THE SCATTERING: A FAMILY HISTORY FOR A FLOATING WORLD

In April 2018 my father died suddenly, ten days before his 72nd birthday. Within a week we had decided that we would scatter his ashes on Scattery – the island in the mouth of the Shannon estuary in west Clare where his mother, Bridget Brennan, had been born and raised.

She had left Scattery in 1940, aged 25, to work in England. But she returned twelve years later with her husband, a Dubliner, and my father, Michael, then five. They settled in Cappa, a coastal village looking on to the island. The island now became part of my father's life. He could see it clearly from the field at the back of their hovel. Even in the thick morning mists that sprang from the warmish surface of the Shannon on cold days, the vertical markers of its tenth-century round tower and the lighthouse at its southern tongue poked out. At night he could trace the light's beam circling the estuary and just pick out the smaller lights from the islanders' cottages. Every Christmas, for twelve nights, the island glowed with fire and candlelight.[1]

For my father the island meant freedom. Every July, on the day school broke up, he would be ferried over to stay there for the whole summer, returning just once a week, weather and tides permitting, for Sunday mass. Supposedly he was there to help on the Brennan smallholding at harvest time. But mostly he was indulged by his many aunts and uncles – my grandmother being the eldest of twelve. Much of the time he wandered alone across the island, a near-treeless landscape covered in coarse grass, bracken and brambles, encircled by a shingle

beach. From its highest point, the *Ard na nAingeal* or Angel's Height, he could view the Shannon for miles around, with Clare to one side and Kerry to the other. To the west, between steep headlands, lay three thousand miles of ocean.

Family history has often been looked at askance by academic historians, as 'archival comfort food', a temptation to 'ancestor worship', 'amorphous pity' or the 'misty-eyed and syrupy'.[2] But it can be a useful 'trespasser', in Alison Light's words – a way of thinking about the past in which the usual scholarly demarcations of period, place and theme dissolve. Ancestry websites and online censuses can call up whole lives in an instant. Instead of 'slowly accumulating a chronology like moss', as Light puts it, family historians are 'speed freaks, accelerating wildly across the generations, cutting a swath through time'.[3] In these sweeping chronologies we watch people be born, grow up, marry, raise children, work and die. A life seems shockingly short, at once cussedly particular and clarifyingly archetypal.

To see a human life whole, from first to last breath, is to see both the specific slog of getting through it, and the ways in which that life is impelled, often dramatically and chaotically, by wider forces. A single life seems to map clearly on to larger trends and patterns; yet it also feels unique and untranslatable, a corrective to historical simplification. Born in 1946, my father lived a typical baby boomer life, one in which the bonds of place, tradition and faith were loosened by the mobility, opportunity and secular liberalism of the postwar years. In other ways his story was not typical at all, as no one's is.

THE DECLINE OF THE WEST

The Scattery islanders arrived there from the tiny fishing village of Kilbaha in Clare's far west. In 1843 a group of Kilbaha fishermen and river pilots rescued a shipwrecked vessel, the Windsor Castle, and towed it to Carrigaholt harbour. They earned a small fortune in salvage from the insurers: £4714, 15s., which worked out at between £110 and £163 each.[4] With their share of the money, six families – Scanlan, McMahon, Melican, Griffin, Hanrahan and Brennan – leased land on Scattery and transformed themselves from landless peasants into smallholders.

This deal probably saved their lives. They moved to Scattery just before the famine that devastated Clare. Thousands died of typhus, dysentery and malnutrition, their bodies slung in open pits. On the island the six families had other sources of food than the potato in the seas around, and other sources of income as sailors and river pilots. Almost uniquely for the west of Ireland, Scattery's population grew in the famine years. On the evidence of the earliest inscription in the graveyard (Mary Scanlan, who died aged 18 in 1861), the island suffered no deaths during the famine. At its peak, in the 1881 census, it was home to 141 people: the size of an ancient tribe.[5] Ireland's population, meanwhile, declined in the century and a quarter after the famine, especially in the west. Scattery's round tower would have been one of the last sights for many of those who left, via Limerick, for America.

As David Gange argues, the famine years accelerated the long marginalization of 'the frayed Atlantic Edge'.[6] Recently historians have sought to redress the underestimation of the significance of coasts in the history of Britain and Ireland.[7] Nature and place writing by Philip Marsden, Madeleine Bunting, Robert Macfarlane, Kathleen Jamie, Kenneth White, Tim Robinson and others has continued the same project of recuperating our Atlanticist and archipelagic past.

Scattery was one of many islands on the Atlantic coasts of Britain and Ireland to be settled between *c.* 500 and 1000 by the religious pilgrims known as *peregrini*. It holds the ruins of a monastic centre founded by Saint Senan, from the nearby town of Kilrush, in *c.* 535. There were seven churches, of which the ruins of five remain, four oratories and the round tower, which would have sounded the call to prayer. During this period, Britain and Ireland's Atlantic edges supported the most advanced scholarly culture in Europe, in a movement of intellectual life away from urban centres and towards the coasts.[8]

Enlightenment thought, and the growth capitalism of the eighteenth century onwards, rewrote this era as 'the dark ages'. The coastlines were dismissed as a Celtic fringe, marginal and backward. Early maps of Ireland focused on coasts and rivers, the source of livelihoods and travel links, and left inland spaces relatively blank. The Irish Ordnance Survey, established in 1824 after the 1800 Act of Union, flipped this geography inside out. Maps now focused on the interior as an aid to standardizing taxation and planning roads and railways, which would lead to Dublin and ultimately to London.[9]

By the time my father arrived on Scattery for his first summer in 1952, the islands of Ireland were in irreversible decline. Scattery's population had fallen to 42.[10] A key moment came when the school closed, in 1948. The last teacher there, Nora Culligan, had a salary based on the number of pupils, and the number kept falling. That autumn, only seven children were due to enrol. She had no option but to resign, and the school closed.[11] When an island can no longer sustain a school, a further exodus is inevitable. This must have been why my grandparents settled in Cappa, not on Scattery, in 1952: my father had to be educated at the Christian Brothers' School in Kilrush.

The decline of the western islands occurred alongside their enshrining in the mythology of the new republic. The political leaders who founded the Free State in 1922 idealized these islands as the indigenous, essential Ireland. One of Michael Collins's speeches included a paean to Achill island, off Mayo, as 'a glimpse of what Ireland may become again', even though there is no evidence he ever went there.[12] The Blasket and Aran islands were the most romanticized, aided by Robert Flaherty's film *Man of Aran* (1934) and many memoirs and accounts of Blasket island life, such as Tomás Ó Criomhthain's *The Islandman* (1929) and Peig Sayers's *Peig* (1936).

