

A virtual island journey: place and place writing in lockdown

cultural geographies

2022, Vol. 29(1) 115–128

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DOI: 10.1177/14744740211029288

journals.sagepub.com/home/cgj**Joe Moran** 

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Abstract

The Covid lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 led many people to reassess their relationship to places. This article attempts, during this time of restricted movement, to imaginatively deep-map an island in the mouth of the Shannon in west Clare where my grandmother was born and raised. My deep-mapping of the island is by necessity virtual, assembled piecemeal from memories, daydreams, family recollections, historical fragments and that powerful, semi-enchanted sense of co-presence that can be found online. Unable to make a physical journey, I rely on the accretive and associative techniques of contemporary place writing. The article uses montage, juxtaposition, thick description, dense detail, imaginative reconstruction and the essayistic blending of undisciplined bits of knowledge, all of which do some of the work of conventional linear argument. As in place writing, the micro-study of a small, special place becomes a way of thinking more widely about our relationship to the earth in a time of environmental and public health emergency. The article is both my own experiment in place writing and an argument for the fresh perspectives that place writing can bring to cultural geography.

Keywords

Covid, deep mapping, energy, islands, lockdown, microspecion, pilgrimage, place writing, vertical travel

Scattery is a small island in the mouth of the Shannon in west Clare, Ireland. My grandmother was born and raised there, and my father spent his summers on the island when he was growing up in the nearby coastal village of Cappa. It is now deserted except for the day trippers who tour the ruins – for it is also the site of a monastery built by Celtic monks in the sixth century and thriving until the Anglo-Normans arrived in the 12th. In summer 2018 we went there on the tourist boat to scatter my father's ashes. In summer 2020 I planned to return to the island, but a global pandemic postponed my visit indefinitely.

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This article investigates my attachment to this small place by using the insights and approaches of contemporary place writing. Place writing is a fluid and polymorphous genre of creative nonfiction that typically interweaves personal witness, family memoir, amateur field biology, folklore, social and cultural history, ecocriticism and nature and topographical writing. Place writing reflects on the importance of place to the health of the human animal and searches for what Madeleine Bunting calls, after a Western Apache saying, 'the wisdom that sits in places'.¹ What follows is both my own experiment in place writing and an argument for the fresh perspectives that place writing can bring to cultural geography.

On 23 March 2020, all but essential travel was banned and I was stuck within a small radius of my home in Liverpool. The furthest I could go on my daily walk was to the banks of the Mersey, the unpassable border into another world. Throughout history, water has linked humanity, allowing people to explore, trade, invade and settle. The story of estuaries is one of movement and migration, of humans and other animals coming and going on the tides. And yet my journey from the Mersey to the Shannon estuary was now impossible by water, road or air. Above me was the Ryanair flight path from Liverpool John Lennon Airport to Dublin, Cork and Knock. But those familiar contrails, the exhaust flow from planes, were missing. Cheap air travel, it turns out, is the perfect way for deadly pathogens to spread across the world. Almost all of Ryanair's fleet, along with other airlines, had been grounded. Every day, when I arrived at the river's bank, I looked over towards the Clwydian hills in the direction of Scatterry, 300 miles over the horizon.

In those anxious, insomniac days as the pandemic took hold, thinking about the island helped me to get off to sleep. In my mind's eye I would land on the island's jetty and crunch along the cobble-and-shingle beach to the lighthouse at Rineanna Point, the island's southern tongue. Or I would traipse overland, through the spongy grass dotted with salt marsh and bulleted with rabbit holes, to the western shore facing the Atlantic. Here there is a storm beach below low cliffs. I would sit in the fishermen's icehouse, carved into the cliff and watch the ships disappearing through the headlands while I drifted into unconsciousness.

Lockdown obliged me to explore the potential for really knowing a place when I had the time and desire to travel through it in my mind like this, but could not physically be there. My account of the island has been assembled piecemeal from memories of previous visits, daydreams, family recollections, online browsing and the historical fragments I can pick up from the fairly scant literature on the island. As Caitlin DeSilvey writes in her study of a Montana homestead, certain places are so inscrutable that they demand a 'poetics of suggestion and conjecture . . . [T]he bringing into legibility requires a process of manipulation, description, displacement'.² I have had to rely on the associative and accretive methods of place writing to make sense of a place that was always elusive but has been rendered more so by my absence from it.

A basic insight of place writing is that writing itself is generative and part of the process of discovering a place. Words are not a barrier between us and some direct, epiphanic communion with the world; they are a natural way for the human animal to interact with places. Writing is, in Richard Mabey's words, 'the interface between us and the non-human world, our species' semi-permeable membrane'.³ And so my article employs the writerly techniques of place writing: thick description, dense detail, juxtaposition, imaginative reconstruction and the essayistic, voice-driven blending of undisciplined bits of knowledge. These techniques do some of the work of conventional linear argument in the belief that, in Tim Cresswell's words, description need not always 'bow down to explanation'.⁴ Forced to write the island in my head, I have been drawn to the idea of place writing as not just writing about place but about writing *and* place.

