

RESEARCH

Rural Waterscape and Emotional Sectarianism in Accounts of Lough Derg, County Donegal

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The story of Lough Derg in Ireland's County Donegal is arranged around clusters of sectarian narratives in juxtaposition, synthesis and conflict. The Sanctuary of Saint Patrick sits on Station Island, a small rocky islet set within the waters of the lake. The site became well known in the early Middle Ages as the place of Saint Patrick's delving of a cave that led to purgatory, allowing the sinner to experience a glimpse of the torments of hell while still in this life. The island then attracted pilgrims from all over Europe and became embedded into the Catholic literary and spiritual imagination. After the Protestant Ascendancy and the Plantation of Ulster began in the seventeenth century, the place became a site of tension and narrative clashes between differing visions of rural place, each with its own spectrum of affect, emotions and ideals.

This essay unpacks the resonances of Lough Derg as a site of sectarian narrative by 1) situating the discussion within a distinctly rural context; 2) adding the unique properties of spiritual waterscape to the discussion; and 3) discussing the Irish sectarian narratives and identities arising from the lake and its purgatorial isle. It focuses on a case study of Protestant and establishment accounts of the lake during the nineteenth century, depicting them as internally diverse as well as part of a larger ecology of sectarian contestations. It explores waterscape and its role in influencing community responses to and shaping of place, the manner in which sectarian responses to space are internally diverse, and the manner in which Catholic and Protestant narratives of place have intertwined to shape the lake in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Ireland; Lough Derg; History of Emotions; Rural Landscape; Isolation; Water; Political Ecology

Introduction

Oh, would you know the power of faith,
Go ! see it at Lough Derg;
Oh, would you learn to smile at Death,
Go ! learn it at Lough Derg;
Thomas D'Arcy McGee, 'Lough Derg', IV, 1 (1902: 486)

When the Catholic Irish-Canadian politician and poet Thomas D'Arcy McGee visited Lough Derg in Ireland's County Donegal in the late nineteenth century, he captured snippets of place, space and emotion that ran a complex course through spiritual experience. The reason McGee's admiring intervention in the epigram above was political as well as spiritual must be set in the context of a spectrum of polarised and differential accounts: some admiring, laudatory or rapturous, other disappointed, confused or disdainful. The story of the lake is the arrangement of sectarian narratives in juxtaposition, synthesis and conflict. Part of this story and its associated qualities has been a complex

interaction of community, emotion and identity. Human actions accumulate within shared place, the collective interactions of the pilgrimage, human and non-human combining to create a spectrum of emotional narrative responses.

The Sanctuary of Saint Patrick sits on Station Island, a small rocky islet set within the waters of Lough Derg. The site became well known in the early Middle Ages as the place attached to a narrative detailing Saint Patrick's delving of a cave that led to purgatory, allowing the sinner to experience a glimpse of the torments of hell while still in this life. It served as the stage for a multi-layered dream vision containing complex moral symbolism: a descent into the fantastic and return to the quotidian. The island then attracted pilgrims from all over Europe and became embedded into the Catholic literary and spiritual imagination. After a likely pre-history as a pre-Christian sacred site, lake and island then became a popular pilgrimage in the twelfth century after participating in the Patrick story. The Purgatory has evolved with the beliefs of its visitors (see Barbezat, 2018; Cunningham and Gillespie, 2004; Haren and Pontfarcy, 1988; and Haren, 1994). After a waning but enduring influence during the period of suppression in the seventeenth to early nineteenth century known as the

Protestant Ascendancy, the waxing fortunes of Catholic worship and those of the Free State and later Republic of Ireland raised the pilgrimage to renewed prominence. The focal point of these debates is the long nineteenth century, and yet the sectarian narrative begins in the seventeenth century with the Plantation of Ulster and takes on a new life in the early twentieth-century era of independence. As I have written elsewhere (Smith, 2019), the story of the lake has become entangled in both the social and religious history of the regions as well as its emotional history.

The repetitive circuit of prayer stations, the experience of hardship, and the unforgiving schedule have become famed across the Catholic world. They have formed a cornerstone of a reaffirmed pilgrim identity that is still an important part of Irish cultural life. They have come to shape the identity of rural County Donegal and Ulster as a whole. Ryan Lash (2018: 84–5) proposes that attending to repetitive patterns of use ‘means recognising how human settlement patterns, skills, and perceptions of place, time, and the past emerge through multisensory encounters with environments animated by other living beings as well as the forces of water, weather, stone, etc.’ Lash discusses the ‘taskscape’ model in the context of medieval devotion, but it would be equally apt to mention Cheryl Morse Dunkley’s (2009) ‘therapeutic taskscape’, a site of repetitive activity such as a youth camp in which repetitive and re-inscribed activity augments a therapeutic landscape. This is important, for as Monique Scheer (2012: 220) puts it, emotions alter with time ‘not only because

norms, expectations, words, and concepts that shape experience are modified, but also because the practices in which they are embodied, and bodies themselves, undergo transformation’. Repetitive embodied action inscribes itself upon place.

Once place is felt and experienced affectively, it combines with a complex environment of other factors. **Figure 1** depicts the iconic image of Lough Derg in the twenty-first century: Station Island set within the lake and crowned by its iconic Hiberno-Romanesque basilica, a symbol of a renewed social and spiritual identity. It is a cultural symbol for a healing experience. The current marketing for the pilgrimage within the Catholic community focuses on rest, relaxation, rejuvenation and spiritual renewal. The healing properties of the arrangements formed create in turn what Ronan Foley (2010) has termed a ‘therapeutic assemblage’, a system of performed healing and subjectivity shaped through engagement with place. Human and physical geography intertwine: the more that human geography is warped by an aversion to development because a place must be rural and isolated to be itself, the more the environment will express this mentality through cultivation practices, land management, conservation and environmental management decisions. Positive and negative jostle for position: hydrophobia and hydrophilia make place supportive or inimical to health and happiness, depending on their valence (see Foley et al., 2019).

