

## Fear and loving in the west of Ireland: the blows of County Clare

*Jeremy MacClancy*

One of Ireland's premier tourism counties, Clare is amazing. It has an abundance of visual riches from the famous river Shannon ... to its rugged Atlantic coastline with its towering cliffs and golden 'blue flag' beaches.

So states one local tourist website. Another speaks of Clare as 'an ideal destination for those in search of the outdoors', a 'beautiful area' with 'charming villages.' According to a third, 'West Clare is an area of unspoiled beauty', 'one of Ireland's best kept secrets', while a fourth claims 'its unspoiled natural beauty is highly prized and its dramatic coastline entices many visitors. County Clare has a living Gaelic tradition, which can be heard and seen in its music and arts.' Individual towns are treated similarly: Doolin becomes 'a place of breathtaking beauty surrounded by the spectacular bare limestone landscape of the Burren'.<sup>1</sup>

Geologists and historians tell a different tale. The soil is poor, boggy, where water cannot easily drain because of the dense underlying clay. The karst limestone formations of the Burren in the north-west of the county are no better: Oliver Cromwell, on his Irish campaign, famously complained the area had 'not enough trees to hang a man, not enough earth to bury him.' The climate is rainy and, towards the coast, wind-bound. Bordered on three sides by water (Galway Bay, the Atlantic, the River Shannon), it was a relatively isolated county, which maintained much of its traditional Gaelic way of life well into the eighteenth century. Historically, it was also a disadvantaged county. Most travellers to Ireland avoided the area altogether. Those few who did make the journey were usually pleased by the landscape, but more often appalled by the extreme poverty of its people. From the seventeenth century on, visitors spoke of ragged locals leading mean lives in miserable hovels 'no better than pigsties'. One German passing through the area before the Great Famine stated that he 'passed not a single village, nor a single hut fit for human habitation ... nowhere else do we find human beings gnawing, from year's end to year's end at the same root, berry, or weed.' One visitor, arriving a few years after the Famine, wondered where in the world he was:

The features, manners and costume of the majority of the country people ... added to the language they spoke, and (to an Englishman) curious stock of goats, mules, and

asses in which they dealt, made me almost start to think that, instead of being in some far-off primitive land, I was in reality within a twenty-fours' ride of home and among citizens of the same nation!

The tradition of emigration boosted by the Famine and the switch in land ownership from landlord to tenant did lead to a gradual rise in living standards from the late nineteenth century on. Even so, Clare never came to be considered an agriculturally rich county.<sup>2</sup>

Irish writers based in Dublin perceived yet further dimensions of the area. In the late nineteenth century, Clare's *gaeltachts* (Gaelic-speaking areas), its traditional ways and backward economy helped make it a prime site for the high-priests of the Celtic Renaissance. Lady Augusta Gregory, nationalist and folklorist, held court for Yeats and others in her Clare house, Coole Castle, and the poet spent time doing a little fieldwork in the area, which he thought an ideal zone for collecting folk beliefs (Foster 1997: 195). After visiting the Aran Islands off Clare, Yeats urged the young writer J. M. Synge to 'live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression'. Between 1898–1901, Synge visited five times, gathering material there he later used in his plays. In his account of these stays, Synge acts the amateur ethnographer translating the ways of these insular characters for an educated, urban audience. He sees the locals in patently primitivist terms: unsullied by a brutalising 'civilisation', these elemental types live in concord with their storm-swept, wave-washed homeland. They are both wild and refined, resigned and passionate, makers of a 'rude but beautiful' poetry (Synge 1907; Robinson 1992).<sup>3</sup> To Synge, they are exemplars of what we urbanites have lost.