Vertical travel and place writing

A striking feature of place writing is its small focus. In 1997 Kris Lackey coined the term 'vertical travel' to refer to this patient and prolonged attention to a specific place, in contrast to the horizontal journey through space in classic travel writing.⁵ Michael Cronin defines vertical travel as 'travel[ling] down into the particulars of place either in space (botany, studies of micro-climate, exhaustive exploration of local landscape) or in time (local history, archaeology, folklore)'.⁶ More recently Cronin has called for 'a politics of microspec[ti]on . . . a form of engagement with the world which is based on an in-depth analysis and understanding (*specere*: to look at) of the local (*mikros*: little)'.⁷

This assiduous noticing of the local and particular is partly a response to familiar anxieties about the placelessness and restless mobility of modernity. But as Cronin suggests, it is also a 'way of re-enchanting a world grown weary of the jeremiads of cultural entropists'. Digging into the detail of 'micro-modernity' reveals the local, even in a world shrunk by technological connection and corporate homogeneity, as 'endlessly and tantalizingly distinctive', home to 'the full, fractal complexity of human habitation'.⁸ Recent critical-creative work in cultural geography by Caitlin DeSilvey, John Wylie, Hayden Lorimer and Tim Cresswell has shared this interest in the writing-logged, impressionistic encounter with small places.⁹

Both vertical travel and microspec[ti]on are central to place writing, even if they are not named as such in the writing itself. Bunting's *The Plot: A Biography of an English Acre* is typical in centring on a small, unremarkable, revisited plot of land of great import to the author – in her case, the spot in the Hambleton Hills on the western edge of the North York Moors on which her father built a private chapel. Other instances of the microspec[ti]ve method are Tim Dee's *Four Fields* (2013), Jon Lewis-Stempel's *Meadowland: The Private Life of an English Field* (2014), Rob Cowen's *Common Ground* (2015), Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun* (2016) and Alan Jenkins's *Plot 29: A Memoir* (2017). The area of land is sometimes as small as an allotment, never bigger than a parish.

These books drop down into the minutiae of soil, grass and fields – all of which, when cultivated, are both human and natural creations, intimate reshaping of the earth. For Tim Dee, fields are 'the greatest land art on the globe' and 'offer the most articulate description and vivid enactment of our life here on earth, of how we live both within the grain of the world and against it'.¹⁰ Avoiding landscapes already enveloped with cultural associations, place writing homes in on mundane patches of earth to bring out the hidden richness of their ecology and their human investments.

Scattery is this kind of place. It is a small and undistinguished slab of land: low-lying, no dramatic contours, not especially beautiful. Its fields were never chemically fertilised and it has been virtually uninhabited since the late 1950s. In Lewis-Stempel's words, 'nothing conserves like poverty'.¹¹ Hundreds of years of organic farming, followed by 60 years of near desertion and benign neglect, have made it as near to natural grassland as can be. The fields have been invaded by those commonplace colonisers, bracken, brambles and gorse. The wildflowers – purple loosestrife, spear thistles, silverweed and ragwort – are the perennials of railway sidings and derelict canals. The beaches are dotted with the dark-green deposits of moss, seaweed and samphire. Scattery is a land of muddy, muted colours with the odd dash of brightness in summer. It testifies to the earth's quiet resilience and self-renewal, what Robert Macfarlane calls 'the sheer force of ongoing organic existence'.¹²

Nor is Scattery encrusted with the romantic projections that can stop us really seeing and noticing places. Unremote, estuarine islands like Scattery have less glamour than offshore islands, those lone masses of rock emerging audaciously from the sea. In the growing field of island studies, river islands have been largely ignored.¹³ Mitul Baruah and Jenia Mukherjee suggest that this neglect

is rooted in a European environmental imagination that clearly separates 'land' from 'water' and that looks on mixed earth-liquid environments (such as marshes, swamps and fens) as treacherous, inhospitable places.¹⁴ As Nicholas Allen argues, the place of Ireland's western islands in the Celtic Revival, as 'symbolic redoubts of native cultures', has depended on 'their longstanding associations with anachronism and constancy'. These associations are harder to sustain on an island like Scattery because, as Allen writes, 'the ecologies of river mouth, beach and estuary are difficult to demarcate as singular possessions'.¹⁵

Given the paucity of the historical record on Scattery, I have had to incorporate speculations and extrapolations based on my research into similar Irish monastic islands. Most of Scattery's recent history has been told only in fragmentary form by islanders themselves.¹⁶ A few photographs from the last century survive – although the islanders were wary of having their pictures taken and there are hardly any of the different families mingling. Marriage between families was the norm and the islanders believed that any young man and woman photographed together would never marry each other.¹⁷

