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A secret affair

Researching Ireland's Catholic Mass Rocks

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Background

In Ireland, the period 1530–1750 witnessed major changes in the organization of Irish society (Smyth 2006). Rather than being simply an inert backdrop to the momentous events that accompanied the advent of Protestantism in Ireland and the energetic attempts of the Roman Catholic faith to resist annihilation, the Irish landscape provided a powerful arena for future devotion that shaped the profound theological, liturgical, and cultural transformations that mark this crucial period (Walsham 2011). During this period, the Williamite revolution of 1690–1691 ensured the dominance of the Protestant minority in Ireland (Hill 1988). Both Williamite and Jacobite forces had seen themselves engaged in a war of religion fighting for constitutional principles. It was the climax of the Reformation and of the long struggle between Protestant and Catholic political, social, and economic rivalry for supremacy in Ireland (Hayton 2004). The Treaty of Limerick marked the end of the revolution, but Protestants believed its terms to be much too favorable towards Catholics (Bartlett 1990). They were deeply suspicious of the articles and believed that, while the Stuart Pretender continued to be recognized by the Vatican and Versailles, their position in Ireland would remain threatened (Bartlett 1992).

The Penal Laws were passed between 1695 and 1756, although it is reasonable to argue that Ireland's Roman Catholics had remained in a state of suppression from as early as Tudor times. The degrading and dividing influence of the Penal Laws, which were enacted in defiance of a treaty intended to guarantee Catholics freedom from oppression on account of their religion, and without the provocation of rebellion, extended to every field of Catholic political, professional, social, intellectual, and domestic life (Lecky 1891).

The introduction of the Banishment Act of 1697 required all regular clergy, bishops, and those exercising ecclesiastical jurisdiction to leave Ireland. Their expulsion was carried out in a highly efficient manner, and those regulars, such as the Jesuits and Franciscans that remained, or filtered back into the country, found refuge among wealthy Catholic families or remained under the pretext of being secular clergy, eventually registering under the Registration Act (2 Anne (1703) c.7 Section 1). All registered priests were required to take an oath of abjuration, denying the right of James III to the throne and accepting Queen Anne as the rightful and lawful queen (2 Anne (1703) c.6 Section 15). Few priests took the oath, and those who refused forfeited any legal status that the Registration Act had offered them, resulting in a disruption to religious services. Priests were forced into hiding, and the doors of Catholic chapels and Mass Houses were closed (Connolly 1992).

Although the Penal Laws managed to limit the public expression of Catholicism, they did not ensure the elimination of Catholicism or result in the mass conversion of Catholics (Bartlett 1990). Despite chapels being appropriated by Protestant authorities and Mass Houses being closed, Mass continued to be celebrated in secret at a number of locations such as barns and outhouses and in the open air in ditches, under trees and bushes, and at altars known as Mass Rocks.

I first became interested in Mass Rocks as a postgraduate student studying for an MPhil in 2009 at the Institute of Irish Studies, University of Liverpool, under an Arts and Humanities Research Council grant. The research assessed the impact of European Union funding on the management of archaeological

monuments within England and the Republic of Ireland. I had studied the Penal era as an undergraduate and, during postgraduate field research and interviews in County Mayo in Ireland, farmers often pointed out Mass Rocks on their land. They seemed to be a recurring feature of the archaeological landscape, yet few were recorded on the Record of Monuments and Places, which forms the foundation of the list of all historical sites in the Republic of Ireland.

Although much had been written about the Penal era, little research seemed to have been undertaken with respect to Mass Rock sites, and the archaeological excavation of sites associated with the period was severely limited. I put forward a proposal for PhD funding to assess the geographical distribution of Mass Rock sites across the island of Ireland, but focusing specifically at a diocesan level to test existing hypotheses about their nature, use, and significance in the retention of Catholic identity and practice. This approach was intended to provide both a meaningful and manageable set of data.