Scattery, less remote and non-Irish speaking, was not so soaked in this mythology. But Éamon de Valera, who dominated Irish politics from the 1930s to the 1950s, had long associations with Clare, having been elected MP for East Clare in 1917 just after being released from prison for his role in the Easter Rising. As Taoiseach he visited Scattery in July

1947. Accompanied by members of the Kilrush Fianna Fáil Cumann, he attended a lecture in the school on Saint Senan and Scattery.[13] There is a photograph of him standing in front of one of the houses with the Scanlans, towering over them all at six foot one, a Gulliver in Lilliput.[14] In a St Patrick's Day broadcast of 1943, he had spoken of his ideal nation, of a people 'satisfied with frugal comfort [who] devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit'. This land, 'bright with cosy homesteads', would be filled with 'the romping of sturdy children' and 'the laughter of happy maidens'.[15] The island must have seemed to him like this dream made real.

Scattery offered, even by the standards of the west of Ireland in the 1950s, a pre-modern, subsistence life. There was no farm machinery at all. The men harvested the wheat, oats and hay with a huge scythe, sharpened with a portable whetstone that the mower stuck to his belt. On the beaches the women gathered limpets and *sleabhcán*, a cabbage-like seaweed which, when simmered in water for a week at the back of the range, became more or less edible. *Carraigín* moss was scraped off the rocks and, mixed with milk and sugar, eaten as an after-dinner sweet.

The sole form of transport was the currach: a small rowing boat of Mesolithic origin, used along the western seaboard from Kerry to Donegal, which Richard Mac Cullagh calls 'the currach coast'.[16] The currach was made of canvas, stretched over a wicker frame shaped like a ribcage, no joinery required, and sealed with tar. Any rents in the canvas could be quickly patched up with hot pitch. On Scattery these boats were beached upside down on stands on the beach. Even the larger, five-man currach

common on Scattery was light enough to be shouldered by two and walked into the water.

The currach was rowed by both men and women. The Scattery women were thought to be the best currach rowers in the country; they had to be, because the men were so often at sea. My grandmother, five foot nothing, could handle a currach as well as any of her brothers. The currach was how you got to Kilrush for mass and to the shops to buy tea, sugar or – a rare luxury – cornflakes. It was also how you transported the island cattle to Kilrush market. That perilous trip involved tying the cow to the stern and pulling hard for the mainland while it paddled for dear life at the back of the boat and someone held its head above water.

This self-sufficient life meant that Scattery dwellers were, like many islanders, cussed about centralized authority. In their currachs they undertook illegal fishing for salmon, by laying nets on the island's Atlantic side, out of sight of the shore. Bailiffs would periodically row out, impound the nets and prosecute the poachers. Still, it was worth the risk. The bailiffs had a lot of the Shannon to cover and the rewards for foiling them were rich: fresh salmon for tea, and cash from selling it (no questions asked) to the prosperous houses in Kilrush, including the presbytery.

In other ways Scattery was more cosmopolitan than the mainland. Most Scattery men went off to sea when young. My great-grandfather, Jack Brennan, had a captain's ticket and made a good living before the Second World War sailing grain clippers from Europe to Australia, and skippering the luxury yachts of rich Irish families like the Guinnesses. Seven of Jack's eight sons went to sea as soon as a boat would take

them. Antwerp, the port where the Scattery sailors were engaged, meant more to them than any Irish town. They would return from Liverpool, Rotterdam or Hamburg with some glittering symbol of the wider world: a Victrola wind-up gramophone, a bracelet for a sweetheart or, once, a gold-plated watch – the first timepiece to arrive on the island.

The islanders were hungry for the new and for the world beyond, with no time for de Valera's ruralist fantasies. The main entertainment was the wireless – used frugally, because the island had no electricity and batteries were expensive. The big moment for my father and other younger islanders was 11pm on Sunday night, when Radio Luxembourg broadcast the Top Twenty, and you might hear Elvis Presley, the Everly Brothers or Buddy Holly. Radio Luxembourg's 208 signal could be received in Ireland only after dark and then only erratically, when it was able to strike the ionosphere and bounce back to earth. But still it was vastly preferred to Radio Éireann, broadcasting from Athlone, with its interminable plays of John McCormack's 'The Star of the County Down', Brendan O'Dowda's 'Are you Right There Michael' and the Kilfenora Céilí Band's jigs and reels. Long stretches of Radio Éireann were in Irish, not a word of which the islanders spoke.

As moderns, Scattery islanders also had little interest in the island's history. As a gateway into the Shannon, the island had been strategically crucial, an Irish Rock of Gibraltar. In 816, and again in 835, Vikings invaded, plundering the monastery and massacring monks. In 977 the Irish king Brian Boru drove the Danes out, killing the Viking king of Limerick, Ivar, inside a Scattery church. Hundreds of people were

slaughtered in other invasions of the island. When digging the fields, the islanders would often come across bones and skulls, petrified into stones, from the butchery of a thousand years earlier. The strong river current's erosion of land on the island's eastern side also exposed the stratum of earth, six feet from the surface, that held bits of bones.[17] The islanders were blasé about these remains, throwing them aside as if they were rocks.

Only in one respect were the islanders more traditional than mainlanders: they were markedly more religious. The Angelus was recited daily at noon in the fields. Last thing at night, the Brennans kneeled in front of the house's only decoration, a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and said the rosary. When my grandmother was dying in a Ludlow care home in 2010, she recited the rosary for days under her breath, along with the prayers she had been taught by the Sisters of Mercy as a little girl.

As penance the islanders would 'do the round': walk the island's entire pebbled circumference barefoot. According to a 1954 account, this was done five times on a Thursday, the fifth day of the week.[18] They would stop at seven prayer stones and crawl on their knees on the pebbles, saying prayers. Water from Saint Senan's well, as well as being used for drinking and washing, was meant to cure arthritis and warts. The entrance to each house had a holy water font, and every currach carried a bottle of holy water tied to its bow and a stone from Saint Senan's grave as protection against drowning. The smaller stones around his grave were worn as amulets and put in the drinking water to kill bugs.

Religion mingled with superstition. Saint Senan had vowed that no woman should ever set foot on the island, and even in the 1950s no woman dared cross the iron bar that guarded Senan's tomb, on pain of becoming barren or catching a deadly disease. When my father was thrown from a donkey and broke his collarbone, his aunt Nannie's first response was to rush to fetch a crucifix to lay on it. Luckily my grandfather was around and insisted that he be taken to a doctor on the mainland.