Water provides a framework for and shape to identities and emotional topographies, but also complicates them. Lakes such as Lough Derg and its archipelago of



Figure 1: Purgatory at Lough Derg. Photo: © Kenneth Allen, CC BY SA 2.0.

land-locked islands are part of Ireland's sacred network of wells and watersheds that are united in tradition, and yet distinct in their meanings and characteristics. As Celeste Ray (2014: 11) puts it, 'how people might have venerated springs, ponds, bogs, lakes or rivers, has varied with their societal forms and the physical geographies over which they emplaced cultural beliefs'. In the case of many sites, a layered history of past and present veneration endures, cutting human contours into the beds of physical geographies like the path of a river or the watershed of a lake. Pilgrim practice surrounding these sites draws power

and structure from repetition—stations, circuits, rosaries, prayers—and water remembers it to those entangled in its hydro-social and socio-ecological arrangements (see Linton and Budds, 2014; Winiwarter, Schmid, Haidvogl and Hohensinner, 2013).

For Lough Derg, multiple religious and class-based community identities have shaped distinct emotional nodes of power within the spiritual geography of place and its cyclical narratives. Repetition of political visions within space created overlapping identities clinging to these nodes. For example: Lough Derg the Catholic pilgrim



Figure 2: A pilgrim praying on St. Brigid's Chair. Photo: Philip Dixon Hardy, *The Holy Wells of Ireland: Containing an Authentic Account of Those Various Places of Pilgrimage and Penance Which Are Still Annually Visited by Thousands of the Roman Catholic Peasantry. With a Minute Description of the Patterns and Stations Periodically Held in Various Districts of Ireland* (Dublin: Hardy and Walker, 1840), public domain, out of copyright. Altered colour to improve visibility due to yellowing of paper in digitisation.

site, belonging to the sacred landscape, and/or Lough Derg the underutilised rural lake, owned and managed in the Protestant secular sphere. McGee was responding to a layered resonance of place swirling around the lake, destructive and developmental in equal measure. This essay unfolds the patterns of Lough Derg by 1) situating the discussion within a distinctly rural context; 2) adding the unique properties of spiritual waterscape to the discussion; and 3) discussing the Irish sectarian narratives and identities arising from the lake and its purgatorial isle. It focuses on a case study of Protestant and establishment accounts of the lake during the nineteenth century, depicting them as internally diverse as well as part of a larger ecology of sectarian contestations.

Remoteness, Isolation and Waterscape

The isolation of Lough Derg within County Donegal and the distance of Station Island from the lake shore are fundamental components of its rural spiritual geography. Carla Danani (2014: 54) proposes that a sacred space 'clearly expresses and, at the same time, opens up an understanding of what is missing, as the condition of what is possible, and this is precisely the path of symbolic consciousness'. Furthermore, liminal markers such as steps 'act as the access point to a sacred place and, at the same time, effect a defamiliarization with the surrounding'. The remoteness of Lough Derg and the distance between the islets and shore further amplify the defamiliarization and remoteness of the sacred, a performative function 'to free what has been forgotten, to awaken the concern that our homeland is elsewhere'. Perhaps the best example of this phenomenon occurs in the writing of Catholic spiritual author Alice Curtayne as she outlines the power of the lake:

Whether the pilgrim to St. Patrick's Purgatory knows it or not, he is a sort of Rip Van Winkle whose experience is reversed: he finds himself catapulted back from the twentieth century into the fifth. If he goes there for the first time, he is on a voyage of discovery in which he will gain experiential knowledge of the past, not merely in his mind but in his very body. The Patrician age endures on the island and fifteen hundred years are almost as though they had never been. Unrivalled peace and isolation give him complete freedom to savour this experience. (Curtayne, 1944: 167)

In the case of Lough Derg, the symbolic power of encountering Purgatory is amplified by the double symbolic journey—across Europe and Ireland, and across the water—needed in order to cross into a place that is not of this world. It is far from the homes of those who come on pilgrimage. Prior to the advent of more efficient forms of transport, many pilgrims of humble means walked for many miles to visit the Purgatory, and their stories make the lake remote in the minds of its admirers. In the pre-modern incarnations of the pilgrimage, medieval aristocrats and churchmen came to the lake from every corner of Latin Christendom. Isolation can be a centre.

The rural can attract the urban. All that is required is sufficient history, fame, and affective magnetism. Ireland is filled with sites exuding this power, from Newgrange to Croagh Patrick, Giant's Causeway to the Cliffs of Moher. The route branded by the Irish Government and Fáilte Ireland (the Irish tourism development authority) as the 'Wild Atlantic Way' running along Ireland's west coast is its spine of attractive isolation, a highway of ecologically situated rural affect. The more recent branding of the east coast as 'Ireland's Ancient East' is an attempt to replicate the symbolic power of the phenomenon.

The Irish West bears a powerful legacy of nostalgia and cultural identity. Patrick J Duffy (1997: 68) writes that 'the West [of Ireland] has continued ... to carry burdens of authenticity into the twentieth century'. The same can be said of the twenty-first. Éamon de Valera—second Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and third President of Ireland—saw the rural Irish-speaking West as the essence of nationhood, and the revolutionary and writer Pádraig Pearse retreated to Connemara to commune with wild nature. Poet William Butler Yeats was another prominent Celtic Revival aficionado of this perspective. The romance of isolation and the rural has been baked into modern Ireland from the beginning. It is no accident that the title page of the *Saorstát Éireann: Irish Free State Official Handbook* (1932) contains a rural image of Errigal in County Donegal by Paul Henry. As Duffy continues:

Overarching the idealisation of the West in the artistic representations of Ireland is what might be called the myth of the rural, a narrative which has echoes of a more universal allegory of the communal and pastoral tranquillity of the rural idyll in the face of ever-expanding urbanisation. The preoccupation with rural imagery in Ireland can be traced back to nineteenth-century searches for an identity as Other to English industrial urbanism... However, the myth of the rural had largely elitist origins. (Duffy, 1997: 69)