My research does not attempt to assess the implementation, success, or failure of the Penal Laws. Instead, it attempts to set the archaeological context of Mass Rock sites against their historical background while simultaneously considering geographical settlement patterns and topography, and it has provided one of the most thorough syntheses of available information with respect to Mass Rocks at both a diocesan and county level. In doing so, it has produced a valuable resource that continues to widen our understanding of this emotive and often misunderstood period in Irish history.

The theme of Catholicism has rarely been far from the center of discourse on the nature of Irish life. Despite this, the seemingly monolithic nature of Irish Catholicism obscures significant temporal, social, and regional variations. For both the historical and cultural geographer, an emphasis on the uneven impact of Catholicism and its development in the modern period can highlight many features of Irish geography (Whelan 1983) and help us to understand how religion can shape landscape.

The interdisciplinary nature of research

Initially, I struggled to find a suitable framework within which to place my research. No two Mass Rocks were the same, so how was I going to capture these differences within a comparable and consistent dataset? I reflected on the sacred nature of these sites and realized that a framework of sacred space that looked at the location, nature, ritual, memory, and language of each site would provide the structure I needed. However, I also realized that, as a result, I would need to take an interdisciplinary approach in order to explore relevant data, methodologies, perspectives, and concepts that the framework reflected. The over-riding discipline remained that of human geography, but research was located within the subfield of cultural geography and specifically focused on the geography of religion, encompassing historical, archaeological, folkloric, and linguistic methodologies and sources. I continue to successfully apply this framework to current research projects, including my Mass path project funded through the British Academy, but it would be equally suitable for others researching a variety of sacred spaces.

Archaeological sources

My initial desk-based investigation uses on-line resources for both the Record of Monuments and Places in the Republic of Ireland and the Sites and Monuments Record for Northern Ireland. In the early stages of my research, this provided a record of the total number of officially recorded sites across the whole island of Ireland and revealed some surprising concentrations and absences, with County Cork experiencing a density of Mass Rock sites far greater than any other area and thus providing an obvious focus for initial research. To keep the PhD study area to a manageable size, it seemed sensible to choose the diocese of Cork and Ross because approximately 75 percent of these recorded sites were located within this particular diocese. This localized study allowed me to deeply analyze the data gathered and use it to question the validity of assumptions that were based on information at a national level and also to place the collected data and conclusions within a wider context.

One of my first questions was to ask why the density of Mass Rock sites was far greater in County Cork than in any other area. I found that the reason for this was that it had enjoyed something of an extensive and systematic study of its archaeological and historical sites by the Cork Archaeological Survey team based at University College Cork (Murphy 1993). It also benefited from the publication of *An Archaeological Inventory of West Cork* (Power *et al* 1992) and the well-established *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*.

I discovered that it is necessary to be cautious when using some archaeological resources as there are inherent dangers in an over-reliance of the data produced within them. As Cooney *et al* (2000) point out, the

Record of Monuments and Places, which forms the foundation of the list of all historical sites in the Republic of Ireland, predominantly consists of built structures which pre-date AD 1700 although Rynne (2000) acknowledges that subsequent legislation, in the form of the 1987 amendment to the National Monuments Act, grants discretion where post–AD 1700 sites of national importance are concerned. Given that many historians believe that Mass Rock sites were used predominantly as a result of Penal legislation passed between 1695 and 1756, I realized that there was the potential for many sites to be excluded from the record. My ongoing research shows this to be the case, with almost 400 potential sites now identified in County Cork alone, yet with just over 100 recorded on the archaeological record (Bishop 2016). The fact that Mass Rocks were both temporally and spatially mutable may go some way in explaining the significant number of sites that have been identified during research and make it difficult to provide a definitive list of sites.

Like most historical archaeology, my research is based on the analysis of both documentary and material records while simultaneously focusing on the material evidence that remains visible within the Irish landscape. Landscapes are an important expression of the relationship that exists between people and place, and they encompass an ensemble of ordinary features which constitute an extraordinarily rich exhibition of both the course and character of any given society (Meinig 1979). The Irish landscape became an arena for open-air piety, devotion, and worship during the Penal era as the persecution and proscription of their faith compelled Irish Catholics to embrace familiar settings that were framed with deeper cultural meaning.