My father spent enough time on the island to know that it could be cold and hard. There was no lying low there, no escape from one's family or neighbours. The families lived in six houses, strung out on 'the street' along the sheltered east of the island, facing Kilrush creek. These were the traditional squat Irish homesteads described in Patrick Kavanagh's *The Green Fool*: 'wedge-shaped, to trick the western winds'.[19] They were single-storeyed, roofed with thatch and with one main room where all life was led. The room was always dark: small windows protected the house from storms. When these came, there was little to do but hunker down together, and even in fine weather you could only walk round the island in circles. Islanders had to tread gently and leave much unsaid. The island could feel like a prison with the sea as jailor, its lock and key being the tides and the wind. The weather could trap you on Scattery for weeks.

By the 1950s my great-grandfather, Jack Brennan, ruled over the household as a barely sane tyrant. In 1945 his wife had died, and he took to drink, becoming prone to incoherent ravings and volcanic bursts of temper. The effects of grief and alcohol would have been mixed with rage

at his failing powers and the declining hold he had over his grown-up children even as he continued to bully them.

In later life, like many Scattery men, he worked as a Shannon river pilot. The pilots guided ships upstream, through fierce tides and deadly shoals, to Limerick, where the river finally stops being tidal. Around Scattery especially there are treacherous overfalls and great swells rolling in from the Atlantic. On entering the estuary, a ship would anchor in the deep water of 'Scattery roads' and await a pilot in a currach. As a river pilot my great-grandfather was a well-known and charismatic local figure, known as 'giant Jack', even though his captain's ticket reveals him to be five foot eight (above average for west Clare then, but no giant).[20] By the 1950s he was often drunk on the job. After three accidents, where he grounded vessels on the shoals, he lost his licence. It was a mark of his reputation that he only lost it in 1952, aged 66, on the third grounding. After that he had no role. He descended into a violent dementia and in 1958 was committed to Ennis asylum.

That summer, when my father was twelve, was the happiest he spent on Scattery and, unbeknown to him, the last. For the first time he was on the island without suffering his grandfather's sulphurous presence. The dark note was that his aunt Nannie, to whom he was very close, had a nervous breakdown. By now her three sisters had all left to marry, and life as the only woman looking after the home must have been unendurable. She followed her father into Ennis asylum. My father's whole family moved to the island that summer, as my grandmother took over running the home.

In Hugh Brody's *Inishkillane*, based on fieldwork in an unnamed parish in west Clare in the 1960s, he notes that the gendered division of labour lay 'in the distinction between the seasonal and the continuous'. Women did all-year-round tasks such as caring for children, cleaning and milking the cows; men did seasonal work such as digging turf and planting crops.[21] So for women the work was relentless, while in the winter the men had more of a rest. The Brennan men were often away at sea and all my great uncles bar one also worked on lighthouses or lightships. All alternated time away with long spells working on the farm. But the women worked hardest. As well as mucking in with farm work, they did all the chores, including cooking and washing, without running water.

Brody was one of several anthropologists in the 1960s and 1970s who undertook fieldwork in these remote and depleted communities of the west. They studied the psychological effects of living in an economically depressed and virtually theocratic state. The church's morality invaded all areas of daily life. Divorce was prohibited and contraception illegal, even on prescription. Single mothers and deserted wives were denied welfare payments. Women abused by their husbands had little recourse in law. During difficult births the woman's pelvic bone was broken, in the belief that Caesarean section was an unnatural avoidance of the pain of childbirth.

In *Inis Beag: Isle of Ireland* (actually Inisheer, the smallest of the Aran islands), John Messenger anatomized the repressive society produced by this mix of poverty and puritanism, which led to drinking, alcohol-fuelled fights and depression.[22] Brody thought that this sense of

defeat had deepened as the 1950s went on, as emigrés returned with stories of urban life, and the greater availability of cinema and glossy magazines made people aware of a better life elsewhere.[23] Nancy Scheper-Hughes, conducting fieldwork in the village of 'Ballybran' (An Clochán) on the Dingle peninsula in the mid-1970s, noted the social separation of the genders and the high incidence of mental illness. She called it a schizophrenic culture in its 'translation of social ills into private troubles'.[24]

On Scattery these feelings would have been aggravated by the even steeper decline of island life. Light keepers and river pilots were less essential in the age of radar, and there were fewer ships in the age of air freight and road haulage. In 1951 the pilot's station moved to Cappa and in 1953 a motorized pilot boat replaced the currachs. Several of the island's young men had been lost at sea, drowned on unseaworthy ships or on boats torpedoed in the war. My great uncle Felix drowned in 1940, aged 22. The classic sailor who couldn't swim, he fell overboard in Limerick harbour while closing the cattle hatches. His brother Ged drowned in 1947, aged 19, on his first voyage. His wooden schooner capsized in rough seas off the Isle of Man and broke up. He clung to a bit of the wheel deck with his skipper for four hours, slipping away half an hour before a Manx steamer picked the skipper up alive.

Jack Brennan died in October 1958, aged 72. The whole of Kilrush and Cappa closed down for his funeral and a huge crowd walked behind the cortège for a mile and a half from Saint Senan's Church to Cappa pier, from where the coffin was rowed to the island by currach. An armada of

currachs, full of hundreds of mourners, followed behind. Jack is the last Brennan to be buried on Scattery.

EXILE AND RETURN

Early next summer, my father learned that they were to return to England. His father, working away in Smethwick, had, after years on a waiting list, been assigned a council flat. Within weeks they had packed up, although their few sticks of furniture were not worth the price of shipping. All they took with them were their clothes. My father left, with his mother and younger brother and sister, on the last day of June 1959. His uncle Stephen, captain of the Kish lightship moored in Dublin harbour, was returning there and so they went to Limerick by the luxurious means of his brand-new Ford Prefect. My father was given a shilling as a going-away present. He spent it, in the Limerick branch of Woolworth's while they waited for the train to Dublin, on the first book he ever owned: Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island.*

The ship left Dublin's North Wall late that night. It was also a cattle boat, the export of cattle being as key to the Irish economy in the 1950s as the export of people. My father later recalled that the human and animal cargo were treated about the same. They were part of the Mailboat generation, named after the other common way of leaving Ireland: on the British Railways Irish Mailboat embarking from Dun Laoghaire. In the 1950s about 40,000 Irish people a year emigrated, mainly from the

poorest rural areas.[25] By 1961 nearly a sixth of Ireland's population was living in Britain as part of the 'Irish Middle Nation'.[26]