Compare this scant evidence with that provided by the Irish-speaking Blasket islands to the south and the Aran islands to the north. In the last century they attracted writers, artists, scholars, photographers and film crews interested in their oral, pre-modern folk traditions. As early as 1907, J. M. Synge wrote of the Aran islanders that 'most of the strangers they see on the islands are philological students, and the people have been led to conclude that linguistic studies, particularly Gaelic studies, are the chief occupation of the outside world'.¹⁸ Books by Blasket islanders have become classics: generations of Irish schoolchildren have cursed the memory of Peig Sayers, Tomás Ó Criomhthain and Muiris Ó Súilleabháin after being forced to read their books as set texts. On 17 November 1953, when all but one of the Great Blasket islanders left the island, a film crew recorded their journey to the mainland.¹⁹ When, 6 years later, the Scattery islanders left the island, it went unrecorded. In the Blasket heritage centre that overlooks the islands, there are preserved island objects such as a scallop-shell lantern, a *naomhóg* (currach) and a donkey pannier. Similar items were used on Scattery, but none survive.

Deep-mapping the island

The concept of deep mapping derives from William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairieErth: A Deep-Map*, a classic piece of place writing on Chase County in the Flint Hills of Kansas. Heat-Moon spent several years in this sparsely populated, silent expanse of tallgrass prairie as its 'inspector of the ordinary', its 'secretary of under-life'. For Heat-Moon, this landscape's blankness presents an opportunity. Unencumbered by too much human noise, it can be reduced to its most essential reality as a place of 'energy transfer'. On the smallest scale, nutrients pass from soil to grass to ungulates to humans; on the largest, oil and natural gas from this region are pumped across America. Transit and transmission occur all over 'a place as apparently still as the under-rock itself'.²⁰

In place writing, the persistent alertness to place demands an understanding of timescales beyond a human lifespan. Often a personal meditation on death and grief will turn into a reflection on the incremental, sedimentary nature of life on earth. In her 'geological memoir', *The Grassling* (2019), Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's visits home to see her dying father inspire a literary excavation of the red soil of Devon where her family farmed. 'What is 2,000 years in the span of the soil?', she asks. 'To move in earth's time is to necessarily think outside the human'.²¹

The French historian Fernand Braudel suggested that historians pay more heed to these enduring climatic and geological processes. By over-attending to the history of events – 'surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs' – we missed the quieter but more telling undercurrents.²² The foundation of all history, for Braudel, was this *longue durée*,

imperceptible in a single human life and made of unbending facts like climate, vegetation, soil quality and the shape of the land.

Such deep time feels close at hand on Scattery. It looks roughly the same as it has done for millennia. Over the six decades the island has been deserted, the Atlantic wind and wet have done their work on the row of houses where my family and others lived. Increasingly they resemble the island's monastic ruins – bare stone, roofless shells covered in yellow lichen and weeds. There is only one obvious intrusion of modernity. The east window of the ruined Cathedral Church of St. Mary's, which catches the rising sun and points towards Jerusalem, now perfectly frames Moneypoint, Ireland's only coal-fired power station.²³

'To stand at the edge of the sea', the marine biologist and environmentalist Rachel Carson has written, '... is to have knowledge of things that are as nearly eternal as any earthly life can be'.²⁴ Every 10 seconds or so, the spilling breakers turn into swash on Scattery's western shore. They have been doing this for 18,000 years, after the island was formed from boulder and clay deposited there at the end of the last ice age. Ever since then, this wave action has been slowly shrinking the island, part of the inexorable westward movement of wind and water in the Atlantic currents. These ocean gyres – powered by the trade winds and modified by the sun, the moon's gravitational pull, the spinning of the earth and the shape of the continental masses – have endured throughout human history. On Scattery's east side, the river current also sweeps with great force, and is making similar inroads on the land there. The hardest rock is helpless against a world made mostly of moving water.

Small islands are the newest pieces of land on earth and the most unstable, due to erosion, deposition and rising sea levels. They appeal to us as discrete, bounded, encompassable places; but in deep time, and in the accelerated processes of recent climate change, they are some of the most precarious places on earth. River islands are especially prone to shift under the influence of tidal erosion and accretion, and the constant movement of sediment in the flow of the river.²⁵

Waves make visible the unstoppable rhythms of the earth. A wave is less a thing than a process, a tidal becoming made not of water but of energy using water as a medium. It makes manifest the unseen force driving the universe: energy. The first law of thermodynamics states that energy cannot be made or destroyed, only changed from one form into another. The waves that build up over the Atlantic must be converted into noise, friction and longshore drift as they arrive on Scattery's western shore. Energy never dies.