Historical sources

Historians are in agreement that, because of Ireland's turbulent past, historical and other sources are often limited. In her review of tradition and confessionalism in Ireland between 1400 and 1690, Meigs (1997) points to the fact that many conventional sources used by Continental and English historians are lacking for Irish history. She explains that historians must, instead, often rely on foreign archives, particularly those in London, Belgium, and Rome. Irish Catholic documentation can often be more about the history of ideas and high politics than about popular Catholic beliefs or practices (Barnard 2008). Later sources also tend to be dominated by Protestant commentary (Harris 2008) for, as Barnard (2005) explains, they alone possessed the resources and leisure time. While they sometimes consulted learned Catholics who had preserved documents, objects, and traditions, little about the circumstances of the lives of contemporary Catholics interested them.

In documenting Irish martyrs, Corish (1993) turned to the State Papers to provide a rich source in an area where other sources were scarce and scattered. However, he too acknowledges limitations. He advises that the State Papers contained correspondence between the lord deputy in Dublin and the Privy Council in London and was more concerned with the problems of royal government in Ireland and their difficulties in raising taxes than the problem of religious recusancy. While this correspondence would once have been underpinned by more 'grassroots' material from across the country, a vast amount of this material was lost when the Irish Public Records office was destroyed in 1922. The resultant chaos in which the seventeenth century is shrouded reveals little about the ordinary people (Elliott 2000), and it was these 'ordinary' people who would have used the Mass Rocks.

Another major problem common to nearly all new work on eighteenth-century Ireland is the fact that it was based on English-language evidence (Dickson 2004). For the Gaelic Irish, a key aspect of my research, the difficulties are further complicated by the fact that particular biases have created a document base that either ignores them or presents them solely in the context of foreign institutional policies (Meigs 1997). The exploration of early modern religious practice in an Irish context is truly hindered by the nature of documentary sources that are available, and native areas of the country are represented by little other than surviving documentation in the form of annals or poetic eulogies (Lyttleton 2009).

One exception is the *Report on the State of Popery*. By 1731 the strength of Irish Catholicism in Ireland was creating considerable anxiety to authorities. Under the direction of Archbishop Hugh Boulter, a House of Lords committee was established in 1731 to ascertain the 'present state of popery' in the country. Two reports focusing specifically on the religious aspect of the Catholic question were published and included returns outlining the numbers of Mass Houses, Popish chapels, and officiating priests in towns and counties across the country (CHSI 1912). While they do not specifically call for Mass Rocks to be recorded, these provide a good source of reference for me as they occasionally identify parishes where Mass was celebrated in the open air. The report states, for example, that there were no Mass Houses or '"private popish Chapel" in the parish of Inshiguilah' in County Cork but identifies seven 'sheds' where 'only a Shade over the Priest' existed, with 'the people standing in ye open air' (CHSI 1913). As these reports are contemporary, once I

had identified these parishes, I was able to investigate further using subsequent or alternative sources.

Irish-language sources

Language is a basic component of culture. It can help to identify who we are and help to unite us as communities, but it can also divide and separate. Languages evolve and change in response to the dynamics of human thought and experience and are the most important medium by which culture is transmitted. Poetry texts, place-name studies, and other Irish-language sources can provide a range of information about the location and context of Mass Rock sites. Despite this, Irish-language sources are 'sadly neglected by Irish geographers' despite the fact that they can provide insight into how the Irish-speaking community lived and responded to both political and colonial pressures (Smyth 2006). Fortunately, I studied Irish language as part of my undergraduate degree program and have reasonable proficiency, and this has been invaluable in accessing Irish-language sources.