My father's journey to England, hugely significant in his own life and the history of our family, was one of several hundred thousand such journeys in that decade. The huge numbers make migration feel, as John Berger has written, 'like an event in a dream dreamt by another'. Migrant journeys follow singular itineraries but create mass patterns, like desire lines trodden out by countless footsteps. The migrant seems to act autonomously but everything he does 'is determined by the needs of the dreamer's mind … The migrant's intentionality is permeated by historical necessities of which neither he nor anybody he meets is aware.'[27]

My father literally dreamed this event. As the coast of Ireland faded away into the gloaming, on one of the longest days of the most glorious summer of the century, he fell asleep. When he woke they were blearily debarking in pitch blackness at Holyhead – a name with great resonance to the Mailboat generation – and getting on a train. He slept again and woke at dawn as the train stopped at a station. A sign said *Wolverhampton*. They trundled through the Black Country – all redbrick terraces, giant furnaces, slag heaps and factories with galvanized iron roofs, not at all the country he had pictured from his reading of the *Beano*, cadged from school friends, or from the Ealing comedies he had seen at the Mars Cinema, Kilrush. As dawn broke, they reached Birmingham New Street.

Their new flat was a maisonette in a three-level block, on the top floor at the end. Only much later did my father realise that this was a mild

form of segregation: as bog Irish they had been put as far as possible from the neighbours. He spent the first day exploring his new home, dazzled by its luxury. Instead of a range with a turf fire there was an electric hob and oven, and a sink with taps. His father turned on the taps to demonstrate the marvel of hot running water. My father had never before seen an electric fire, or used a flush toilet, or taken a bath. The Smethwick shops were a miracle of plenty, full of exotic items such as Heinz Baked Beans, Birds Eye Fish Fingers, Fray Bentos pies and Ambrosia Creamed Rice. The whole family's health improved on the stodge of processed food and tinned fruit and veg. My auntie Maria, aged two, had been diagnosed with rickets shortly after their arrival. The combination of a better diet and the National Health Service soon cured her.

The new arrivals were fortunate in another respect. The anti-Irish prejudice in 1950s Smethwick was being overtaken by resentment at the next generation of immigrants from India and Pakistan, particularly Sikhs who had moved from the Punjab to work in the iron foundries. These foundries had flourished in the consumer boom of the 1950s, largely because of the demand for family cars.[28] By the early 1960s there were colour bars in Smethwick pubs and barber shops, and the pages of the *Smethwick Telephone* were full of anti-immigrant letters. The resentment of white residents centred on housing. At 24.7 people per acre, Smethwick was the second most densely populated borough in the UK after Salford. More than 4000 were on the council house waiting list.[29] Only one new flat in five went to people on this list; the rest rehoused

people cleared from slums.[30] In 1961 residents of a council-owned block on Price Street went on rent strike when a Pakistani family was housed there. This showed how lucky my grandfather had been in securing the sought-after Maisonette. Or perhaps how cunning, since he had fiddled the rules by not telling the council that the rest of his family was in Ireland.

In the 1964 general election, my father, aged 18, canvassed for Labour in Smethwick against the Conservative candidate Peter Griffiths. Griffiths was calling for a national ban on immigration by unskilled workers, and for immigrants who had been unemployed for six months to be sent back to their country of origin. His supporters adopted the slogan 'If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour', which appeared on unofficial leaflets that Griffiths refused to disown.[31] My father's support for the sitting Labour MP inspired a furious row with his father, who in common with many older Irish immigrants supported Griffiths. Griffiths went on to win what had been a safe Labour seat, defying the national swing.

Although he lost his seat eighteen months later, this was still an important moment in understandings of race and immigration in postwar Britain. At the height of Empire, British elites had advanced the idea that national identity went beyond the boundaries of Great Britain. A sense that all the Empire's subjects had a common identity lay behind Lord Palmerston's evocation of a Civis Britannicus Sum, Rudyard Kipling's idea of Britain as a world imperial state, John Robert Seeley's espousal of a 'greater Britain' in his *The Expansion of England* (1883), Joseph Chamberlain's dream of an imperial tariff union, much of Winston

Churchill's rhetoric, and the 1948 British Nationality Act, which led to a wave of immigration from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent.[32] But then, starting with the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, this notion of universal citizenship was eroded. The 1962 act drew a distinction between unskilled West Indian and Asian workers, who were no longer welcome, and unskilled Irish workers, who were, even though Ireland was no longer in the Commonwealth.[33]

My father profited from these racially-based notions of citizenship. He quickly learnt to lose the west Clare accent that was impenetrable to shopkeepers and schoolteachers. With his newly classless and placeless inflection, he became an invisible immigrant. He benefitted greatly from being a full citizen of the welfare state in those providential years of the postwar consensus. In Ireland, which did not have free secondary education until 1967, his education would have been curtailed at thirteen. On his arrival in England he had been put straight in a Smethwick secondary modern. He left it with just two O levels. But he had entered an age of free and expanding higher education, full employment and what was not yet called social mobility. In 1964 he won a place at Lancaster University, in its first cohort of 300 students. Three years later, he was one of only three students in that cohort to get a first-class degree, and went on to become an academic and writer. The middle-class, cosmopolitan life he lived for the next fifty years was contingent on a single journey he had made in the summer of 1959.

That same summer my father and his family left Cappa, all the Scattery families – except one – left the island. This followed the

conventional pattern of island depopulation: a slow decline over decades until, unable to face another winter, the last few leave. The Scattery tribe was simply too small to sustain itself and island life had become too hard. The older islanders settled in Kilrush and Cappa; the younger ones sailed to England.

