way that I Went*, focuses just as much on the landscape and the process of walking, as on the practical reason why he was out there botanizing. While I believe this to be an important text for my research (there are not many other accounts of a person walking a few thousand kilometers around Ireland), there is an important distinction to be made between Praeger’s experience with the wild landscape and the experiences I and many others have now within the modern Irish landscape: we are walking on a specific trail that has been built just to be walked.

A writer who has discussed this specific style of modern trail walking is Robert Moor in his book *On Trails*.²³ It was while Moor was walking the Appalachian Trail in the United States of America that he became fascinated with the idea of trails “Who created it? Why does it exist? Why, moreover, does any trail?”²⁴ According to Moor, the verb “to hike” (defined as “to walk for pleasure in open country”) only entered the English language

18. The state-owned wild spaces are maintained by National Parks and Wildlife Service, who look after the Republic of Ireland’s six national parks (the Wicklow Mountains National Park; the Burren National Park; Killarney National Park; Glenveagh National Park; Connemara National Park; Ballycroy National Park), as well as the state-owned nature reserves.

“National Parks in Ireland | National Parks & Wildlife Service.” (2011). In www.npws.ie/national-parks (Accessed: 14 June 2019).

19. In other European countries such as Scotland, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Austria, Czech Republic, and Switzerland, there is (to differing levels) a freedom or ‘right to roam’ that takes the form of general public access rights to walk in rural areas.

20. Coillte is Ireland’s state owned commercial forestry company.

21. *Setting New Directions: A Review Of National Waymarked Ways In Ireland.* (2010).8. National Trails Office, and Irish Sports Council. In

https://www.irishtrails.ie/Sport_Ireland_Trails/Publications/Trail_Development/Setting_New_Directions.pdf. (Accessed: 7 Jan 2019).

22. Praeger, L.-R. & Viney, M. (2014). *The Way That I Went*. Cork: The Collins Press

23. Moor, R. (2017). *On Trails*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks

24. *Ibid* 2.

in this form within the last two hundred years. Before this, it was usually used to refer to someone sneaking or make a tedious journey. This leads Moor asks the simple question: what is a hike? What are its defining characteristics? The requirements that Moor creates say that it must be; land outside of anyone's ownership; remote yet reachable; free of any dangers or threat, but also have minimal technology and few other tourists; be deemed "worth exploring" which can be interpreted as meaning that the landscape the trail brings you through must possess some sort of value such as a picturesque aesthetic.²⁵ When listed as such, these requirements appear contradictory. Moor's view is simple, writing that:

"The modern hiking trail is an uncanny thing. We hikers generally assume it is an ancient, earthborn creation - as old as dirt. But, in truth, hiking was invented by nature-starved urbanites in the last three hundred years, and trails have sprouted new shape to fulfill this hunger".²⁶

While Moor's discussion of trails is unique, I believe that hiking trails are an evolution, and the current incarnation of a walking trail can be seen in the previous trails through the picturesque. As discussed earlier in this paper, through the development of the picturesque landscape, trails were designed purely to bring the walker through a beautiful landscape. Solnit credits this style of trail development as one of "the great English contributions to Western culture".²⁷ I argue that there

is a clear connection between this picturesque gazing, where the subject is separated from the environment and looking onto it, and how many people engage with the landscape today in Ireland. In recent years, 80% of Ireland's population increase has been to urban areas.²⁸ As our population shifts to urban centers, people lose the understanding that previous generations may have had with the land. There reaches a point where someone interacts with representations of a place more than with the place itself. In this way, I believe that people have become abstracted from the land not only no longer having lived experiences within the landscape, but also not knowing how to interact with the landscape.

In the Guardian's recent article Crisis in our National Parks: how tourists are loving nature to death,²⁹ they discuss how Americans are flooding to the National Parks and landmarks to experience a specific picturesque moment, take a photo (of the landscape or themselves), which they can then post on social media and all towards building the specific visualization of the landscape and their interaction with it that they want to share with the world. The elitism that existed when the Halls' were composing their exact landscapes can still be seen today, as people perpetuate what has become the socially accepted and expected representations of a landscape on social media platforms such as Instagram. However, as these picturesque representations of landscapes become popular on social media plat-

25. Ibid 204.

26. Ibid 203.

27. Solnit 2014, Ibid 88.

28. "Population Distribution - CSO - Central Statistics Office." www.cso.ie, Central Statistics Office of Ireland, 11 July 2018. In www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp2tc/cp2pdm/pd/. (Accessed: 14 June 2019).

29. Simmonds, C., et al. "Crisis in Our National Parks: How Tourists Are Loving Nature to Death." *The Guardian*, The Guardian, 20 Nov. 2018. In www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/nov/20/national-parks-america-overcrowding-crisis-tourism-visitation-solutions (Accessed: 1 April 2019).

forms, people descend to these locations en masse, without necessarily understanding how their interaction impacts the area.