The induction of Lough Derg into a Western rural space of alterity was part of its mythos and story. As Richard Scriven (2018: 73) has discussed, the positioning of Station Island within the waters of the lake is intrinsic to its transformative pilgrim experience, an 'embracing of a liminality that seems to disrupt modern sensibilities in search of something beyond the everyday and observable'. Isolation is aided by topography: in insular geography it is possible to have a third order inception—an island in a lake on an island in a lake on an island. Likewise, we might see the Purgatory as a third order inception of remoteness—a remote sacred space within a remote sacred island within a remote lake within a remote region within the island of Ireland, itself long considered to be remote to European life. Remoteness and isolation are the fuel for affect and emotion, which in turn shape identity and sectarianism. By layering isolation and seeking barriers of water that are barriers of the mind in equal measure, the legend of Patrick's Purgatory is fused to loneliness at its core. Duffy's point about the elitism of the rural is apt: as we will see,

the exercise of power and privilege has a great deal to do with the story.

Spiritual landscape presents a vision space and place generated by a relationship between 'bodily existence, felt practice and faith in things' (Dewsbury and Cloke, 2009: 696). In order to begin this approach, Dewsbury and Cloke (2009: 708–9) consider three modalities: 'that the spiritual be considered as existential and of sensation, that it be thought of as performative in that it is practised and brought into being (and thus valorised) as something based on faith (as something that scripts action as an experience of doubt), and that whilst not transcendental it is nonetheless suggestive of immanence'. In short, a spiritual landscape must be felt, practised, re-inscribed, and believed to endure. Such is the power of spiritual place that its meaning can cling to its material traces within the landscape long after active practice has ceased.

Isolation does not have to be a material reality to be an influence. For Lough Derg, a location within the rural landscape does not mean that it is poorly visited, or that it is a place of wholly wild nature without infrastructure or a complex administrative apparatus. The large 1920s Hiberno-Romanesque Basilica has enlarged Station Island, expanding over the water on stilts driven into the lake. Station Island has waxed and waned over the centuries, and more recent additions create a visible stamp of bustling spiritual place and prosperity. Despite all this, Lough Derg is coded as wild. Ask an average Irish person what they know of Lough Derg, and the answer will be painted in a palette of austere loneliness and physical hardship, but also often include a story of a relative who still visits. Without its shroud of rural isolation, the lake would not exist in its current articulation. There would be a lake named 'Lough Derg', but it would no longer have the spiritual and socio-natural properties that make it unique. This characterisation of the lake often exists independently of the material reality of the lake. Curtayne echoes the Catholic sentiment that Lough Derg is a time machine for the re-experience of an earlier and more austere form of wilderness devotion, the heart of the pilgrimage's appeal:

[The pilgrim] will embark on a mountain-locked lake that is just as secluded to-day as when Saint Patrick was attracted to its solitude. The physical features of the landscape have remained practically unaltered through the centuries. Its lonely aspect is the same as in the fifth century; the eye may still rest on all that Patrick saw: in the west, Croagh-Breac (the Speckled Stack); in the east, Kinangoe; behind the one the same solemn sunsets still gild the sky, above the other appear the same fresh dawns. (Curtayne, 1944: 167)

In this passage, Curtayne makes it clear that she sees the waterscape as an intrinsic part of the coded rural loneliness. The vistas, the colours, the soundscape: all combine to make a physical crucible for a particular genre of spiritual experience. The water provides the community of human and non-human required to cement this association. The

lake and its archipelago are criss-crossed with lines of activity like lines on a palm: points of enduring memory, evidence of human embodiment past and present, and material culture. They stretch from city and town into the countryside of County Donegal, intermingling in a tangle surrounding the lake as it sits in splendid rhetorical isolation half a mile from the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The deliberate imagining of an 'uncultivated' environment despite the heavy footfall of pilgrims visiting the site is part of its history is an exercise in spatial double-think. The refusal to see change in a landscape leads to real-world decisions. Remoteness has been maintained at the expense of any concession to infrastructure or efficiency, with recent decades heralding an increase in facilities sympathetic to the rural landscape and yet suitable for the twenty-first century. In the nineteenth century, O'Connor reflects on the material improvements to the site that had been neglected and yet might bring a modicum of modern efficiency to the pilgrimage:

If this were an English or a Continental lake, instead of an Irish one, can we doubt but that its waters would be traversed by yacht and steamer, and that hotels and villas would look down from the surrounding heights on its delightful expanse of water? (O'Connor, 1879: 159)

The agency of human visitors has shaped a complex religious geography in which new interactions are possible. No power within the lake can exist in isolation. Despite this reality, there has long been a sense that Lough Derg cannot be made subject to the same rules as other sites of natural beauty and spiritual history. The expanse of the other Lough Derg—on the Shannon—occupies a more central position and contained many such steam boats plying its waters. Other sites of remote beauty such as the English Lake District had acquired new amenities to complement the growing numbers of ramblers and tourists following in the footsteps of the Romantics. Many ancient religious sites across Ireland are easily accessible and part of tourist itineraries. The lake, despite its fame, remains distant from the conventional comings and goings of the twenty-first century despite attracting pilgrims in large numbers during the June to August season.

Isolation has a history at Lough Derg. Its surrounds bear the indelible stamp of the Famine. In 1835, for example, the Ordnance Survey counted 794 families of 1,987 males and 2,185 females in the Parish of Templecarne, location of the lake (Lancey, 1835 in Day, 1997: 161). The 2011 population for the three electoral divisions (Grousehall, Pettigoe and Templecarn) that cover the same footprint as the parish townlands is 600, with 322 males and 278 females (Central Statistics Office, 2011). The demographic realities of isolation or rural landscape twist along a different path to the rhetorical profile of a place such as Lough Derg as a rural locale. On the other hand, the lake is a centre and a node. As Scriven (2014: 252) has pointed out, 'networks of people, services and commodities

... develop around a pilgrimage centre, and physical infrastructures are built up embedding pilgrimage into the landscape'. Thus, a remote and rural place becomes busy and well-trafficked at pilgrim season, and requires corresponding infrastructure. The Plantation of Ulster gifted the Protestant Anglo-Irish Leslie family–owners of Lough Derg until the twentieth century—with some of the most isolated and unproductive townlands in the region, but paradoxically allowed generations of Leslies to quietly draw a steady income from pilgrim fees.