Five years later, an army major and businessman from Meath, James Willson, bought the island for £20,000, the money being shared among the island families.[34] One family remained: 81-year-old Bridget McMahon and her children, Bobbi and Patty, employed to tend the lighthouse. Bobbi had been the island postman. He told the *Irish Times* that he had once handled letters from across the world but was now 'tempted to write letters to myself to keep me occupied'.[35] Kilrush town council had planned to buy the island for the community, funded by 80,000 five-shilling shares from the general public, and had received supportive letters from west Clare exiles in Britain and America. But the more recent Scattery islanders, the *Irish Times* reported, just wanted rid of it. 'About efforts to save the "sacred isle" for the nation,' it said, 'the ex-Scattery folk could not, in modern parlance, care less.'[36]

Just two years later, Willson was having second thoughts. He advertised the island for sale in the personal columns of the London *Times*: 'Historical island for sale in Shannon estuary, 170 acres, freehold, one mile offshore. Many old cottages, churches, ruins, &tc. Good quay, ample fresh water supply. Previously inhabited by several hundred people [*sic.*] now only by lighthouse keeper. Ideal for holiday development. One hour from Shannon Airport. Price, £30,000.'[37] Willson had hoped to

develop Scattery as a yachting marina and resort for the rich, with an airstrip. But the matched funding he hoped for from government never materialized. Only in the early 1970s did other islands in the west of Ireland begin to be marketed as holiday locations. In 1975 Willson finally sold Scattery at auction to a Dutch businessman who left it undeveloped for the next fifteen years.[38]

Patty and Bobbi McMahon left the island in October 1978, lighthouse attendants being redundant in the age of automation. Earlier that summer, the writer and broadcaster Donccha Ó Dúlaing made a programme about Scattery for RTÉ radio. He took three former islanders, Gerald Griffin, Michael Scanlan and my great uncle, John Brennan, back to the island. All sound wistful, and quietly angry that the island had been sold. 'It makes me very lonely to look at it and the state it's in,' Michael Scanlan says. John Brennan says that 'the island should have been kept by the island people … Now it is nobody's island.'[39]

The melancholic effect of returning would have been magnified by the very final way in which they departed in 1959, leaving everything on the island as it was. No one even came back to tend to the graves in the *Teampall na Marbh* (Church of the Dead), for that was Scattery tradition. Once the gravestone had been laid, a bottle of whiskey was broken over it and holy water sprinkled, releasing the dead person to heaven. The grave was never visited again. By 1978 the empty houses had suffered nearly twenty years of winter storms, salt air and cold desertion. Damp had attacked the walls, the roof thatch had sprung huge leaks, the ceiling timbers had been eaten away by wood lice and beetles, and the window

frames had rotted. The farms had become weedy and briar-ridden, the lanes had turned spongy with moss and the old school was windowless and roofless. Rabbits, introduced in the 1950s, had taken over. The island, abandoned so peremptorily and definitively, had become that most *unheimlich* of ruins: a ruin of the living.

The retreat was repeated elsewhere. In 1841, 34,219 people lived on 211 Irish islands. By 1961, 14,473 lived on 92 islands; and by 1991, 9,569 lived on 66 islands.[40] For the Scattery islanders, the technology that might have kept them there – telephones, electric light, boats with outboard motors – came a few years too late. Unlike in Scotland, there were few lobbyists calling for investment to stop the mass flight, leading eventually to the founding in 1965 of the Highlands and Islands Board.[41] Even with this support, Scattery islanders would have had no niche product to sell, like the malt whisky of Islay or the knitwear of the Aran islands. In Ferriter's words, 'those who supposedly embodied the traits of the Devaleran "ideal national type" made precious little profit from it'.[42] Only in the 1990s did Irish governments start to invest in keeping existing populations on the islands, with the establishment of a Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands.

The saddest voice in the RTÉ programme belongs to the teacher Nora Culligan, whom Ó Dúlaing spoke to on the Tarbert to Killimer ferry, looking over at the island from a distance. 'I was very lonely when I left,' she begins. She had arrived on the island from Knock in 1935, aged 26. 'I loved it at first sight,' she says, 'and I knew I'd find it very hard to leave it.' She notes that many mainlanders wished to be buried on the island,

because ‘they say that if you’re buried in Scattery, it’s the next place to heaven’. It was also believed that bodies buried at Shanakyle graveyard in Kilrush when the weather was too bad for the coffin to be rowed to Scattery would be miraculously removed there to speed their heavenward journey.

The Celtic pagan tradition believes in thin places, a term later adopted by Christians to describe holy sites like Iona, Lindisfarne and Scattery. Heaven and earth, according to this tradition, are just three feet apart, but in thin places even that distance dissolves. Somewhat similar to the Hindu *tirtha*, a thin place is a portal to the divine – a liminal space where the material and sacred share common ground. Here only the thinnest membrane divides the terrestrial from the spiritual and ‘a sense of something other lurks just behind the visible’.[43] George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community, described this small Hebridean island as a ‘thin place – only a tissue paper separating earth from heaven’.[44] The Scattery islanders, too, spoke of heaven as a real and proximate place – as real as an England, or a Dublin, that they had never seen. So it was a small leap to think that on the island the gap between heaven and earth could collapse to reveal a glimpse of the divine.

Despite Scattery’s hardships and privations, islanders were generally loth to leave it. When my grandmother left Scattery for the first time, in 1940, it was probably only because it no longer contained any eligible men. The families were by now so intricately intermarried that any potential suitor was too close a cousin. Britain was short of labour in wartime, and the government sent recruiting teams to Ireland to find

munitions workers. My grandmother was hired and came to Smethwick. She worked as a ‘viewer’ – an inspector of small components for war planes, with the job of spotting any that were defective. The work was long and hard, but no harder than being an unpaid skivvy for her parents and brothers. Birmingham in the Blitz was dangerous, but Smethwick, with its large Irishtown, was a home from home. For the first time she had money in her purse, and pubs, dance halls and cinemas to spend it in. She even had her own bed, instead of sharing one with her sisters. And after she met and married my grandfather, and the war ended, they both landed plum jobs: as live-in caretaker and cook at a Yorkshire prep school.

This makes their decision to come back to west Clare in 1952 mysterious and, by any rational calculation, calamitous. Britain was just coming out of postwar austerity and taking off on a long economic boom, one that transformed the material lives of nearly the whole population. They returned to an Ireland of poverty and mass unemployment. De Valera’s protectionism had stunted the economy and locked Ireland out of the postwar European economic miracle. Almost immediately, my grandfather had to return to Smethwick to find work, sending home a £5 postal order each week.

My grandmother was reticent about her emotional life, and never accounted for the move back. But she did once hint that she had been homesick for the island. If so, she must have felt especially displaced in landlocked Smethwick, about as far from the sea as one can get while still on the island of Britain. From the rural west, with its cleansing winds,

luminous skies and soft light made partly of water vapour, she had come to a town of tight-packed streets, soot-blackened houses and foundry smoke.