Anthropologists came remarkably early to Clare, and provided a more prosaic form of ethnography. Members of the Ethnological Section of the British Association visited Aran in 1857, followed by a longer sojourn by the Cambridge anthropologist A. C. Haddon in 1892 (Haddon and Brown 1893; Robinson 1992: xv). Between 1932 and 1934, a pair of Harvard anthropologists, Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball, based themselves in a mid-Clare village and carried out what is usually regarded as the first exercise in intensive fieldwork among a West European people. Clare, they thought, had 'something of the old tradition still alive'. Their now-classic monograph, *Family and Community in Ireland*, is considered a model study in a high functionalist mode, with its detailed analysis of the structure, process, and relations of smallholder families, begrudgingly adapting to the present because firmly anchored in the past (Arensberg and Kimball 1940; 1968: 37; Byrne, Edmondson, and Varley 2001). Writing in the wake of the Depression, with its vicious exposure of the dangers within laissez-faire capitalism, Arensberg and Kimball portrayed these small farmers as predominantly subsistence producers, only marginally inserted in a cash economy.

Robert Cresswell, another American anthropologist, who went to a north Burren parish in the mid-1960s, found 'general destructureation' to be the rule then: the

declining autonomy of local producers, ever increasing use of money in circuits of production, a widening gap between large and small farmers, and an end to belief in the power of fairies and their Celtic kin (Cresswell 1969). These factors, combined with the depopulation caused by the Famine, emigration and low rates of reproduction were leading to the demise of kinship as a base of social organisation. If Cresswell perceived the 'disintegration' of traditional society, his successor, Hugh Brody, who lived in an unnamed west Clare village in the late 1960s, took an even bleaker view.<sup>4</sup> According to him, communities had broken down and traditional mores devalued. People no longer believed the customary way of life could continue, and had now lost faith in its worth anyway. Where Arensberg and Kimball underscored harmony, Brody saw contradiction and tension, which became ever more evident as the local culture fragmented. Despondent, demoralised, robbed of a residual dignity, locals led increasingly lonely lives, in the isolation of their own homes (Brody 1973).<sup>5</sup> Suicides were not rare and 'mental breakdowns' were becoming an almost routine part of local life.

Perhaps this is the point at which I must declare my own special interest. My father, a doctor, was born and raised in Ennis, the county town of Clare. His father was County Surgeon at the County Infirmary from 1908 to 1950. A man very well aware of his own dignity, he and other Catholics of his class saw themselves as rising to fill the hierarchical positions left vacant by the decline or departure of the Protestant Ascendancy. This solid sense of social rank, where the middle class looked down on the less well-off, and townspeople thought themselves superior to rude rural folk, was, however, strongly tempered by a common commitment to an ideology of egalitarianism.<sup>6</sup> My grandfather and his ilk might have been well aware of their own position in the pecking order, but they still knew that they were expected to engage with others, at least in selected contexts. To give one example, on a golf links, the well-to-do might play a round with a butcher and a small shopkeeper, but would later drink among their own in the clubhouse. An open friendliness to all, based on recognition of a common humanity, was expected; those who set themselves apart or broadcast their own achievements were strongly derided as 'too full of themselves'. A hard-nosed commercialism was anathema, and embodied in the much-denigrated figure of the '*gombeen*', entrepreneurs on the make. Relations were meant to be affective, not nakedly instrumental, for one's own petty gain.

What I perceived, as a child on repeated holiday trips in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as good-natured people coasting in a peaceful timelessness is now spoken of as adaptation, willing or not, to economic stagnation and the heavy hand of a traditionalist church. With little to aspire to for most, time was not valued. Talk, however, was and a man with a 'gift for the gab' and a sense of humour much appreciated. In sum, Clare in those days appeared to me an insular, quiet county of few opportunities and friendly people united by a common desire to make the most of what company offered: conversation, music, and Gaelic sports. No wonder so many suffered mental illness!

Tourist promoters, historians, writers, anthropologists: all produced their own vision of Clare; all worked from their own interests. The promoters have only the most roseate of views, while the historians tend to stress disadvantage, the writers to romanticise the locals, and the anthropologists to tribalise them. My point is simple: there is no unitary or definitive image, whether external or internal, of the county. Thus when a new kind of person started to come to Clare in the early 1970s there was no simple, dominant vision of the area. Rather, these ‘blow-ins’ or ‘blows’, as locals termed them, perceived the complex, slowly shifting reality of the county in their own way, according to their own interests and to the welcomes they received. In this chapter, I wish to investigate who these immigrants were, what images of Clare they had, how they fared, how the locals perceived them, and how have they all got on, or failed to.