The Celtic monks arrived on Scattery around 600 BCE. By now, wind and water had worn down the island's rock to make cultivatable soil – about an inch of it for every 1,000 years. Here the monks could grow cabbages and barley, make bread and porridge and keep bees. The climate was wet but temperate on account of the Gulf Stream, a relative newcomer to the atmosphere at about 60 million years old, and without which Scattery's weather would be Icelandic.

The monks came to Scattery because here they could survive in the state of perpetual discomfort advocated by the desert fathers. Their grey woollen robes were too hot in summer and not warm enough in winter. They slept on straw in leaky, draughty wooden cells. Six times a day, starting with matins at 3am, the round tower bell called them to sing the offices. They fasted every Wednesday and Friday, and three times a year for 40 days.²⁶ They were permanently tired and hungry.

Energy is the property in the universe that allows work to be performed. The monks harnessed just enough of it, by breathing in the island air, eating the harvest of the land and seas and drinking water from the springs, to stay alive and have a little left over to work the fields and sing the psalms. To make their illuminated manuscripts, they used whatever lay to hand. The roots of the island's yellow irises provided black ink; seashells supplied different colours; the white of seabird eggs bound these colours to the page.

On Scatterry, the endlessly circulating energy of the world is a thrilling, elemental fact. This mostly treeless island offers little escape from the weather. The monks must have looked nervously west, dreading the Atlantic storms that rattled their wooden cells and kept them awake at night. But perhaps they also found it exhilarating to inhabit a world where the weather changes so quickly. The anthropologist Tim Ingold argues that weather is not a backdrop to our lives but the substance of life itself. All life needs the three things of which weather is made: light, air and water.²⁷ The sun is the ultimate source of energy on earth, all living things use the air to respire, and water is ubiquitous, present in everything from the world's oceans to the cells in our bodies. On Scatterry, light, air and water mingle dynamically. It is a land of squalls and dead calm, of frequent mists followed by the sudden parting of the clouds to expose a weak, watery sun. Life there is a daily reminder that the world is an ever-shifting arrangement of particles and that we are part of the mix.

The Irish monastic tradition was pagan-influenced: less a *contemptus mundi* than a pantheistic celebration of the natural world. Much early Celtic nature poetry was written by monks, often scribbled in the margins of the manuscripts they worked on. They saw God's work in the light glinting on waves or the unpolluted blackness of a night studded with stars. They believed that at Easter they would see the sun dancing in the sky in celebration of the risen Christ.²⁸

At least five times, between 816 and 1176, the monk keeping lookout in the round tower would have blanched at the sight of a longboat coming up the mouth of the Shannon. The Vikings plundered the monastery of its treasures – silver chalices, Celtic crosses and brooches – and massacred monks. They established a base on the island for their raiding parties, making Scatterry first landfall after their forays into Europe.²⁹ For two centuries the island was fought over by Vikings and Irish kings. After a series of raids by the Anglo-Normans, the monastery went into decline. Seven ships from the defeated Spanish Armada took shelter in Scatterry's waters. During the Napoleonic wars, the British built a fort on the island to counter an invasion.

Scatterry's strategic position in the mouth of the Shannon accounted for these surface disturbances of events, briefly illuminating the dark of Braudelian deep time. Mostly, though, quotidian life carried on. Every day the sun rose over Limerick and dropped over the western ocean. Pilgrims rowed over to the island, leaving a votive offering of a seashell or a pebble at the well of Saint Senan, the monastery's founder. Ships anchored in the deep harbour of Scatterry Roads on the island's sheltered eastern side. Mourners rode their dead over from Clare or Kerry to bury them on holy land. Around the middle of the 17th century, laypeople re-inhabited the island. They built houses with mud from the shore, thatching them roughly with bulrushes. Their main source of light was soaking rushes in oil and burning them.³⁰

My grandmother's family settled on the island, with five other families, in the 1840s. Like the Celtic monks, they rowed there in currachs, primitive boats of ancient origin – only now, instead of oxhides tanned with oak bark, they were made of canvas sealed with tar. The men were river pilots by trade. Before the lighthouse was completed in 1872, they lit fires on the island's highest point – the *Ard na nAingeal* or Angel's Height – as an aid to ships navigating the Shannon. They raced each other in currachs to reach the ship first and be hauled aboard, entitling them to steer it upriver.

They earned their living from the eternal movements of the tides, the rise and fall of the waters according to the moon's encircling of the earth. The Shannon tides are strong, and a spring ebb tide can run as fast as four knots. Around Scatterry these tides combine with treacherous shoals and overfalls, and great swells rolling in from the Atlantic. Guiding ships through them to Limerick was how the new islanders made their living. They also fished and worked the land as the Celtic monks had done. 'The obstinate presence of the past', Braudel writes, 'greedily and steadily swallows up the fragile lifetime of men'.³¹

To make their lives as comfortable as they could, the islanders used energy supplied by their bodies, aided only by spade, fork and scythe. They built drystone walls with rocks cleared from fields, the larger stones providing flagstones for the floors of their houses. They spread seaweed on their crops, repurposed straw as thatch and picked limpets and periwinkles on the beach. From the boxes of tallow that washed up on the western shore from shipwrecks, they made giant candles.³² Their endless search for sources of energy linked them closely to the world around them.