For the Irish middle nation in Britain, the longing for home had little to do with logical calculations. Irish emigrants, Clair Wills writes, 'lived in the fissures between the knowable rural communities that had forced them out, and the urban industrial environment which allotted them a place, and they were not about to reject the past that had formed them'.[45] Exiled islanders experienced a particularly extreme case of the pull of home – what Douglas Dunn, in a poem about St Kilda, calls the 'manacles of place'.[46] Since antiquity, islands have aroused ambivalent feelings, symbolizing both homecoming and banishment.

Celtic folklore has many names for the ethereal isle of the blessed, such as *Tír na nÓg* (land of the young), *Tír fo Thuinn* (land under the waves) and *Tír Tairngire* (land of promise). The Christian Irish folk tales of sea voyages, the *Immrama*, narrate journeys to mythical islands off the west of Ireland that promise eternal youth, good health and plenty. Saint Brendan was said to have sailed in a currach towards the setting sun and found such an island in the north Atlantic, where the trees bore tender fruit and the sun never set. There was always some reason why these islands of dreams eluded others who sought them. They drifted out into space when the earth, once flat, became spherical; or they veiled themselves in a magical mist; or they floated across the sea away from any pursuer.

For exiled islanders, these associations of islands with timeless human yearnings would have mixed with memories of real people and

places. Familiarity may have diluted the magic that islands work on visitors, but a more mundane magic replaced it. Nora Culligan recounted to Ó Dúlaing her memories of the islanders swimming in the sea and boating in the summer, enjoying all-night céilís after weddings, and performing Irish step and set dancing, mainly the quadrille or 'plain' sets of Clare, in the schoolhouse. (Well into her seventies, my grandmother was an accomplished step dancer.) Nostalgia is an omnivorous and adaptable urge. It is easy to see how, in artfully remade memory, the claustrophobic aspects of island life might be erased. My grandmother had an air of nervous melancholy, always answering the phone with an uneasy 'hello?', as if she had never picked up a receiver before. Listening to the RTÉ documentary, I heard the same shyly desolate quality in Nora Culligan.

My father, though, was different. He made light of his *Angela's Ashes* upbringing and the Daedalus (or Stephen Dedalus) in him was glad to have flown. He was amused when, in the late 1960s, musicians such as Donovan and John Lennon began buying up remote Irish and Scottish islands to turn them into hippie communes. In the post-1960s mainstreaming of the counterculture, the western islands of Scotland and Ireland came to be seen as a cure for the ills of modern culture. What people thought they were escaping – the banal conformity of urban life, the mediocrity of cheap consumerism, the desacralized, placeless world of affluence and mobility – he had felt as a liberation. He reserved a special scorn for the scandal-ridden politician Charles Haughey, who in 1974 bought Inishvickillane, one of the Blasket islands. I remember him snorting through *Charles Haughey's Ireland*, a Channel 4 documentary we

watched together in March 1986. Over shots of him riding his yacht *Celtic Mist* off the west coast, Haughey spoke of the 'magical, mystical quality' of his island and the 'intellectual and spiritual respite' it offered.[47]

Why, then, when my father was such a proud citizen of nowhere, did we return to the island to scatter his ashes? Perhaps we were attracted to the poetic congruity of its name – which is, etymologically, unrelated to the modern word, *scatter* – with the scattering of ashes and the scattering of the islanders across the world. The word *diaspora* comes from the Greek for scattering seeds, and returning to scatter what had been scattered decades earlier felt like closing a circle that demanded to be closed.

But we also knew that he had loved the island – and that this love was perfectly compatible with his worldly and well-travelled life. We don't get to choose where home is, and for my father Scattery was home. It was, in Yeats's words, his 'one dear perpetual place', or Seamus Heaney's *omphalos*, the stone that marks the centre of the world. Like most islanders, he referred to Scattery elliptically as 'the island', as if there were no other island in the world. He had a framed aerial photograph of it above his desk and he regularly scoured the website of the local newspaper, the *Clare Champion*, for Scattery news. A few days after his death, I was trying to hack his password to get into his email. After several failed attempts, I guessed right: 'Scattery59'.

Paul Henry's painting, *Launching the Currach*, is still in the living room of the family home, where my father hung it up more than thirty years ago. It was painted around 1910, shortly after Henry moved to

Achill. In the painting, five cloth-capped men on a beach launch a boat into the sea, putting their shoulders into it as if pushing a broken-down car. Henry's paintings fed into the mythologizing of the west, and of the islands, by the new republic. *The Irish Free State Official Handbook* (1932) was illustrated with Maurice Mac Gonigal's paintings of Aran and Henry's paintings of Achill.[48]

Although my father had no time for these nativist mythologies, he loved this painting. Henry probably painted it from memory, because the islanders were superstitious about their likenesses being sketched, believing that it stole part of their souls. He obscures the men's faces, as his Achill paintings often do, casting them as emblematic of the rural west. Henry was colour blind and his palette range is small: orange-reds, red-browns, grey-blues. The currach handlers seem to blend into the beach and the sea, as if part of the earth and the elements. Those six faceless men, launching that boat eternally into the back of a painting, could easily be my father's uncles.

My family is Catholic. While the church's strictures on cremation were loosened in 1963, scattering ashes is still banned, as Pope Francis reconfirmed in a 2016 Vatican ruling. Warning against 'pantheism, naturalism or nihilism,' it forbids anyone 'to scatter the ashes of the faithful departed in the air, on land, at sea or in some other way'.[49] Ashes in Judaeo-Christian religions are a mere residue – what remains after the fire has gone out, and 'hence, anthropocentrically, what remains of the body after life is extinguished'.[50] Since what remains is valueless, ashes symbolize the ultimate valuelessness of mortal life. The Catholic liturgy for

Ash Wednesday makes this clear, as the priest dusts our foreheads with ashes and says ‘remember, man, that you are dust and unto dust you shall return’.

Many national parks and estate managers bar or frown upon scattering ashes, on the grounds that it will affect the fragile ecology. To travel abroad with human remains is also, as we discovered, bureaucratically complex. Nevertheless, the scattering of ashes is an increasingly common secular and humanist ritual. This probably has something to do with the adaptability of its meanings, incorporating new age paganism and materialist rationalism. The ritual’s common denominator is its recognition of the power of place. The ashes are scattered to the winds in a way that concedes the evanescence of a single life, but those ashes also merge with the organic matter of a specific, treasured location. We hoped that scattering my father’s ashes on Scattery would allow us to come closer to a place that he loved, and to feel closer to him – and what John McGahern calls ‘the most elusive island of all, the first person singular’.[51]

ISLAND STORIES

Fourteen of us made the journey, including my father’s grandchildren, siblings, nephews, nieces and in-laws. As my brother is a teacher, we agreed to meet in Kilrush on the first day of the school holidays – almost sixty years to the day since my father would have rowed over for his last Scattery summer. I flew to Dublin with my mother, which meant

negotiating my father's ashes through the security check and storing them in the plane's overhead lockers. Then we drove them across Ireland in a hired car, along new roads which the satnav did not recognize, built partly with European Union funding.