A note on method: a London friend of mine had been a Clare blow-in herself for many years. She gave me the name of a friend, a blow long-resident in the county. In Easter 2003 I stayed with him during my compressed fieldwork there. He introduced me to a large number of blows, whom I duly spoke with. I sent a draft of this chapter to all those for whom I had addresses. I am grateful for their comments, some of which I have heeded. During my fieldwork, my cousin (my FBS), Malcolm MacClancy, a Dublin graduate born and bred in Clare, acted as my research assistant, interviewing locals about their attitudes to the blow-ins. His value was underlined when my host told a neighbouring farmer about his guest and what I was doing. The farmer replied, ‘Just as well your man is talking to the blow-ins. For he wouldn’t get a word of truth out of us.’<sup>7</sup>

### **The blows**

The longest-resident blows, and many others, divide the arrival of incomers into three waves: the first, who were known as ‘hippies’, came in the late 1960s and early 1970s; the second, who were pejoratively classed as ‘crusties’, arrived in the 1980s; the third started in the 1990s and are often termed ‘suburbanites’ by the longer-established blows.

The first arrivals state today that they had become disenchanted with their urban way of life, whether in Britain, continental Europe, or America. Greatly influenced by the counterculture that had then begun to emerge, these early blows rejected many of the middle-class conventions in which most of them had been raised. For instance, John (all names used are pseudonyms, unless stated otherwise) said that in the early 1970s he had been very keen to leave his native USA because he was strongly opposed to the Vietnam War and because his country was then ‘boiling’ with new ideas and youth discontent. The blows wanted to lead a different kind of life, though many were initially unclear what exactly they might be.

Many first travelled around Ireland, living in a caravan, staying in different places for periods of time. They came to Clare later, and often only by chance. Four examples:

- (a) in 1969 Jane, a young English woman then in her late teens, went with her boyfriend to live in the Wicklow Mountains, south of Dublin. There were already 'alternatives' living in the area, but Jane and her man, who regarded themselves as hippies, saw themselves as different to these already established incomers, as most were married, artists, or otherwise dedicated to a bohemian lifestyle. Three years later she visited Clare, and found it almost empty of artist-types. The only then resident incomers were a few well-to-do English people who had bought some of the county's big houses, emptied by the Ascendancy fleeing the Civil War, and which locals had not wanted to occupy. She decided to stay.
- (b) John, a recent US graduate in architecture, in 1971 came first to County Carlow, west of the Wicklow Mountains, invited by a charismatic German artist-friend, who had set up house with other compatriot artists. Their plan was to buy a house together which they would run as an art school. A local priest offered to sell them a shambolic farmhouse in northern Clare. But shortly after buying it, the Germans found the large Georgian house they had long dreamed of, and decamped. John and his new partner, a sister of one of the artists, decided to stay put, and began to renovate. He is still there.
- (c) James came to Ireland in the late 1960s. He had already been 'vagabonding', as he put it, around Britain and Europe. Hitchhiking down from Belfast, he and his girlfriend were befriended by the men of a small village who let them camp in their fields for a month. A dedicated angler, he was then invited by a small landowner in the north of Ireland, to fish his lake. Come the summer, he travelled around the country, following Irish musicians who were playing in one traditional festival after another. While at a very small festival in Scariff, east Clare, James visited the nearby lake, which he thought 'enough to keep a fisherman happy for several lifetimes'. He says the idea of getting his own place was 'at the very back of my head'. But he was offered houses so cheaply so often, he returned to Britain to accumulate some money. On his return, now with a dog and a new girlfriend, he bought a small rowing boat. Over the next few months, they methodically toured its coast, pitching their tent by the shore and talking to the locals, until he found the run-down, lakeside house he was looking for. I interviewed him there.
- (d) Kate dropped out of comfortable Twickenham at the height of hippiedom in the late 1960s, and moved into a nearby commune. She stressed to me how deeply idealistic she was at the time: 'I really, really did believe people would start loving each other and giving flowers to the cops.' When hippie ideals proved unworkable to her mind, she sought to debunk them and took up instead a romantic version of gypsydom: she joined a group of fellow-minded nomads who even imitated the Rom language. While apple picking in Kent, she participated in what she calls an 'arranged marriage', which fitted in with Gypsy lore. The group deliberately practised what they thought was a traditional lifestyle. The men hunted, fished, cared for the horses, and cut the wood; the women