This article tells a cautionary tale; as visitor numbers go from a couple thousand a year to five thousand per day, the human impact is unavoidable. As people queue to take their variation of the same picture, each post further cements the imagined geography that is being built within the social media landscape, ultimately clashing with the reality of physical geography. In the Guardian article, it reports that:

“In May 2018, a Phoenix man fell to his death when he slipped off the cliff edge. In 2010, a Greek tourist died when a rock underneath him gave way, police said, as he took photos. Like the recent death of a couple taking photographs in Yosemite, the incidents have raised troubling questions about what happens when nature goes viral”.³⁰

Such fatal accidents have also occurred in Ireland, with tourists falling from the Cliffs of Moher in Co. Clare.³¹ The outdoor ethics organization Leave No Trace has called upon people to avoid geo-tagging where they take their photos in a hope to lessen overcrowding and possibly the destruction of that wild space.

This commodification and destruction of the landscape can be seen represented in the work of Seán Hillen and his piece *Irelantis*. This work collages of a collection of picturesque postcards by John Hinde, with Carville describing the fantastical scenes as extending “the imaginary possibilities of the island of Ireland so

that it began to collapse in on itself”.³² This work can be seen as the destruction and post-modernizing of a landscape that had yet to reach modernity. Carville then references Fintan O’Toole’s observations on *Irelantis*, who describes it as “a cultural space that has gone in the blink of an eye, from being defiantly closed to being completely porous to whatever dream is floating by out there in the media ether ... this Ireland is [...] everywhere and nowhere”.³³ Hillen’s transformed landscapes still hold aspects and references of the original postcards excessive twee - however, the work still offers insight into how contemporary Ireland projects an image of itself. The *Irelantis* photomontages highlight the complex amalgamation of the photographic realities and fictions, building an imaginative geography that could also be viewed as a distant non-place; a landscape to travel through or past, but not exist within.

It is possible to compare this to the introduction of Valérie Morisson article, *A People’s Sense of Belonging: Dislocation in Post Celtic Tiger Art*.³⁴ Morisson’s article brings together the ideas of sense of place, landscape, and how a place is viewed by its native people. Morisson opens the article highlighting the dominance landscape art has received within not only Irish art but also representations of Ireland in the international art community, reiterating the power of the imagined Irish landscapes.³⁵ She goes on to state that whether representations of the Irish landscape are poetic or political, they “have sharpened people’s sense of belonging and therefore constructed imaginings of Ireland as Nation

30. Ibid.

31. Flynn, P. & Gallagher, C. “Student Who Died at the Cliffs of Moher Has Been Identified.” *The Irish Times*, *The Irish Times*, 6 Jan. 2019. In www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/student-who-died-at-the-cliffs-of-moher-has-been-identified-1.3749146 (Accessed: 14 June 2019).

32. Carville 2011, Ibid 10.

33. Ibid 12.

34. Morisson, V. (2008). *A People’s Sense of Belonging: Dislocation in Post Celtic Tiger Art*. *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 37 (1/2), 178–207.

35. “Since the very first reported moments of the existence of the country, Ireland has constituted a landscape. It doesn’t appear as a land, but as a place artistically represented” Ibid 179.

Quoting Guibert, Pascale. “This is Not Really an Island: L’Irlande ‘ré-inventée’ par sespaysagespoétiques.” in *Réinventer l’Irlande*, edited by Nicole Ollier, 121–30. *Maison des Sciences de l’Homme d’Aquitaine*, 2001.

[...] they have contributed to the elaboration of an ethnoscape that has remained firmly etched in collective memory".³⁶ However as our world develops into a globalized connection and spreading of culture, Morisson states that experiencing Irishness is no longer tied to the island of Ireland, and instead there can exist a disjunction between a physical place and a sense of identity.

At the time of writing this paper, I have walked 40 of the 42 National Waymarked Trails of Ireland. The end is in sight. Have I found an Irishness within myself that I had not existed before? Has the weather molded me to the landscape with its gentle but relentless rain?

When I reflect on the images I made while walking I have yet to compile a selection that expresses the Irish landscape in a way I feel is correct. Following these trails, I have experienced the picturesque, sublime beauty that they are sculpted to show me. I have also walked long sections on featureless roads when a trail has needed to be rerouted as it has lost the permission of a landowner to cross their fields. Because of these access rights I have experienced

firsthand how private and closed off Ireland can feel to someone walking. I have walked into places where the local people did not know there was a trail that passed through their town and often didn't know why I would want to walk there. When I do find myself in a popular area, the crowds of people are a startling experience. Sitting at the Cliffs of Moher in Co. Clare, I watched the steady arrival and departure of large tour companies. Those who disembark have half an hour to experience this land and then leave again. Their experience was not of one continuous, changing landscape, but a fragmented kaleidoscope of each popular location. In these moments I connect with Hillen's collaged, conflicting representations of Ireland. If we go back once more to Justin Carville's opening piece, it is now clear how even though "the island of Ireland does exist as a geographical place", its existence has been unable to prevent "generations of photographers from framing their pictorial representations of the island to form the imaginary image that existed for them in their mind's eye before they experienced it in reality".³⁷

36. Morisson 2008, Ibid 180.

37. Carville 2011, Ibid 7.

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