In 1959, when my father left, Ireland had seemed shackled to a mythical past while Britain sped into a bright consumerist future. Now, as we listened to radio voices calmly and knowledgeably debating Brexit and the British-Irish border in a way not entertained in the UK, it felt as if these roles had been reversed. After visiting Ireland in October 2018, Matthew Engel wrote: 'Suddenly it is Ireland and not Britain that appears to be the adult in this dysfunctional family.'[52] It was more complicated than this. But our journey back to Ireland did make me reflect on the power of island stories and why Ireland and Britain's stories now seemed so different.

In 1959 the Irish government was in denial over mass emigration. Political leaders were unsympathetic to Ireland's emigrants, claiming that they had been seduced by modern excess and amorality. These politicians told scare stories about life over the water. In a 1951 speech, de Valera claimed that fifty workers were living fifteen to a room in a single house in Birmingham, with shift workers sleeping in the same bed in turns.[53]

My father's leaving of Ireland came just a week after the replacement of de Valera as Taoiseach by Sean Lemass. Lemass set about modernizing the economy by getting rid of tariffs and quotas, in a tacit recognition that mass emigration represented a national failure. In 1967 Charles Haughey, then Minister for Finance, declared rashly that

‘emigration is gone’.[54] But in the 1970s Ireland’s new urbanized economy began to collapse, and the city jobs that had been filled by rural exiles dried up. The first part of the 1980s almost rivalled the 1950s for economic bleakness. In that decade, one Irish person in twelve emigrated.[55] The writer Roddy Doyle, who taught geography in a Dublin school at the time, said recently that he would have been better off teaching them ‘how to get to the boat’.[56] Then, in the early 1990s, the Celtic Tiger began to roar. Twenty years after joining the Common Market, Ireland benefitted belatedly and spectacularly, with the highest growth rates in the EU.

But the story that Ireland had told itself – that emigration was over and recovery permanent – was shaky. The Celtic Tiger collapsed in the economic crisis of 2008, and in 2009 emigration exceeded immigration for the first time in fourteen years. From 2015 the economy recovered, but many feared that the growth was fragile and uneven. Areas like west Clare were particularly badly hit by the crash, with high unemployment and a flight of young people reminiscent of the 1980s.

The area was now heavily reliant on seasonal tourism. A new marina had opened at Kilrush in 1991, replacing its muddy tidal harbour, which meant that trips to Scattery were no longer tide-dependent. EU structural funding, available for poorer regions, flooded into Kilrush and was used to update visitor facilities on Scattery.[57] In 1991 the Kilrush Community Development Company bought the island for £100,000 on behalf of the local community. It is now owned by the Office of Public Works.

At the marina we saw luxury glamping pods and adverts for kitesurfing lessons, sea kayaking and dolphin tours. Major Willson's plans for Scattery had not been ludicrous, just premature. A few miles along the coast, at Doonbeg, there was now a golf links and five-star beach hotel owned by Donald Trump. For sale in the ticket office of Scattery Island Tours, on the marina, were Scattery fridge magnets, postcards, Celtic crosses and models of thatched houses. We sailed across to the island on a catamaran, with Irish fiddle music playing – a ride that my father had taken the other way in a currach sixty years earlier. Tourism, writes Rebecca Solnit in an account of her journey through Ireland to discover her own Irish ancestry, 'reconstitutes as play all the endless tides of humanity that constitute war, invasion, and exile, reenacts the tragedies of population shifts as comedies of desire and expenditure'.[58]

In Ireland, though, these tensions tend to be lived and discussed. Ireland remains acutely aware of what Fintan O'Toole calls its 'elsewheres … the places where Ireland is always landing and returning from'.[59] Its long crisis over net emigration meant that when, from the mid-1990s onwards, the republic finally became a destination for immigrants, mostly from Poland and the Baltic states, there was relatively little anti-immigrant feeling. The proportion of foreign-born residents is now sixteen per cent, one of the highest in the EU. But immigration is not a significant electoral issue and far-right populism has little purchase.[60]

In 2018, by contrast, Britain was locked in toxic debates about immigration. The two decades up to the Brexit vote in 2016 had seen a rise in negative media coverage of immigrants, often conflating them with

‘bogus’ asylum seekers and refugees. Politicians, beginning with the Tory leader William Hague in the late 1990s, had picked up on this mood. Britain had become the most glaring example of what James Hollifield calls the ‘liberal paradox’ that had emerged in Europe and the US from the 1980s.[61] Business wanted cheap, mobile, flexible labour; electorates wanted less immigration. Politicians tried to keep both happy.

The government adopted a tone of public hostility towards immigrants, with divisive rhetoric about EU ‘queue jumpers’ and citizenship being ‘a privilege, not a right’. Even with the tightening of immigration laws since the 1960s, those allowed to settle had been given the equal rights of citizenship that my father had enjoyed. The government was not prepared to grant this kind of citizenship – something indivisible and unrelated to the economic benefits an individual brought with them – to Eastern Europeans and African migrants. As the welfare benefits and other citizenship rights of these groups were restricted, the supply of cheap labour, and the lifestyles it sustained, continued.

This policy’s contradictions were now imploding. David Cameron had promised to reduce immigration to the tens of thousands even as numbers rose, especially from the EU accession states. Britain had taken only small numbers of those fleeing conflict in the Middle East and Africa. But dramatic stories of them taking to boats to cross the Mediterranean or the Aegean reinforced the common idea in the UK that this was some newly apocalyptic scenario rather than part of a long postwar history of displacement and emigration. The end of 2018 saw a small rise in the number of migrants entering Britain by crossing the channel in boats. The

Home Secretary Sajid Javid declared it a major incident and cut short a holiday to deal with it. As Peter Gatrell argues, boats have a peculiarly potent symbolism in stories of immigration, even though most arrivals are now by road or rail.[62]

The Brexit mantras were ‘control of our borders’ and ‘an end to free movement’. Brexit’s mythology centred on Britain as an island nation, unchaining itself from the continent in favour of the open sea, a blue water naval fleet and control of its fishing waters. More accurately, since Brexit was driven by English nationalism, it saw England as an island, a fallacy with a long pedigree. In 2010 David Cameron named Henrietta Elizabeth Marshall’s *Our Island Story: A History of England for Boys and Girls* (first published in 1905) as his favourite childhood book.[63] England is not, of course, an island – and the fallacy attests to the power of story over bare facts gleaned from a glance at the map. England is part of a north Atlantic archipelago containing two sovereign states, Britain and Ireland – or what Irish politicians, after the Good Friday agreement of 1998, were careful to call ‘these islands’.