cooked, made bread and begged from farmers. Everyone scavenged. The group migrated to Ireland in its first year. After an initial, hard winter, they split into sub-groups, which would meet up at horse fairs, where they would form a circle of waggons. One or two married Irish travellers. For several subsequent years, Kate, her husband and their four children lived in a friend's field, or by the road in County Tipperary. They finally settled in north Clare because 'we loved the area. It's so beautiful, so close to the sea, and lots of music.' After a decade of living in a barrow caravan, they bought a house, near Gort, where they still live.

Most blows of this first-wave state they were very ignorant of Ireland, and were surprised how attractive it was when they arrived. One Dutch ex-urbanite said that before she had had dreams; when she arrived in Clare, 'the pictures in my former dreams were here, real.' Many describe their first encounter of the countryside and its people in almost Elysian terms. James states 'It was so different to anything I'd experienced in those days. There was an almost magical, timeless feel to the place, so totally entirely different to anything I'd seen before.' He remembered very clearly the small village he and his girlfriend walked into one evening on their hitchhike down from Belfast: 'There were raindrops glistening on the branches, water clearer than I had ever seen in the stream under the bridge. I felt I'd landed in paradise, like a rebirth, I'd come home.' They entered a tiny bar, where a succession of old men bought them all their drinks and competed over whose field they could stay in first. Other blows of this first wave, to whom I repeated James's account, immediately agreed and sympathised with his judgement. One, based in north Clare, remembered that on hot summer days, they would down tools and meet up at a nearby lake. He emphasised the scene was so idyllic it was almost Biblical: with babies left in the shade adults, as often nude as not, would cavort and swim in the cool water. For these early blows, rural Clare in the early 1970s really did have dimensions of paradise.

The attractions of the area cited by these incomers include the great kindness and persistent hospitality shown by so many locals, the cheapness of land and buildings, the slow way of life, and the romantic, if not patently mystical charms of the Burren. As one blow put it, Clare was so attractive because of 'the peace, the landscape'. Niall Williams, a long-established Dublin incomer on the south Clare coast who has since become an internationally successful author, put this aspect well:

To gather myself, I turn and look down the garden and across the hedgeline at the valley. The morning is made of a quietness I had forgotten, so still and hushed it is impossible to imagine anything of significance is happening. Across the fields of Clare no time at all exists, nothing of change or moment, only a long singular season of soft weather and wet grass. (Williams 2004: 211)

Many English and German blows also saw Ireland as a very free land, compared to the restrictive societies they felt that they had been raised in. Some Germans were amazed and enchanted by the lack of bureaucracy: for example, that one could just

build a new house or extend an old one without too much difficulty. They regarded the west of Ireland as almost a European outpost of the 'Third World'. One Dutch blow said she and her partner had left east Ireland because it was becoming 'more European', with better roads and more money about; they went to Clare because 'so few others were going there'. They wanted to leave behind what she called 'the West European industrialised ethos'; instead they wanted to live their version of an untouched rural idyll. Clare, precisely because it was so underdeveloped, offered them an excellent setting to put their primitivist dream into practice. To use the countercultural vocabulary of those times, these blows wanted to get 'closer to nature', to be 'in peace and harmony with it'. In other words, they wanted to live off the land, though most were profoundly ignorant of how to do that.

Most made their first priority the creation of a kitchen garden, preferably organic, maybe even biodynamic.<sup>8</sup> Many hunted, some with dogs, for hares, rabbits, pheasants, pigeons, wild goats, and the odd deer. Several of these early blows also fished for trout, pike, eel, and perch. James could catch seventy to eighty perch of an evening, which he would smoke in the chimney for two days, before rollmopping and then pickling them in vinegar. Some erected small windmills to generate electricity, which was used to provide lighting or grind corn for the bread they made. Many kept a few cattle, and some goats. Several English blows, living around the Gort area of north Clare, formed a goatkeepers' society, and for several years successfully sold goatmilk throughout the county as well as in Galway and Limerick. It is said that, in those days, the odd blow-in family supplemented their income by cultivating cannabis.