One of the most enduring ways in which religion can influence landscape is through place-names (Park 1994). In many countries such as Ireland, it is common to find religious names for towns and topographical features. The Irish language has remained in use to modern times with respect to place-names and natural features, and modern Irish place-names do not differ to any significant degree from their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century forms (Hughes 1991). Local people are the principal users of these place-names and may therefore be considered the sole hereditary custodians of them (Hughes 1991). These place-names can be of great assistance to a geographer in that they can exist in perpetuity, providing 'a powerful memory bank for, and of, a culture' (Smyth 2004, p. 243). During my research, I discovered a significant number of place-names, indicative of the commemoration of the celebration of Mass, including *Carraig an Aifrinn* ('Mass Rock'), *Clais an Aifrinn* ('Mass Ravine'), *Paircín an Aifrinn* ('Little Field of the Mass'), *Páirc an tSéipéil* ('Chapel Field'), *Pairc an tSagairt* ('Priest's Field'), *Faill an Aifrinn* ('Mass Cliff'), *Cábán an Aifrinn* ('Mass Cabin'), *Cnocan na hAltorach* ('Small Hill of the Ahteltar'), *Gleann an Aifrinn* ('Mass Glen'), and *Carraig an tSeipeil* ('Rock of the Chapel') (Bishop 2016, p. 42), shown in Figure 11.1.

Figure 11.1 Carraig an tSeipeil, Gortnahoughtee Mass Rock, County Cork

While place-names can hold extensive clues, I am mindful of some research difficulties in using them, especially as an ultimate source of reference to indicate the use of a particular place for saying Mass. Power (1917–1924) refers to a number of these in his research of south-east Cork and shows that place-names cannot always be taken at face value. In Ballycranny, County Cork, he identifies the 'Mass Path Field' which is in reality a field with a path that runs through it that was simply used as a short cut on Sundays (Power 1917). *Páirc an Aifrinn* is a 'Mass Field' through which a Mass path ran but did not receive this name because Mass was actually celebrated in the field (Power 1917). In Terrysland, *Páircín a tSagairt*, or the 'Priest's Field', is thought to be so named because the priest held the field as tenant (Power 1917/1919a). Despite this they continue to provide an initial baseline for my research and can often prove a fruitful resource.

Folklore sources

Understanding folklore is an essential requirement for the interpretation of contemporary reactions to historical events (Hopkin 2001), and Ireland is renowned for its vibrant oral traditions. The use of folklore as a historical source has an early pedigree in Ireland, and Douglas Hyde's seminal address to the National Literary Society in 1892 gave new importance to folklore for understanding Gaelic Ireland and placing it centrally in Irish life (Ó Giolláin 2000).

The Folklore of Ireland Society, founded in 1927, was followed by the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935 (Ó Giolláin 2000). The main aim of the commission was to retrieve and rescue cultural traditions before they disappeared (Daly 2010, p. 67). Described by Séamus Ó Duilearga as 'the State Papers of a forgotten and neglected people' (Ó Duilearga 1936, p. 399), the Irish Folklore Commission archive is the largest single resource available for the study of popular culture in Ireland's recent past (Ó Giolláin 2005) and has contributed significantly to defining the country's intellectual and cultural heritage (Daly 2010).

Seán Ó Súilleabháin, in his *Handbook of Irish Folklore*, stated that inquiries were to be made concerning the Penal days. I found the use of his practical guide, as to the type of material to be recorded from oral sources in Ireland, invaluable. He recommended that information and popular traditions associated with stones, Mass Rocks, altars, and Mass Paths, as well as other remains popularly associated with Penal times, should be collected, specifically suggesting that names and traditions connected with such places should be recorded (Ó Súilleabháin 1942).

One of the Commission's first country-wide projects used the primary school system, with teachers coordinating material collected by the pupils at home (Ó Ciosáin 2004).The Schools' Folklore Scheme (1937–38) resulted in more than half a million manuscript pages of valuable material and was the vessel through which much of the information suggested by Ó Súilleabháin was collected. Now known as the Schools' Manuscript Collection, the scheme resulted in more than half a million manuscript pages of valuable archival material (NFCS 2018). Entries can help to provide an understanding of how religion shaped the Irish landscape as well as offer an insight into local experiences and the complex relationship that existed between local religious practice and more 'official' forms of devotion (Taylor 1992).