Lough Derg's rural identity is firmly rooted in the social fabric of its surrounding townlands, parish, region, province and nation. For the pilgrim travelling to Donegal, the lake is both *spatially* and *demographically* remote, and also *emotionally* remote. The lake is at the eye of an area of historically low population with low levels of intensive agriculture and cultivation made even more sparsely populated by urbanisation and demographic change due to the depopulation and emigration that were the legacy of the 1840s Potato Famine. Despite this history, it is a place of change that cannot be fully recognised if the emotional sense of isolation is to persist: the enduring power of its isolated identity cannot be explained on logistics alone. Reports such as the passage below from the prominent Irish-American *Donahoe's* magazine reveal a place that has long been accessible in a strictly logistical sense:

Formerly a pilgrimage to Lough Derg must have been attended with much hardship and inconvenience, when we consider that pilgrims travelled, in many cases, barefoot, from the most remote parts of the kingdom. Considering, however, the facilities of travelling which we enjoy at the present day, the journey is now regarded as little more than a pleasant excursion trip. Good roads lead towards the lake, though, we regret to say, not to its shore; a line of railway runs pretty close to it; well-appointed cars in connection with each train ply between the lake and railway; in a word, pilgrims have nowadays little to complain of from fatigue or inconvenience, till they are landed on the island of Lough Derg. (*Donahoe's*, 1880: 307)

The Enniskillen and Bundoran Railway functioned between the 1860s and 1960s and increased access to the lake via Pettigo. Its closure was replaced by a corresponding growth in car access. Infrastructure has not attenuated a remote identity: by bringing the lake closer to centres of population by railway, road and the dense infrastructures of twenty-first century life, technology has fetishised the remoteness of Donegal. The Sanctuary of Saint Patrick has been developed and built upon in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—including the iconic Basilica dome—and the land has changed a great deal with the growth of forestry trees up to the water's edge and an increase in roads. Despite these changes, a reputation for isolation and remoteness remains intrinsic to the identity of the pilgrimage. Rhetorical remoteness may be shaped by a rural landscape, but it is often maintained in spite of it.

Sectarian Narrative in the Long Nineteenth Century

The descriptions of Lough Derg—its waters, its topography and geographical features, the weather, the light—are the prism through which emotion is shaped and coordinated to make a spiritual sense of place. The waters participate in this process to create a transaction between human activity and environmental factors that is neither wholly environmental nor wholly social. The visitor finds what they expect to encounter, be they pilgrims, curious historians or visitors, Catholic admirers or Protestant critics. As Terence Dewsnap (2008: 22) puts it, accounts of the lake are 'life with rhetoric and cliché', and yet they are evidence of authors attempting to find themselves in a 'spiritual maze' as dramas of religious dispossession and repossession play out before them. Dewsnap is referring to twentieth-century Catholic poets such as Patrick Kavanagh, Denis Devlin and Seamus Heaney and yet I propose that this depiction of confused self-narrative is equally apt when describing those less positively disposed.

The landscape is a stimulus for these often-fevered searches for identity, and its rhetorical remoteness generates this meaning by placing it beyond everyday experience for the majority of visitors. Some come with the eye of a surveyor, simultaneously assessing its geography and musing on its peculiarities. Others come as believers, using the lake as a catalyst for miracles, inner experiences, visions of purgatory or personal revelations. Others are aesthetes, shaping pastoral romanticism, brooding Gothic, whimsical poetry or biting social critique from its substance. As Peggy O'Brien (2006) describes it in her seminal monograph, the history of the lake is a process of 'writing' Lough Derg, again and again. The traces of previous writings never disappear, and new stories score the page ever deeper.

Emotional style is intimately linked to exercises of political power. As William M. Reddy (2009: 312) describes the link, '[t]he stable rule of any elite is shored up by an emotional style; and periods of crisis bring transformations of [emotional] styles'. Sectarian accounts of Lough Derg present a palpable aura of crafted isolation and a rural identity that induces and embeds a complex of coded emotions that match the conflicting priorities of elite and subaltern worldviews, while evolving to fit the habits of the time. It draws on a resonant deep time connection to rural identity as a fundamental building block of Irish identities, be they Catholic or Protestant. Catholic narratives gloss the lake with a romantic impression of unyielding isolation, rugged austerity, and purity uncorrupted by modernity or secular life. Protestant narratives paint a picture of folly, uselessness, waste and harmful isolation holding back an otherwise valuable site of natural beauty or agricultural potential. There is also a sense of elite anxiety about the culturally and politically uncontrolled expressions of Irishness thriving in remote and rural locales.

All actors in this network are crucial since 'affect is distributed between, and can happen outside, bodies which are not exclusively human' (Lorimer, 2008: 3). A place with intermingled natural and social qualities is

shrouded in an atmosphere, described by Bille et al. (2015: 32) as an ambience, or a sense of place, or the ‘feel’ of a room. Its history and cultural legacies haunt it. It can also be a *stimmung* in the Heideggerian sense, a ‘mood’ or ‘attunement’. Gernot Böhme (1993: 121) describes the phenomenal properties of a thing—hue or texture, for example—as radiating from the thing and colouring or ‘tincturing’ environment. It is ‘an articulation of its presence, the way or manner of its presence’. Those who encounter Lough Derg often seem to sense the resonations of this place-based atmosphere. The Catholic convert and Lough Derg scholar Shane Leslie—of the Protestant Leslie family who were the lake’s Plantation landholders—imagined that ‘year by year the Gaelic heart turns thither [to Lough Derg], as the magnet to the north’ (Leslie 1909: 10). Fiona McGrath’s (1989: 45, Table 1) study of Lough Derg pilgrimages would seem to agree, with 33.6% of survey respondents stating either ‘pilgrim atmosphere’ (20.8%) or ‘tradition’ (12.8%) as their reason for coming to the lake. Pilgrims are drawn by forces that are difficult to describe, what Griffero (2014: 1) describes as ‘emphatics tunings that would otherwise be incomprehensible’. The same might also be said of those drawn out of sceptical, scholarly or scientific interest described below.