Most of these early blows strove to live as frugally as possible, and often succeeded. Several spontaneously stated to me how proud they had been to fulfil their goals of living in a relatively non-materialistic, if not flatly primitive manner. They stressed how much work they had had to put in, to create a viable smallholding, to reconstruct a house. Today they openly question, perhaps rhetorically, whether now, more wise, they would have embarked on the adventure had they known the labour it would involve. Though dramatically inexperienced in the beginning, these blows had taught themselves, often with local assistance, to be almost self-sufficient. They had not just had a dream; they had made it a reality. In this context it seems almost churlish to point out that most of them were only able to endure their first years in the area because the dole provided them with a very basic income.

It is important to remember that the people I talked with were the successful ones, those who had been able to stay and make a viable life in this new setting. The failures moved on, or were moved out. One blow gave me the case of Chris: a very creative, energetic man subject to bouts of depression, he heated his house with deep-freezers. Among his several projects, he wanted in particular to breed Great Danes and to start an electrical printing-press business. But his first Dane, while still immature, ate most of the press. Sometime after his wife left him, he was admitted to the county mental hospital. Another blow stated that couples who came here

because of difficulties in their relationships usually found that moving to Clare was not the solution. Most broke up within a year; they either left or found new partners and stayed.

The great majority of the early blows were university graduates, upholding hippie ideals, who would admit, once I'd achieved a basic rapport, that they were assisted in buying or developing their properties by their parents.<sup>9</sup> Many of them saw the next wave of blows, who arrived in the 1980s, as very different: they were predominantly from England and may be classed 'Thatcher's renegade children'. They were strongly opposed to the social damage wrought by the introduction of privatisation and other Thatcherite reforms, which they felt excluded or marginalised them. A majority had lived in travellers' camps in the west of Britain, before making it over to Ireland. To many of the already resident blows, these new arrivals seemed more aggressive, harder types than their flower-power predecessors. One former hippy said that these travellers' attitudes were perceived as 'Fuck you. I'm all right'. They seemed more content to live off the dole than the land. As one early blow put it, 'They were more into take than anything else. Some stole from shops. They made the image of the blow-ins difficult for all the rest of us.' One north Clare encampment of them in particular gained a bad reputation among locals, because of the mess they made, the raves they held, and the fact several of its residents were fined for possession of cannabis. In at least one small town the bars would close weekly, on the day local blows came in to sign on and meet up with one another.

I must not paint too negative a picture here. One group of twenty to twenty-five of these 'second-wave' blows travelled in a convoy of aged vans and converted buses, enjoying month-long stays in one place after another. They wished to live as Native Americans; John remembered how pleasant was the sweat lodge they held nearby to celebrate the completion of the stonework on a blow's house.

In the mid to late 1980s, the Irish Government began to tighten up on the previously very lax system of the dole, thus forcing many blow-ins to rethink their domestic economy and maybe find alternative ways of raising an income. This turning of the financial screw stimulated many of this second wave to adapt to ways more acceptable to the locals. Some left. One might say that those who stayed became less 'crusty' and more workaday 'neo-hippy'. Perhaps the most economically successful blow-in of this period is Roderic. In the late 1970s he was a militant squatter on the south English coast and a leading housing activist there. Tired of his fellow teachers, who he thought 'grey, cynical', he moved to east Clare to help set up an alternative school, which is now the Raheen Wood Steiner National School. Several of his activist friends followed him over. In the early 1990s he started in an unplanned way to advertise locals' unwanted houses for sale, in alternative magazines, as a way 'to seed the area with interesting people'. This initial activity proved so beneficial to him, to local vendors, who would get a very good price, and to outside buyers, who were ignorant of the market, that he is now the very busy owner of a thriving auctioneers-cum-estate agency.