Despite this, there are difficulties in using Folklore Commission archives. These are clearly outlined by Beiner (2007) in *Remembering the Year of the French* wherein he researches local memories of the events of 1798. The academic study of Irish folklore has always been strongly associated with the study of the Irish language and has therefore favored material in Irish. Pupil attendance in the national school system was overwhelmingly Catholic, and pupils who participated principally collected folklore from family members, resulting in a pronounced partiality towards Catholic traditions. Field collection also tended to focus on rural areas and elderly informants so that, by the early twentieth century, eyewitnesses to early events were no longer alive and recollections had been transmitted as family traditions over multiple generations (Beiner 2007).

Additionally, there is no standardized way of approaching the material contained within the folklore archive. Some classic folkloristic categorization schemes, including Aarne-Thompson and Ó Súilleabháin, are inadequate either because they are designed largely for folk narratives that are fictional and imaginative (rather than historical) or because they derive from Scandinavian folk-life studies (Ó Ciosáin 2004). Neither is it appropriate to apply the methods of oral history to the memory of historical events because little is known about the actual circumstances of the collection of the material and interviews cannot be repeated (Joutard 1977, 1983; Thompson 1992).

There are 125 volumes of the Schools' Collection for County Cork which form part of the National Folklore Collection (NFCS), and during my PhD work, I systematically studied these page by page for entries relating to Penal times. An indexing system is available for anyone wishing to research the collection, but my own approach helped me to provide context for the relevant entries rather than studying them in isolation and to better understand the landscape as a whole. While it is acknowledged that the Penal era was clearly afforded some priority and that the questions asked appear to be designed to elicit specific responses, this continues to be a valuable resource to help me identify the location of Mass Rock sites and has contributed to a number of peer-reviewed publications (Bishop 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018). I continue to rely on this resource for my initial investigation into Irish Mass Paths as part of a British Academy funded research project.

Geographical sources

Ordnance Survey Manuscripts and Memoirs, Ordnance Survey Maps, and historical maps and charts help me to assess the topography of a given area and to research place-name information and the approximate location of sites. However, Ordnance Survey Memoirs and letters are regrettably deficient for some areas of Ireland (Cadogan in Lewis 1837). Additionally, early cartographers had no cause to publicize Catholic places of worship, by putting them on maps, for fear that this might have been misunderstood as a gesture of legitimization. As a result, many government officials paid little attention to them (Andrews 1997) so that, even with updated sources available from Ordnance Survey Ireland, the majority of Mass sites still remain absent from cartographical sources.

Geographical field research

By their very nature, Mass Rock sites are well hidden from sight and difficult to find and access. Sites are often in remote or inaccessible places, on private land or simply overgrown and impossible to locate or access. A number have been removed or buried, further exacerbating my field research. While some sites are recorded within the archaeological record, the majority are primarily known at a local level, with information about their location and background passed down orally from generation to generation. Local sources therefore provide valuable information, helping me to identify sites. For example, a list of sites compiled by McCarthy (1989/90) and published in the *Journal of the Ballincollig Community School Local History Society* provided a starting point for my research in County Cork.

In Ireland, most of the nation's rich archaeological heritage remains in the custody and guardianship of thousands of private landowners and land users. Land ownership and control has always been a critical factor in Irish rural history and remains a strong influence over attitudes towards land in Ireland today (Aalen 1993). There are two fundamental, but contrasting, attitudes towards land ownership in Ireland: the first views land as personal property and a commodity to be traded at will; the other view incorporates a sense of stewardship that recognizes a responsibility towards the interests of a wider community alongside future generations (Aalen 1993). I have come across both and, sadly, participation rates in stewardship schemes within Ireland demonstrate that the first view is still the more dominant (Bishop 2009). In the past 20 years, it has become more difficult to access the Irish countryside, and previously relaxed attitudes have increasingly become preventative and hostile. Landowners state that this is due to difficulty with insurance and damage caused by walkers as well as ownership and privacy issues (Keep Ireland Open 2018). I have been turned away from some sites but local diocesan teams have been extremely helpful in providing me with letters of recommendation, and it is acknowledged that many of the sites I visited and subsequently recorded, along with much of the information obtained from local landowners, would not have been possible without these letters of recommendation.