Figure 3, depicting the Down Survey Map of 1655–6, reveals an overlapping of power structures: record of the site’s pilgrimage juxtaposed with the emerging Protestant confiscation and reallocation of the island of Ireland. The map hints at the change in status—and splitting of perceptions—inherent in the Plantation of Ulster and the subsequent Ascendancy. The birth of a struggle for

affective tone focused on different perspectives on the same site characterise the post-seventeenth-century history of the lake: one space, two imaginations of place. The instrumentalist and anti-pilgrimage tendencies of Protestant narrative are preceded, run alongside of, and are followed by a corresponding Catholic narrative—explored here through examples such as Curtayne or O’Connor—attempting to valorise the lake. The record of pilgrimage never recedes from the post-Down Survey imagination and mapping of Ulster, and yet continues to trouble and confuse non-pilgrim visitors. As this struggle for valence plays out over centuries, we gain a glimpse of imaginings of spiritual utility, moral valence, the making of religious place and the qualities of remoteness and rurality in a variety of accounts.

A Waste of Place?

Protestant scholar and preacher Rev. John Richardson (1727, Preface) was attuned to an early tone of anti-pilgrimage discourse when he proposed condescendingly that ‘Every Body knows how excessively the Irish are addicted to Pilgrimage, there being few Parishes in the Kingdom, in which there is not some Thing or other, to which they frequently Resort on a Superstitious account’. Such a place is unlikely to impress the right-thinking Protestant commentator—not due to the inherent nature of the place, but due to its misuse and superstitious use. These attacks were part of a trend in discourse surrounding the seventeenth- to early twentieth-century span of the Protestant Ascendancy, a cultivated and channelled landscape narrative with a political goal. As



Figure 3: Down Survey Map for Barony of Tirhugh, County Donegal, ‘An Island unto which the Papist did come a Pilgrimage’. William Petty, *A book containing a generall map of Ireland with the lower provinces and countyes thereof* (1655–6). Photo: Bibliothèque national de France, public domain. DOI: [ark:/12148/btv1b52509533x](https://doi.org/10.3938/bnfc.ark:/12148/btv1b52509533x).

the Anglican author Rev. James Spencer Knox (1840: 375) put it in his *Pastoral Annals*, the lake is located ‘[i]n a lonely and remote region of the counties of Fermanagh and Donegal respectively, where scarcely a traveller ever passes, excepting for those whom the sanctity of the spot allures...’. The lake itself is ‘dear to the national memory by many a fabulous legend, or wild tradition’ (Knox: 1840: 377) and yet degraded by pilgrimage.

Knox depicts religious behaviour—the repetitive enactments of place revealed by the notion of taskscapes discussed above—as fundamentally linked to the value of place. A place managed by spiritual rectitude can be positive, although salvation is found within, yet the incorrect observances of worship create waste and folly. They repeat and perpetuate a performance of place misused and misunderstood. As Catholic pilgrims swoon at the sight of every miracle, their cries are ‘borne on the glassy surface of the lake, to the expectant multitude who line its shores ... till the distant mountains receive it into their lonely caves, and give it back again in dying tones...’ (Knox, 1840: 380). In his eyes, the mass hysteria of Catholic worship was an oppressive presence within the landscape. The reverend accumulates a keenly felt sense of moral outrage that such a place is so abused as the account builds, culminating in the opportunity to use his account of the lake and its pilgrimage to expound—as Richardson did 90 years earlier—on the wider malaise of Catholicism and its pilgrimages:

I well remember, while in early boyhood, to have frequently witnessed practices exceeding in folly and fraud those described [at Lough Derg], on an island on the river Shannon, by many thousands, for purposes almost identical. Whether they existed or not then (A.D. 1818), I cannot pretend to affirm from personal observation, but I hear, and believe, that they did—for to whom has the instructive lesson been given in vain, that so long as the Church of Rome finds dupes, so long will she countenance those arts which delude the reason, and enslave the consciousness of mankind? (Knox, 1840: 380–81)

Knox (1840: 377) frames his sectarian account with a combination of disappointment in the delusional nature of pilgrimage and concern for the ‘multitudes of the lower classes of the native Irish’ who he sees as enslaved by Lough Derg, describing them as victims of a ‘monstrous fallacy’ (Knox: 1840: 380). As John Barrell (1983) has argued in the context of English paintings of the rural poor of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, depicting the remote landscapes of County Donegal in this light suggests that this is a natural state, a ‘dark side of landscape’ that shapes social and subjective identities. Highlighting the follies of Catholic pilgrims and the righteousness of their penal suppression was an on-going apparatus of domination, a wielding of political power in an ecology drawing in all tools at their disposal.

When he wrote on Lough Derg, the prominent Protestant writer and novelist William Carleton was at pains to point out that the disdain for Patrick’s Purgatory exhibited

within his work and that of his co-religionists was not the result of a lack of appreciation or elitist indifference to the Irish peasantry, but due to the site’s failure to attract positive affect on any front looked for by the educated tourist. Like Augustus Pugin and the luminaries of the Gothic revival, Carleton saw himself as an admirer of the medieval and a devotee of ruin-lust. If a rural space had merit, then he would be the one to appreciate it. This, we might imagine, is a facet of the rural landscape that the florid imagination might cling to. It is reflected in the love of elite writers for Irish folklore, tales, habits and quaint practices, but disdain for Catholicism, Irish culture and the Irish language. We are pointedly reminded that the site is unromantic in a Gothic sense as well as un-sublime. It does not reach its romantic potential—to Carleton’s mind—due to its Catholicism:

A person who had never seen the picture that was now under my eye, who had read of a place consecrated by the devotion of ages, towards which the tide of human superstition had flowed for twelve centuries, might imagine that St. Patrick’s Purgatory, secluded in its sacred island, would have all the venerable and gothic accompaniments of olden time: and its ivied towers and belfried steeples, its carved windows, and cloistered arches, its long dark aisles and fretted vaults, would have risen out of the water, rivalling Iona or Lindisfarn; but nothing of the sort was to be seen. (Carleton, 1843: 238–9)

During the early nineteenth-century height of this mode of sectarian nature writing, rumours were sufficient if they confirmed stereotypical behaviours and identities. Landscape was a favoured weapon. Emotions were ordered and aligned based on one’s opinion of rural Donegal and its pilgrimages: a case study in a wider argument. It was the extreme opposite to establishment narrative: the rural opposite of Dublin, the spatial opposite of the English locus of control, the opposite of Anglophone Ireland, the Catholic reaches of Plantation Ulster. As a result, Lough Derg found itself on the symbolic front lines. Only when the Emancipation loosened some legal fetters did the discourse begin to soften. Carleton was a notable observer predisposed to be unimpressed with his experience of the lake—and, importantly, its use—as a result of pre-existing ideologies. He and his fellows mobilised affect and emotional response as well as the atmosphere of rural landscape to paint a picture of rural landscape misused, underwhelming, squandered, wasted:

The lake itself was certainly as fine as rocky shores and numerous islands could make it: but it was encompassed with such dreariness; it was deformed so much by its purgatorial island; the associations connected with it were of such a degrading character, that really the whole prospect before me struck my mind with a sense of painfulness, and I said to myself, ‘I am already in purgatory.’ (Carleton, 1843: 238–9)

The lack of dramatic elevation within the hills surrounding the lake fail to live up to expectation. If Carleton is 'already in purgatory', then it is an emotional place of his own fashioning. In this paragraph, the reader can see a schooled exercise of communal Protestant emotion, moving beyond aesthetics to seek the appropriate disgust and disenchantment required to paint the desired picture. The paragraph gives the impression of having been agonised over, crafted by increasingly clarified from well-practised emotion. To be struck by painfulness, one must have first rehearsed the striking, imagine that a blow is coming, and cultivate the appropriate pain at its contact. Rural disgust is not a natural affect, but one painstakingly fostered through an echo chamber of likeminded co-religionists. Carleton expands on his rhetorical desolation, shaped by the surrounds of rural Donegal:

Lough Derg under my feet—the lake, the shores, the mountains, the accompaniments of all sorts presented the very landscape of desolation; its waters expanding in their highland solitude, amidst a wide waste of moors, without one green spot to refresh the eye, without a house or tree—all mournful in the brown hue of its far-stretching bogs, and the grey uniformity of its rocks; the surrounding mountains even partook of the sombre character of the place; their forms without grandeur, their ranges continuous and without elevation. (Carleton, 1843: 238–9)

By enacting a mode of anguished observational spiritual outrage, sectarian commentators linked the isolation and unfamiliarity of the rural landscape to an elite notion that the Irish landscape was 'wasted' on both the Irish and their Catholic faith and could only be unlocked through the apparatus of colonial exploitation and Protestant paternalism. Knox is more explicit in this belief, mourning the loss of spiritual fecundity represented by pilgrimage and equating it to the 'wasted' rural isolation of uncultivated land:

Thought ran its busy round. I gazed on the distant borders of the Lake, dimly distinguishable from the Sainted Island, which is situated near to one extremity, and attainable by a row of a few minutes. The mountains were indeed brown and barren on their summits; but crops waved, and green grass grew—and both, continually ascending the gently sloping sides, testified to the successful progress of human labour. And is this an emblem of mankind? Beneath my feet lies the unreclaimed soil, which no spade nor plow have ever penetrated, yet susceptible, to happy cultivation. Is this a type of my poor benighted countrymen, condemned by an artful priesthood to the curse of moral sterility, lest they should bring forth fruit a hundred-fold? (Knox, 1840: 386)

The relationship between affect and emotion, sectarianism, and isolated place becomes clear here. Religious emotions

tie the environment to human religious practices by arguing that the former is failed by the latter, and the latter degrades and pollutes the former. In the eyes of early nineteenth-century Protestant commentators, Lough Derg is a waste of potential, both materially and spiritually. It is a non-place, a non-space, filled with pilgrims performing empty non-actions. It is their duty, by this logic, to remediate place and bring meaning. We see a similar link between the lack of cultivation in rural Donegal and the spiritual folly of pilgrimage in an account of another well-known Protestant polemicist, Rev. Caesar Otway, an influence on Carleton and many others:

In a short time I arrived at the island, and as stepping out of the boat, I planted my foot on the rocks of this scene of human absurdity, I felt ashamed for human nature, and looked on myself as one of the millions of fools that have, century after century, degraded their understandings, by coming hither. (Otway, 1827: 157)

This affective environment did not last as the religious environment of Ireland shifted. Late nineteenth-century visitors to the lake demonstrate that this approach to place description waned with the aggressiveness of suppression. A good example occurs in an unlikely place: a gentleman churchman's fishing guide to Lough Erne and its surrounds. Although devoted to the details of fishing, the book is equally about good company, folklore and discussion about local customs and traditions. In a time of more relaxed—although still contentious—sectarian discourse, the narrative was correspondingly relaxed: fishing rather than religious polemics. When the clergyman Henry Newland visited the lake with companions for a day of casual fly-fishing, he was more interested in angling than Anglicanism. He experienced the lake as a place of barren beauty and of sparse isolation both satisfying and depressing in equal measure, but was ultimately there for the fish. Newland, like many observers before him, provides hints of an elite attitude to the lake and its remote situation:

Lough Derg has certainly been well chosen as a spot of religious penitence and seclusion, for the character of its scenery harmonises well with such a feeling; it is that of wild and gloomy loneliness. (Newland, 1851: 220)