The third, most recent wave of blow-ins is different yet again. Perhaps the most distinctive attribute of this group is the mildness of their attitudes, compared to the rainbow visions of the original hippies and the embittered politics of the crusties. These immigrants lack the radical edge of their predecessors. They tend to combine a general wish to live in the country with a sharp-eyed appreciation of the varied benefits the new technologies offer. Thus many tele-cottage from home and commute a few days a week to part-time white-collar jobs in Limerick or Galway. As one put it to me, she and her partner wish to avoid both the stress of 'surviving on nothing' which the hippies had to bear, and the stress of maintaining a comfortable existence. 'How do you get the balance?' she asked me. As far as I can judge, these incomers tend to congregate in areas where blows have long been resident and have helped to establish a network of well-run local services, especially schooling. The exemplar of this is the area around Scariff, east Clare, which is acting as a magnet for these so-called suburbanites.<sup>10</sup>

Given their very different approach to and reasons for living in the west, many early blows do not hold these new arrivals in high regard. One was openly dismissive of them to me:

The first people, the ones who survived, were pioneers. They were people who could live on nothing; they built their own homes, used their hands. The recent blow-ins are totally different. They build new houses which cost thousands. I resent them coming. For the first blow-ins, Ireland was like a frontier, like Westerners living with the Indians. The recent blow-ins expect it to be a little England. The original crowd were all alternatives: the Steiner crowd [centred around Scariff] are straighter than straight; they try alternative therapies but with modern attitudes.

### **The locals**

When the first blows started to arrive, locals were still leaving the land. To them maintaining the family plot was a hard life which offered poor, and steadily diminishing returns. Even as late as the 1950s children might still walk to school barefoot, no matter the season. Those living in the more isolated areas would often not wish to admit they lived 'in the hills', as that was equated with poverty. So when other opportunities came up they, or more usually their qualified adult children, got out.

Thus locals were often mystified by the blows: why on earth were highly educated young foreigners coming to work the land when so many indigenes had given that up, or longed to do so? Some could not accept that these incomers genuinely wanted to take up such unrewarding, low-valued work, and therefore fantasised about their true motives. For instance, the brother-in-law of John's vendor always believed that John had bought it because he had discovered oil on the land. Some locals, perceiving the incomers' actions in local terms, could not fathom their aims. When one blow bought land in the Burren, locals said 'I was crazy buying a field of rocks. Why not buy a proper field, on which I grow something?' (Figure 8.1).



Figure 8.1 The Burren: karst limestone.

Be that as it may, many locals displayed great kindness to these newcomers in their midst. Many blows, when asked about their relations with their neighbours, will spontaneously and very happily list the unpaid labour that locals gave them to help rebuild their ramshackle houses, the tractors they were loaned, the furniture they were given, the repeated advice about farming that was freely offered, the parcels of food left out for them, the seemingly endless teas they were invited to, and so on. One said she and her partner need never have gone shopping in their first three years if they had accepted all the invitations made to them. Another cried when he recounted to me the thoughtfulness of his local postman: one day, several months after the arrival of he and his partner, the man knocked at their door with a big box of food. The blow suspects the postman knew the pair did not know many people. The following year, his French neighbour was still putting felt on his roof at the time his son was born. When, a few months later, the baby was kept in hospital because of whooping cough and poor home conditions, the postman offered to loan the blow a caravan and a radiator until he had fixed his house.

One blow claimed to me that the locals were on the whole so accepting of them because the new arrivals amused them: with their seemingly strange ways and unusual lifestyle, the incomers were good entertainment value for the locals. Several blows I interviewed took a slightly different tack: they argued that the indigenes were so accommodating because they themselves were poetical, non-logical types, traditionally tolerant of the odd within their own community. As one blow said, 'In

the west of Ireland there is a madness, an eccentricity, I think, where reality and unreality, time and timelessness mix and merge freely.<sup>11</sup> Another, long-resident blow-in remembered:

When we came here first the locals accepted us in our eccentricity. I mean our immediate locals here are all completely mad in a lovely way. They'd talk to you for days non-stop about the fairies. Our neighbour said he heard liltin when he was digging a ditch and then saw the fairies coming along on horses. He threw down his hat in front of them, which meant they had to give him a horse. He got on the horse and went with them. They jumped the Shannon and then came to a huge field where the county teams of Offaly and Clare were hurling. He's no fool either. He lived in New York.