The islanders were still living like this in the 1950s, when my father arrived to help out on the family smallholding during the summer holidays. Now he became part of the island's energy cycle. He helped herd the cattle in for milking, so that one of the oldest forms of human sustenance could be wrung from their udders. He helped turn the hay and rake it into haystacks, to make the stored energy of fodder as the Irish had done since the arrival of the Normans. On the wet ground at the island's southern tip, where dead plants had decomposed over 1000s of years into peat, he cut turf squares, combustible energy for the family hearth. His favourite job was fishing with his uncles. Sometimes the mackerel were so plentiful that they just had to row along with a bucket over the side of the currach and wait for them to jump in: protein on tap.

All this harvested and channelled energy allowed the islanders to breathe, their hearts to beat, the food in their guts to move along, their brain synapses to fire and their lips, tongues and teeth to form speech. It allowed their eyes to use the radiant energy of light to turn all the island's colours and shades into signals sent to the brain. Without energy, the islanders would have been just useless masses of carbon-related matter. When they died, their metabolisms stopped and energy left their bodies as heat. After they were buried in the island's graveyard, insects and bacteria unlocked the energy tied up in their cells. When my father died, and we returned his ashes to the island, it helped to know that the elements of which he was made – oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium and phosphorus – also made up the island, and that when we die our energy is not lost but repurposed. As matter, at least, we are immortal.

The island as place

A Scattery islander's relationship to place was a matter of endless, delicate negotiation with their environment. In 1972 the young writer Deborah Tall landed on the Irish island of Inishbofin with her partner, the Irish poet and playwright Tom MacIntyre. Inishbofin, Tall later wrote, was 'an outcrop of rock and bog in the untamed Atlantic, a place still loitering in the 19th century with its heart exposed to weather'. Non-Gaelic speaking like Scattery, it did not attract linguists, folklorists or islomanes (island lovers). The islanders had little time to admire the austere beauty of their surroundings. Inishbofin was 'a place that had to be constantly attended to – one couldn't muddle along ignoring it'. This challenged Tall's sense (gleaned during a childhood spent in the Philadelphia suburbs) of the natural world as *scenery* or *landscape*, words that see it as a human-framed composition. 'Where's a word for a wholeheartedly lived-in landscape?', she reflected. 'Maybe simply place . . . which is humanly defined by buildings and customs but is also firmly attached to and in part defined by the piece of earth on which it sits'.³³

Both the rhetoric and lived experience of global capitalism seek to sever us from this understanding of place. Finance capital presents itself as immaterial, a matter of connectivity and flow. Consumer goods come to us via apps and algorithms that obscure the labour of sweatshop workers and fulfilment-centre order pickers. The pre-chopped vegetables and shrink-wrapped meat of supermarkets break our link to the food chain and hide the collective costs of convenience. This dematerialisation is, in Christopher Connery's words, part of 'the long project of capital's concealment of its spatial and social character'.³⁴ It makes us less inclined to reflect on the use of the earth's resources on which any human act relies.

Faith in progress has been a driving force of secular Western society since the 18th century. Progress, by these lights, amounts to the triumph of mobility over stasis, speed over slowness, individual choice over societal compulsion. It is achieved by extracting more from the land with better machinery, moving goods and energy further and quicker, and defeating distance with technology. The American farmer and ecological writer, Wendell Berry, summarises its underlying ethos: 'If we use up the good possibilities in this place, we will import goods from some other place, or we will go to some other place. If nature releases her wealth too slowly, we will take it by force'.³⁵ Any vigilant encounter with a small place shows this vision of progress to be a human invention. Historical change is revealed not as teleological but as the constant redistribution of the energy of the universe, a multi-grained process in which all gains and losses are relative.

We should not romanticise the grim struggle for subsistence on Irish islands – places without indoor plumbing, electric light or medical assistance, so that the sick had to self-doctor with folk remedies like seal oil or boiled milk and pepper.³⁶ Philip Conkling thinks of the communal nature of island life as 'a kind of "lifeboat ethics,"' where islanders have little choice but to succeed or fail together because their fates are so intertwined.³⁷ But every place that humans have made their home is rich in meaning and particularity, even if its invisible assets cannot be converted into a form deemed tangible by the standards of progress. With no machinery at their disposal, the Scattery islanders had to come together to collect the hay, fish, mend and prepare nets, rebuild walls and rethatch roofs. Neighbourliness, no doubt accompanied by all the tensions and compromises of contiguity, was an art that needed to be cultivated. Now, in the middle of a climate emergency, the Scattery islanders' relationship to place comes to seem like an exemplar of stewardship and sustainability.