In the public debate before the referendum, Ireland was hardly discussed. But by the summer of 2018, Brexit realities had forced Britain to look anew at its relationship with its neighbour, because, as the country with the only land border with Britain, it had become a sticking point in negotiations. Brexit disinterred issues buried for many years, at least since 1993, when the European single market removed barriers set up seventy years earlier. But disinterring them only revealed the deep English ignorance of the first country it had colonized, in the twelfth

century. The history of Ireland barely features in English school curricula, even though, after the Act of Union, it was part of the United Kingdom for over a century. English statements on Ireland demonstrated neither knowledge nor tact. A former Tory minister told a *Newsnight* journalist: 'We simply cannot allow the Irish to treat us like this … The Irish really should know their place.'[64]

My father, by virtue of his own family history, had access to a different story. He thought of the English obsession with immigration as a sort of national fever, akin to the American obsession with the right to bear arms. He never forgot how the incoming Irish in the 1950s were resented for the same reason that later immigrant groups were – for speaking a peculiar version of English, for belonging to an alien faith and for making little effort to integrate. Nor was it lost on him that Peter Griffiths's campaign in Smethwick in 1964 had prefigured Nigel Farage's UKIP. In the Brexit referendum, Sandwell, the borough of which Smethwick is a part, voted leave by nearly two to one.

When we arrived on Scattery, we found that the houses had mostly lost their roofs and could not be entered for safety reasons. The pavement in front of them was now a daisy meadow. An old post box, built into a house front, awaited letters from no one. The schoolhouse had completely gone, washed away in a storm. I could still just make out the outlines of the old strip fields, running from the houses to the island's Atlantic edge. In the new visitor centre, the laminated displays and glass-cased models focused on Scattery as a monastic site. Little was said about its

occupation from the 1840s to the 1950s by those descendants of Kilbaha fishermen.

Part of the appeal of small islands is that they seem to be discrete and legible, handy little receptacles for stories. Like many children, my father had been drawn to the island as a larger version of the woodland den or tree hut, as what the philosopher Ernst Bloch calls a child's 'wishful land'.[65] The great islands of children's literature – Treasure Island, Coral Island, Neverland – are small like Scattery, big enough for adventures but easily traversable. Gazed at from Cappa on a grey school day, Scattery must have seemed like a little world begging to be explored, a land of endless summer.

Small islands seem legible enough to their visitors – especially when, like Scattery, they can be taken in at a glance and their ruined buildings sightseen in an hour or so. But this sense of encompassability is an illusion. Tim Robinson, writing about his beloved Aran islands, found something 'compulsive in one's relationship to an island ... it is as if the surrounding ocean like a magnifying glass directs an intensified vision onto the narrow field of vision. A little piece is cut out of the world … it holds out the delusion of a comprehensible totality.'[66] But once we arrive on an island, he writes, this delusion gives way to a feeling of fragmentation, an awareness 'of the overwhelming richness of even the tiniest fragment of reality'.[67]

Having attached such significance in prospect to setting foot on Scattery, I felt frustrated once we had made land that our visit was limited to two hours, when the boat would return. I thought of Robinson's long

quest to understand Árainn (Inishmore), the largest of the Aran islands, which resulted in two densely researched books and many intricate hand-drawn maps. Robinson trained as a mathematician and was fascinated by the fractal geometry of the island's coastline. In *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage*, he circumambulated the island in search of 'a single step as adequate to the ground it clears as is the dolphin's arc to the wave'.[68] His ultimately doomed aim was to survey every inlet and cove, every runnel and crevasse in the limestone, every type of seaweed and every size and shape of pebble on the shore, steeping himself in local lore as he went. Robinson believed that only an 'infinity of ways of looking' would reveal the island's richness.[69] Scattery is much smaller than Árainn, but still, you would need years, and Robinson's range as a historian, linguist, cartographer, folklorist, geographer, ecologist, geologist, botanist, natural historian and artist to get to the bottom of it.

Even the smallest islands remain unreadable. At the end of his trilogy of books on Connemara, Robinson visits Dinish, a tiny island about half Scattery's size. He looks out on the many small islets and rocks surrounding it, each of which 'would be the anchor stone for a web of stories … Every tale entails the tale of its own making, generalities breed exceptions as soon as they are stated, and all footnotes call for footnoting, to the end of the world.'[70] Robert Macfarlane notes how often islomanes (Tim Robinson on the Aran islands, Adam Nicolson on the Shiants, Lawrence Durrell on Corfu) are drawn in by this apparition of total knowledge, only to realise that familiarity 'lead[s] not to absolute knowledge but only ever to further enquiry'.[71]

If total knowledge is unattainable on a small island like Scattery, how much more is this true on the two largest islands of the North Atlantic archipelago? In every island story – Scattery as the land of endless summer, Ireland as the home of sturdy children and happy maidens, Britain as proud island nation – lies a fantasy of homogeneity and readability. Even the smallest islands have multilayered histories; and then, as they disperse their peoples across the world as small islands do, those histories keep multiplying. Our journey back to the island had vaguely promised, as family history does, to 'anchor us and tie us down, evoking lost ancestral places', in Alison Light's words. But it had ended up as what she calls 'a family history for a floating world' – a study in the heterogeneity and unrecoverability of the past.[72]

We told no one we were scattering ashes, worried they would tell us it was forbidden, and declined the guided tour of the ruins. On the beach, one of my cousins sang 'The Parting Glass', a traditional, unaccompanied Irish song about leavetaking without bitterness or regret. We each took a fistful of ash and threw it towards the water. A pact made a few months earlier – or perhaps years earlier, without us knowing it – had been settled. We had brought my father back to the island and left him there.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1] The family history recounted in this article, when not referenced in the notes below, comes from the reminiscences of my late father and grandmother, as well as an unpublished memoir my father co-wrote with my mother, *The Coal Miner's Daughter and the Irish Brummy*, 2015. I have also drawn on Don Scanlan's *Memories of an Islander: A Life on Scattery and Beyond*, Ennis, 2003. Scanlan was an islander who married my grandmother's sister, Mae.

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