The German ethnologist Ullrich Kockel, who studied the blows in a north Clare village, has an alternative, perhaps supplementary interpretation of this apparent indigenous acceptance: 'The high degree of empathy with which the counterculture is received locally suggests that its primarily individualistic orientation is much closer the local mentality than romantic images of a "communal spirit of enterprise" that are often associated with the West' (Kockel 2002: 62). We can push this speculation further, for if locals' desire for individualism has always been tempered by the pressures of community, then incomers' behaviour might well act as a tempting demonstration of what could be. Following the lines of this argument, the actions of the incomers are seen not so much as idiosyncratic, but as exemplary.

A further possibility, which may be complementary with, not exclusionary to, the others mentioned above, is that the sustained kindnesses of locals to the incomers was invitational. Their offers of food, meals, and other gifts may be viewed as invitations to participate in a cooperative network, where assistance was not measured minutely but understood to be reciprocal over time. In this sense the local's generosity was but a manifestation of a key value underlying indigenous ways: the importance of helping one another. Of course these acts were also at the same time a claim to moral equality, grounded on a local ethics.

The denizens might have shown repeated kindnesses to the blows, but relatively few incomers went out of their way to get to know the immediate locals. Jane, something of an exception here, performed chores for her ageing neighbours: as they became more and more stiff, she would help in their gardens, put out their hay, or do their shopping. John thought the only way he would meet indigenes was to become a holder of livestock. So he bought some cattle and sought out the advice of neighbours on how to manage them. Those who got to know their neighbours best tended to be those who farmed seriously and so met with other farmers at cattle auctions and markets.

Many blows found it difficult to socialise with their neighbours because they did not go to bars or the church, and were not interested in hurling. It was easier to spend time with people with whom they had more in common: fellow blows. Some of these 'isolationists', as one blow termed them, stereotyped the locals in denigratory

terms. One long-term blow-in claimed to me that, 'In the late 1960s the rural Irish were very narrow-minded, very parochial, very naive. They hadn't the tiniest idea of what was happening outside their own area. They couldn't understand why I was living in a tent. They thought it had to be poverty.'

More perceptive blows came to realise that they had entered small communities whose members were either all related to one another or had known one another since birth. Much of their conversation was about their kin, affines, and personalities peppering familial and local histories. Like native Amazonians who when meeting a stranger seek a common (if fictitious) genealogical link in order to establish a social relationship, locals would initiate conversations with a new person in their midst by engaging in a joint hunt for shared kin, in-laws or friends (Riviere 1969: 101–2). Williams, a US citizen, gives a good example of this. He married an Irish American and the two went to live in her late grandparents' house in south-west Clare. Not long after their arrival, the parish priest called round. 'Once he had inquired about our health, he moved the talk to that most important of subjects: "Who is it now are your wife's cousins?"' (Williams and Breen 1987: 124). Not surprising then that one female blow, a singleton, lamented to me, 'How could a local consider marrying me, if he didn't know my parents and the reputation of my family?'

While some blows do mention a number of very minor problems that they had with a few locals, who were ignorant of hippie ways, the only serious difficulties these incomers have had with the indigenes have almost all centred around land. In most of these cases, good-natured blows were made to play the unwitting role of middle-party in an enduring contest between two neighbours. Few of these difficulties endured more than a few months.<sup>12</sup>

Both incomers and denizens are very quick to point out that 'blow-in' is defined very locally. A man who moved from Dublin would be one. Some claim that even a person who came from only ten miles away might be classed as a 'blow'. There appear to be two key, underlying criteria. First, blows are not born and brought up in the rural area, however narrowly defined. In *The Spinning Heart*, a recent novel about rural Ireland, one character assesses her mother's parochialism:

That girl whose child was taken from the crèche is a blow-in, Mam says. *Blow-in*. That phrase is used so derisively. As if to say it's a failing to not have been born and bred here, to have settled in a place outside of the place of your birth. Mam doesn't mean anything bad by it, though. It's hard to shake your prejudices, I know. (Ryan 2012: 127, orig. ital.)