The Scattery islanders formed an intense bond with their island, giving almost every part of it a name or a story. The peat bog was the *Corcas*. A little cove on the Atlantic shore was the *Cam*. The only sandy bit of beach, source of the sand they used to build their houses, was *Cúl na Gainimhe* (back of the sand). A valley on the western side – the only part of the island from which the round tower could not be seen – was *Fan-na-nEach* (the trench of the horses). Here Saint Senan was said to have cursed some horses owned by a local chieftain so that the ground swallowed them up.³⁸

A small island can be easily encircled. Many ancient games and rituals symbolically trace a circle, creating a centre within which to place oneself. Countless religious rites circumambulate a circle or symbolically mark boundaries, as in the tradition of priests walking round altars or churches to consecrate them, or tracing the parish boundaries at Rogationtide, the 'beating of bounds'. Scattery had its own such rituals. Islanders and visiting pilgrims would walk sunwise (clockwise, following the apparent movement of the sun in the northern hemisphere) around its pebbled shore, barefoot. One Sunday in early spring, the currachs, after being patched up over winter, were rowed around Scattery *deiseal* (sunwise), as were all new boats. Believed to protect their occupants from harm, this ritual also confirmed Scattery's geographical singularity. The hold that small islands have on the human imagination owes much to this sense of emplacement, the ease with which they can be framed in the mind.

Every evening after dinner on the island, my father was allowed to accompany the men to the *Ard na nAingeal* where they smoked and gossiped as the sun went down. From here most of their field of vision was sky and water. Looking east followed the Shannon back towards Limerick, and to the west lay the ten-mile wide mouth of the estuary. Wherever they looked revealed the islandness of their home, a small, fixed point in a vast world.

A place is where people, over time, form the attachments, with both living and inanimate things, that give their lives rootedness and meaning. Every place has a natural intricacy and richness created by this day-to-day push and pull between the human search for agency and the obdurate facts of the earth. 'It seems, broadly, good to be stopped by a place', Tim Dee writes. 'And this is one

way a place comes into being'. He contrasts this with modern transit zones like chain hotels, airports and motorways – 'non-places where the most we can hope for is a relatively frictionless passage'. When these zones are working well, we travel through them without expending much mental or physical energy. Their success is gauged by 'their throughput, their flow, their footfall'.³⁹

What drew me towards Scattery during lockdown was a sense that the pandemic had exposed something about our atomised, frictionless lives. It brought home how many of the things we need to sustain us – food, drink, fuel, clothes and distracting entertainment – now come anonymously from some unspecific elsewhere, via touchscreen or mouse click. We depend on strangers doing unglamorous, low-paid work and on the minutely synchronised supply lines of a just-in-time economy. Our consumption and dispersal of energy mostly goes on without us thinking about it. In the environmentalist Bill McKibben's words, 'cheap fossil fuel has made us the first people on Earth with no need of our neighbors'.⁴⁰

Val Plumwood explores this kind of collective inattention through her notion of 'shadow places'. She argues that, by idealising a singular, special place identified with the self or soul, we risk ignoring 'the many unrecognised, shadow places that provide our material and ecological support, most of which, in a global market, are likely to elude our knowledge and responsibility'. By reimagining these hidden connections between our treasured places and their shadow places, place writing can help to restore what Plumwood calls 'place honesty'.⁴¹ As John Tomaney argues in his defence of parochialism, creative writers are well-placed to 'reconcile the parish and the universe'. The loose, hybrid, suggestive style of place writing means that it can travel a long way, both temporally and spatially, in a short space. This allows it, in Tomaney's words, to 'test the ground between the local and the universal, the particular and the cosmopolitan', and to help foster 'an imaginative rather than a proprietorial interest in belonging'.⁴²

The island as pilgrimage

'When all this is over', writes Kathleen Jamie in her poem 'Lochan', 'I mean to travel north/by the high drove roads and cart tracks/probably in June'.⁴³ The phrase 'when all this is over' was uttered many times after March 2020, although less so as the lockdown rules got fuzzier and it became clear that there would be no sudden, purgative return to normality. 'This' in Jamie's poem refers to the daily commitments of domestic, parenting life. But the goal is the same: some specific elsewhere, in this case a boat tied up on an isolated loch. During lockdown, what many seemed to crave 'when all this is over' was to revisit a beloved place that for now could only be experienced in memory and anticipation.

What I missed most about not being physically present on Scattery was the silence – odd, perhaps, when silence can be experienced almost anywhere. But the silence on Scattery feels site-specific. All the island's sounds – the waves breaking as they sweep against the estuary's shoaling bottom, the reeds susurrating in the slightest breeze, the oystercatchers calling to each other on the beach – seem to arise out of this hospitable bed of silence and then fall back on to it. It is easy to imagine the human sounds that have broken the silence over the centuries, before dying on the air and leaving no trace: the raindrops pattering on a monk's cowl, a scythe cutting through hay, step dancing on the schoolhouse floor at a wedding céili, or the tears shed at the American wakes, held the night before young Scattery women left for America.