Newland continues, laying out a scene that is beautiful, but lacking in features of interest. It is a world of stone, simple flora, flat water, looming hills and enclosed seclusion. Its valence is positive and yet lonely. The bioregional characteristics of the lake are an oft-commented upon feature, its aspect presenting a lens through which to view the lake and the island at its centre. Wildness of mentality and of landscape predominate:

There are no trees to be seen, and very little cultivation of any kind. It is surrounded by heavy, round-headed mountains, or rather gigantic hills, covered with heather, which, with its red stalks and

purple blossoms, casts a dull, dusky, red reflexion on the water, and gives to the lake its name. There are a few islands besides the Purgatory, and these are not without their beauty; but they are still of the same wild, savage character as the coasts,—rocky, heath-covered, and abounding in myrica and arbutus. (Newland, 1851: 220)

Newland sees the beauty of the place and reacts to its atmosphere, and he is a man of pastoral pursuits. Despite this, he is unable to value Lough Derg as a spiritual place. The pilgrimage is not of sufficient interest to warrant interest. He holds esteem for its history, but it is still wild, empty, rural, a backwater. Its bogland and stony soils are not a virtue. To describe place is to channel emotion. Not all Protestant commentators presented an overtly negative picture the lake, but lack of enthusiasm was *de rigueur*. Affects—as distinct from emotions—belong to the object, they are ‘always being taken up and reworked in lived experience’ and ‘becoming part of feelings and emotions that may themselves become elements within other atmospheres’ (Anderson, 2009: 79). Thus, they attach themselves to the subjective experience and mentality of the observer.

Sanctity to Survey

Elite affects in Ireland can also stem from an areligious attitude, or the trained mentality of an engineer or scientist. Newland provides an interesting segue between these attitudes, for his use of the lake as a site of leisure presupposes that it is a resource to be enjoyed and exploited rather than a sacred site. By secularising the use of space and the formation of place, a new Imperial epistemology emerges. In a secular version of the Knox and Otway argument, scientific application of colonial elitism implies that only economic development of rural Ireland can ‘repair’ the rural defects of County Donegal, and Lough Derg can only have meaning in an Anglo-Irish colonial world when it and its surrounds are made productive and useful. The discourse has shifted from morality to technology, but the Ascendancy narrative is still clear. The ordnance survey maps are another example. Despite their supposedly military and scientific goals, they ‘...had [their] origin in the official “plantation” maps produced between the reigns of Elizabeth I and William III as a basis for the redistribution of forfeited properties’ (Andrews, 2002: 9). As a result, they were part of an English imperial project to quantify and thus divide up and control Ireland, a clinical dissection of place into space. Despite the stated quantitative goals of the Irish Ordnance Survey of the 1830s, hints of affect intrude.

An excellent case occurs in the letters of John O’Donovan, the renowned antiquarian and corresponding researcher for the survey. His ideas have shaped Ireland, for what we see in maps and know of place has long been filtered through his eyes and expressed by his judgment. In the case of rural Donegal, O’Donovan confesses himself susceptible to the pull of the scenery, the sense of wild place, the shroud of sacred mystery, layered folklore and tradition:

Though my letters are wild as the mountains in which they were written, still do I feel myself very sober in thought, and exceedingly (excessive) in love with truth even to the prejudice of all national feelings. But when you consider the subject, the difficulty of my task—that of seeking through the dim vista of tradition some faint glimmerings of truth—and the incoherency of the rude tales which I have attempted to digest, you will perhaps feel convinced that I could be not at all times serious or sober in expression. (O’Donovan, 1835 in Herity, 2000: 120)

O’Donovan, who had adamantly argued elsewhere in his letters for the primacy of fact above story, evidence above faith, finds himself drawn into the mythography of the place by his love of the Irish language and curation of folklore. The task of turning place into the kind of space that could be mapped, of turning stories into facts, creates a form of intellectual indigestion that O’Donovan struggles to shake. His affect has engendered emotions that he did not expect. Later, he was to write that he was ‘very anxious to quote the ordnance map as often as possible in all my works with a view to make it as popular as possible among the Irish people; and to show its great value not only to the topographer but to the antiquary’ (1846, as cited in Andrews, 2002: 142).

To the dispassionate—or supposedly dispassionate—observers of the Irish Ordnance Survey, rural County Donegal and its famed lake were disappointing. It was an unruly and useless space, rather than an important place. As **Figure 4** reveals, the land surrounding the lake is a patchwork of Coillte (the Irish commercial forestry agency) woodland, farmland and patches of blanket bog held together by a rural network of roads and the infrastructure of the pilgrimage. In the 1830s there were fewer trees and the location was more remote, although also more populous, than today. O’Donovan saw something of the romance experienced by the folklorist within the unassuming exterior. His colleagues and contemporaries, engineers and pragmatists rather than antiquarians, found the place deeply underwhelming. They saw the rural, the impoverished, the poorly resourced and the undeveloped. They saw a place—or more precisely, a space—lacking any of the assets appealing to the eye of the developer. Ordnance surveyor Lieutenant William Lancey of the Royal Engineers could find little to recommend other than the picturesque when he sought to sketch the salient qualities of the Parish of Templecarn:

...Meagre and dry to the last degree must appear the description of a region where the hand of nature, severely parsimonious, has been very niggardly aided by the ingenuity of art of the tasteful design of scientific industry. Beautiful indeed and picturesque in many places the scenery must appear to the eye of the poet, but when considered in an agricultural, commercial or manufacturing point of view, it presents a spectacle little fitted to captivate the fancy of the theoretical or invite the labours of the practical improver. (Lancey, 1835 in Day, 1997: 159)



Figure 4: Satellite Image of Lough Derg. Photo: Google Earth, Image © DigitalGlobe, via Google reuse policy.

The more versed in mythology and folklore, the more the place appeals. Story makes Lough Derg a centre. Lancey reported his disinterest in the narrative dimension of the Ordnance Survey, protesting his 'want of taste and time for such things' (Day, 2002). As a result, his indifference to Donegal is clear. When rooted in science, engineering and surveying, Lough Derg is the most extreme of peripherals, lacking in amenities and opportunities. In some accounts, a sense of centrality and obscurity clash, creating unease.