Where an archaeological record already exists for a Mass Rock site, I verify the details and record any variations or additions. Field research has enabled the development of new typologies to better classify sites, enabling future researchers to categorize sites according to physical appearance and recurring features (Bishop 2015). All sites are measured, where possible, and photographed, and descriptive details noted. In addition, a 360-degree panoramic view of the surrounding topography is recorded digitally. Accurate OS co-ordinates for each Mass Rock are recorded using a Garmin eTrex H Personal Navigator. This is undertaken because the National Grid Reference provided for some sites does not always appear to be completely accurate, as I noted at Coolagh Mass Rock in County Galway.

When Galway Archaeological and Historical Society put out a call for information to upgrade the county's Historic Pathways, I was contacted by a local historian to see if I could shed any light on a Mass Rock that did not appear to be in its original location. The Coolagh Mass Rock was moved when the local Crestwood housing estate was built in Galway and the Archaeological Survey of Ireland placed the Mass Rock in the back garden of a property on the estate (Figure 11.2). However, the homeowner had no knowledge of the Mass Rock. When I visited the Coolough Heritage Committee, during a Visiting Research Fellowship at the Moore Institute, NUI Galway, I toured the housing estate and was able to use my experience to identify a rock in a nearby boundary wall that I thought was probably the Mass Rock. It transpired that the wrong co-ordinates had been input into the archaeological record. Planning permission had been granted for a housing development in the area around the site, meaning that the Mass Rock may have been destroyed were it not for my intervention.

Figure 11.2 Coolagh Mass Rock, County Galway

I prepare my maps using ArcGIS software under a relevant licensing agreement, and details of Mass Rock sites are made available on my dedicated website, www.findamassrock.com, to provide a permanent digital archive accessible within the public domain. The website is an important aspect of my research as it acts as a two-way channel for the dissemination and collection of research data and has prompted contact from potential future project partners such as photographers and heritage groups as well as academics. In addition, website analytics have provided me with robust data to support successful grant applications and funding requests.

Mass Rock sites provided a sacred space for bringing the sacraments of penance and Holy Communion to the people, helping to place the priest at the center of the lives of the community. The Mass Rock became one of the most visible and enduring symbols of Catholicism at this time, and this has remained the case throughout subsequent centuries and in to more contemporary times despite the changing nature of Catholicism in Ireland. So pervasive was the Mass Rock in the image of past persecution that Pope John Paul II spoke of it during his 1979 visit to Ireland.

In an era of rapid cultural change, Mass Rocks continue to reflect, and help reconstruct, contemporary Irish identity, and Mass at the Mass Rock has become an important social event that plays a vital role in shaping both collective identity and social life. Catholicism remains intimately linked to Irish identity and, as Catholic communities become collectively more in tune with their religious heritage, they have sought a more inclusive approach to worship using alternative venues over more traditional ones – what Hederman has termed 'underground cathedrals' (Hederman 2010). Evidence of such a shift may be found in the 'Rosary at the Mass Rocks for Life and Faith' initiative which took place across Ireland in March 2018 (Coastal Rosary Ireland 2018).

The Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary was also practiced throughout Penal times. In the absence of priests available to celebrate Mass, the Rosary was often recited by individuals and groups either in their own homes or in fields in the open air (McGuire 1954). Evidence from a 1961 survey reveals that, in certain parts of Ireland such as Donegal, people remained immensely loyal to the Rosary devotion which played a central role in their lives (Lysaght 1998). As a devotion that was officially recognized and promoted by the Catholic Church, it was equally as integral to the spiritual life of the people as the Mass (Lysaght 1998). In a day of national pilgrimage, hundreds of people followed in the footsteps of their ancestors and celebrated the Rosary at 45 Mass Rocks across the island of Ireland, including additional sites also associated with Mass in Penal times (Coastal Rosary Ireland 2018). This continued use of Mass Rocks reflects, and helps reconstruct and legitimize, contemporary Irish identity while simultaneously providing a tangible and experiential connection to Irish heritage and tradition.

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