In Pat Collins's 2012 film *Silence*, a sound recordist, Eoghan, journeys across Ireland on the way to his childhood home on Tory Island. He has a commission: to record places free from human-made sound. Most of the film is dialogue-free, with the silence interrupted only by the sounds of great Atlantic breakers, the wind blowing through moorland grass or the call of corn-crakes. In one of the film's few conversations, Eoghan and a stranger he meets in a field discuss

two Irish words for silence: *thost* and *ciúnas*. *Thost* suggests only the silence after a noise has stopped, but *ciúnas* suggests an ambient, gravid stillness that evokes the unspoken experiences of the past, as in the phrase *chomh ciúin leis an reilig* ('as still as the grave').⁴⁴

Several of the island's myths in my grandmother's time concerned spectral sounds emerging out of this kind of meaning-filled silence. The chanting of the medieval monks could still be heard at Saint Senan's grave at sunrise or sunset. It could also be heard near the round tower at the secret entrance to *Cathair na gCat*, the city of cats, where bad priests became cats after death. These priests heard the liturgy but could never join in.⁴⁵ The now missing *Clog Óir*, Saint Senan's golden bell, was heard by people about to suffer a great calamity, or die.⁴⁶

In his 1948 work *The World of Silence*, the Swiss theologian Max Picard argues that silence is not the mere absence of noise but its own fertile presence, 'a complete work in itself'. Silence, for Picard, draws our attention to the wordless workings of the universe as they play out in a particular place. 'The reality of spring is so gentle', he writes, 'that it does not need to break through the solid walls of time with noise'.⁴⁷ Silence makes us more conscious of the inaudible tidal and seasonal movements of the world, and the timelessness beyond description that Scattery's monks would have called *eternity*.

Picard thought that modernity was endangering this type of silence. Silence was coming to be seen only as 'the place into which noise has not yet penetrated . . . a technical hitch in the noise-machine'.⁴⁸ Noise, for Picard, is a placeless cacophony coming from everywhere and nowhere; silence, though, is rooted in place. It cannot be experienced virtually, because it relies on being truly present in that place and that moment.

Scattery has been a Christian site of pilgrimage ever since the Celtic monks – known as *peregrini*, a word with the same root as *pilgrim* – arrived there. As Richard Scriven argues, a pilgrimage is necessarily both a spiritual and an actual journey, 'a merging of the tangible and the immaterial', an intermeshing of self and world.⁴⁹ The length and difficulty of the journey serves as an essential spiritual test. The pilgrimage's transformative potential relies on being present at that ultimate destination, the pilgrimage site. For Scriven, a pilgrimage confirms one of the central insights of phenomenology, that human reality is inescapably corporeal. We can only live in our bodies and our bodies can only live in the world.

The journeys in place writing can read rather like pilgrimages. They too attend to the haptic, immersive aspects of places, and the way that they can transform the writer's idea of life, the earth and themselves. In part this is a response to what Macfarlane describes as a 'retreat from the real . . . a prising away of life from place, an abstraction of experience into different kinds of touchlessness'.⁵⁰ And yet place writing tends to see these kinds of touchlessness as much more than just a flat, anodyne substitute for the real world. In Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun*, for instance, a stretch of uncultivated land at the top of her family's Orkney sheep farm allows her to rediscover the grounding qualities of place after an alcohol-fuelled, unmooring period in London. But her book also conveys the augmented sense of reality created by timestamped photographs, GPS apps and digital maps. In *The Outrun*, in David Cooper's words, 'place is co-constituted through a knotty entangling of the material and the digital'.⁵¹ Younger place writers, such as Liptrot, Lamorna Ash and Kerri ní Dochartaigh, seem at ease with and fascinated by the world of instantaneity and conflated distance ushered in by the smartphone.⁵²

Digital technologies make distant places feel imaginatively available; they can instil a powerful, semi-enchanted sense of co-presence, of being in two places at once. Unable to visit Scattery, I regularly looked on the Met Éireann weather app to see what the weather was like there. I browsed pictures of the island on Flickr and watched YouTube films of it taken by drone. On Google Earth, a simple click and drag of the mouse took me from a gently spinning globe in the blackness of space to the island seen from above. Hovering over it like this initially offered the illusion of

comprehensibility, as I noticed things I would not see on the ground. I could see the stark gaps in the peat made by turf-cutting in the *Corcas*, now filled with water to make mini-lakes; the network of faded boreens left by the islanders; and the outlines of the old strip fields, now nearly invisible at ground level.