The rural character of lake and archipelago is a splendid and victorious isolation, enduring in the face of Protestant attempts at extirpation from memory and material culture. It is a relict landscape filled with memories. The affective identity that envelops the Sanctuary of Saint Patrick—with its basilica, pilgrim stations, penitential beds, guest houses and administrative buildings as well as the ecology of rocks, fauna and plant-life—is, in Steven Pile's (2009: 8) formulation, a machine of memory. Protestant accounts seek to undo the site, ridicule the superstition of its visitors and paint a picture of the Catholic Church as peddlers of superstition and spiritual con artists preying upon a vulnerable populace. Emotionology in practice. Communal spatial coding of a place has formed what Barbara Rosenwein (2007: 2) defines as 'emotional communities', 'groups in which people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value—or devalue—the same or related emotions'. Groups sharing an identity have emotionology, the 'attitudes and standards that a society, or a definable group within a society, maintains toward basic emotions and their appropriate expression' (Stearns and Stearns, 1985: 813). How do communities construct emotions? How do they enforce them? What are their norms and standards? Where is it appropriate to express emotions? Catholicism and Protestantism are entrenched emotional communities, each with their own codes.

Conclusion

Nature is not natural. The 'wilderness' is also not 'naturally' wild, and never has been. As William Cronon (1996: 7) describes it, 'wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural'. The same can be said of aesthetically 'remote' rural landscapes. Lough Derg cannot exist without provoking an expectation of tropes such as Arcadia, the sublime, the pastoral idyll, the Eden or the Christian wilderness and yet its identity emerges when the lake is unable to conform to expectations. It is wild and lonely, but also quiet and peaceful. It is a place of austerity as well as beauty: a place of testing as well as tourism. It is a lens that shapes the experience of the visitor, its colours tinted by coded emotional remoteness. This phenomenon is spiritually magnetic. As Maddrell and Scriven (2016: 9) describe the phenomenon, 'pilgrims travel to the hinterland of Ireland in search of spiritual encounters through the liminal space of a remote lake island'. Exiting the central and entering the liminal is also exiting the profane and entering the sacred in a dual exile and return narrative.

As a religious geography, Lough Derg has the distinction of being both a *religious* and a *sacred* site: it is a place of sanctity for Catholics with a history that makes it part of the story of religion in Ireland and is also actively used and visited by members of the faith (Park, 1994: 252). Many places that are sacred spaces are remote: a grove, a henge on a moor, a Neolithic tomb. Many places that are part of the story of religion are rural: the ruins of abbeys, the outlines of now-vanished settlements and enclosures in the modern rural landscape. Few geographies are defined by a triple force of sacredness, historicity and active pilgrimage and are simultaneously coded as remote and rural at the same time. The lake exists at the heart of what Horden and Purcell (2000: 403) term a 'territory

of grace'. Tracing out the nodes and connections of these territories, their transactions, their densities and paucities and their human geographies is an 'ensemble of spatial expressions and correlates of religious behaviour' by which a distinct 'landscape' emerges (2000: 404). This connection is embedded deep in the Irish identity, and the Island of Ireland is a place of layered spiritual spaces and places that reside in its remote areas. As a result, the differential affective sectarian identities attached to the lake help it speak to wider concerns about the manner in which communities see place differently, exist across different affective and emotional spectra, and to some extent *inhabit different worlds* where a single space can be two entirely different places.

Miracles attributed to Patrick and their associated cultic sites cling to water in great density, be it lakes, rivers, coastlines, islands or holy wells. The coding of remoteness is a wider context than Lough Derg alone, lent weight by repetition of story, action, geographical distribution and continuity of tradition. The lake exerts a strong pull on the Catholic imagination and is unsurprised that it is part of an imagined continuity of tradition. The spiritual quality of geography, the numinous and mysterious, working on the minds of those who visit. It makes the rational uncertain, the solid mercurial, and emotion unstable. It breeds new emotions and reconfigures existing ones, and it leaves nothing as it seems, for 'the spiritual is itself a strange territory: not just uncharted but calling into question what can be charted' (Bartolini, MacKian and Pile, 2018: 1). The lake is part of a family of isolated early medieval sites including Iona, Skellig Michael, Croagh Patrick, Lindisfarne and many more. The unifying force of what we might term the 'Patrickscape' is a love of loneliness, whether by the invention of a historical figure or the confection of generations of hagiographers and monastic commentators. Lough Derg came to represent everything that was inimical to the Church of Ireland and an Anglo-Irish Ascendancy vision of place and space. It was remote, it was Irish, it was Catholic, it was resilient to interventions in the intellectual, legal, political and material ecologies of sectarian life. It was the locus of a moral panic based on the fear that Catholic pilgrimage was immune to suppression, always hiding in the deepest and most remote cracks of the landscape and repopulating the world with superstitions, dogmas and meaningless activities. Both struggles—both within and between their respective sectarian communities—become clearer when viewed through the watery prism of Lough Derg.

Water is a facilitator of isolation *par excellence*. It is both a physical and ontological boundary, dividing the everyday and the extraordinary. The material environment of the lake has changed a great deal over the centuries and branding it as timeless may lead us to forget that this image has come about due to careful work by the Catholic faithful to make a 'strong claim about continuity'. The problem occurs when those overly eager to attribute mysterious cultic significance become hasty to attribute continuity of meaning, what Horden and Purcell (2000: 409) term a 'problem of survivals' in the spiritual landscape. Thus, a collection

of stones identified as ancient sacred sites can in fact be the remnants of olive oil presses. The history of a place and its isolation and rural identity are likewise complex mediations of tasks, infrastructures, affects and emotions, material elements and intellectual transformations. This cautionary tale can be applied to Lough Derg in the context of timelessness, but also in the context of rural identity. The desperate need for the lake to be rural has shaped its deep time religious identity, regardless of the demographic and infrastructural reality of the place. This imperative was expressed in a diverse range of long nineteenth-century reactions, and continues to have relevance to religious geographers, literary scholars and historians today.

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