It was, admittedly, a frustratingly odourless and airless experience, colonised by one sense: sight. In digital travel, we see a world only to the extent that others have been able to film and engineer it. Someone else's camera never points quite where you want it to, and however close it gets is never close enough. Zooming in to inspect a detail reveals only a pixelated blur. The sensual, somatic experience of being on the island – the sea breeze on your face, the strain of the beach's cobbles on your calves, that bouquet of ozone, salt and seaweed – is absent.

But then Scattery will always give up its secrets reluctantly. Lockdown has only reconfirmed the island's ultimate inaccessibility and unreadability. Even in Covid-free times, deep-mapping the island would present insuperable challenges. It is owned by Ireland's Office of Public Works and visits are strictly controlled, as well as being dependent on the weather and tides. None of the houses are habitable, and one can only camp overnight in the grounds of the old lighthouse keeper's cottage, the island's one privately-owned plot, by arrangement with the owner. Even when I can at last make the 600-mile round trip to Scattery, my visit will be limited to the few hours that the tour company allows.

John Wylie suggests that a profound encounter with place may have to start from this assumption that there is 'no full coincidence or co-presence of self and landscape, no fulsome being-in-the-world'.⁵³ What Wylie calls 'geographies of love' rely on the sense that we can never simply commune with a beloved person, thing or place. Genuine love and care demand an acceptance of otherness, of our distance from everything that is not ourselves. Placemaking is an open-ended, never-completed human act that combines the embodied and the imagined, the phenomenological and the virtual.

Coda

At the end of June 2020, the possibility of actually being present on Scattery opened up, tantalisingly. The UK government announced plans to ease restrictions on travel abroad, and millions of Britons booked holidays. In early July, for the first time since March, I heard planes overhead, as Ryanair resumed its flights. The vapour trails reappeared. Scattery also opened again for visitors, and they posted pictures of their visits on social media. The island was now a lush midsummer green and the fields were white-daisy meadows. Tentatively, I looked at ferry times and B&Bs in nearby Kilrush. Then, almost as soon as they were raised, my hopes were dashed. The Irish government published the 'green list', the handful of countries that people could travel from to Ireland without the need to quarantine for 2 weeks on arrival. It excluded the UK, its infection and death rates being much worse than Ireland's. Ryanair cancelled 100s of flights in anticipation of suppressed demand. The planes stopped flying overhead; the vapour trails vanished again.

Just as I was processing this, I read a newspaper story about the superrich buying private islands as Covid-free havens. An anonymous buyer had bought Horse Island, off the south-west coast of Ireland, for five and a half million Euros. Like Scattery it used to be an agricultural holding, so the new owner could grow enough food to be self-sufficient. Unlike Scattery it had its own electricity grid, a water treatment system, a private pier, a large house, six guest houses, a tennis court and a helipad. The buyer had bought the island without setting foot on it, after seeing a video.⁵⁴ Even with nine-tenths of the world's population under travel restrictions, the super-mobile rich still seemed able to play by different rules.

This story about the market for private islands underlined to me how odd it is to see land, that common asset beyond price, as something to parcel off through the drawing up of deeds and exchanging of contracts. On the mainland, property lines marked by walls and fences are a naturalised part of the human landscape. But on a small island it is harder to maintain the origin myth on which all private property has its legal foundation – the moment of first possession. A small island exposes the concept of property as, in Nick Hayes's words, 'a hypothetical space, a legal force-field, a man-made spell . . . a hallucination conjured by a history of privatisation'.⁵⁵ Hayes's *The Book of Trespass* was published in August 2020 after a spring and summer of lockdown had shown the importance of open spaces to people's health and wellbeing. Hayes made explicit a political point implicit in most place writing: any bit of earth is part of the commonwealth, antedating and outliving its owners.

As I complete this article in April 2020, Liverpool remains in its third lockdown and I do not know when I will be able to return to Scattery. More than a year of constricted movement has made many of us reassess our relationship to places, both the parochial and now all-too-near and the distant and now inaccessible. At a time of environmental and public health emergency, we have become more aware that, in a world linked by pandemics, climate change, hyperglobalised markets and cheap, mobile labour, the places we love are linked to the places we prefer to ignore.

Contemporary place writing offers a rich corpus for thinking through these issues, by exploring the ambiguities and enigmas of place: place as deeply human and as more than human; place as embodied and present and as remembered and absent; place as a point of connection with the deep time of history and the immediacy of the here and now; place as the unique confluence of elements that make up its *genius loci*, and as part of an endlessly relational world. The resurgence of interest in place owes much to what Tim Edensor, Ares Kalandides and Uma Kothari call 'the paradoxical realisation that we all live in one place, namely a planet that we may be about to render uninhabitable, while simultaneously living in different places on this planet'.⁵⁶ Underlying much place writing is a sense that shifts in environmental consciousness must start with a fierce attention to the small-scale and personal – and that only by acknowledging the parochial will we learn how to care about the world and persuade others to do the same.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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