Second, blows have not worked the Clare soil since childhood, nor had they taken on a genealogical tradition of working it. Williams puts this well, albeit imaginatively:

More and more I was coming to understand, as I never had before, the full measure of difference between the city and the country person. There was a completely other sense of pride at work in the West. It was more than pride in the land, more than pride of the survivor, or the pride of freedom and independence. It was as if there was a natural and

fiery pride in the knowledge of having been passed a special destiny of poor land and Atlantic rain. It could never be questioned, but held instead with a strong grip marked by silence, faith and perseverance. No matter what, we could never belong here the way these people did, for it struck me that they were as much a part of the landscape as any tree, rock or field. They were the West, and they knew it. And yet, from time to time – bumping along in the tractor, barrowing turf out of the bog, living day after day in the ever-falling softness of the rain – we could feel a flash of insight and empathy, knowing if only for a second something of the quality of that pride. (Williams and Breen 1987: 211)

A foreigner, no matter how long they stayed, would never be regarded as Irish. An Irish townsman, similarly, would never be seen as a local. They would be for life blow-ins, and even if their children integrated very successfully, they would always be known as ‘the son/daughter of blow from X’. As another character in *The Spinning Heart* puts it, ‘That lady is only a blow-in from town, a right-looking rap’ (Ryan 2012: 153). Of course, an extremist form of localism is easy fodder for cosmopolitan satire. In a witty claim to rock bravado, one recent duo of incomer musicians undercut any purist criticism by brandishing their outsider status: they call themselves the Blow-ins. On their website they define the term as ‘A stranger or foreigner, basically anybody whose ancestors have not lived within sight of the parish church for at least ten generations.’<sup>13</sup> It is all the more ironic then that, as some etymologists claim, blow-in is in fact an Australian term, originally applied to Irish immigrants.<sup>14</sup> Either way, to focus on the highly localised definition of ‘blow-in’ is perhaps to steer the discussion down an unproductive path. For, as Jane pointed out, long-term blows who had a service they could provide, whether as builder, architect, or fellow farmer, might not be seen as locals but they could still be relied upon, and that was an important criterion for the indigenes: they were participatory members of the local network.

Despite all this it is easy to argue that the key, ultimate difference to blows was not their birthplace, their upbringing, or their work patterns, but their ability to escape the scene. Once again, it is Jane who expressed this memorably: ‘We were like plastic peasants.’ In other words, working the land was for most locals their main, if not sole means of surviving. It was not a question of choice. They had nowhere else to go. Blows, however, had come from elsewhere and they could, if all else failed, always go back there. To this extent, it is not unfair to state that many blows, however idealist, however committed, were toying with the idea of living off the land. It was their belief in the value of rural life, not lack of other opportunity, which kept them tilling the soil. And this difference, though not usually mentioned, is one that never goes away.

### Of individuals and innovators

Several of the early blows I spoke to spontaneously mentioned to me that they were loners, relatively solitary types who did not wish to be seen as members of a

particular group, whether that be a goatkeepers' society or parent of a child attending a local 'alternative' school: it had too strong a collective identity for their liking. The Frenchman, mentioned earlier, to whom the postman made his kind-hearted offer, was so independently minded and so determined to do everything himself, that he refused the caravan and only accepted the radiator. James emphasised to me, 'I learn the conventional way of doing things, and then work out my own unconventional way of doing it. My way in life is: I lay down my own terms.' In the early 1970s several English blows, already resident, decided to set up a commune together in a large house by a lake. But it split up within a year.

Some might like to underline their individuality or solitary disposition, but many of the early blows still liked to hold communal Christmas dinners and, even more importantly for them, New Year and mid-summer parties, where incomer bands would play, and to which they were able to invite all the immigrants they knew. Though most long-established blows stress today that the number of incomers is now so great that they no longer know all their fellows, and that they lead far less social lives than before, they will admit that there remains a weak but perceptible sense of community among their number. Examples of this are the musical benefits held in recent years to raise money for the treatment of a blow diagnosed with cancer, or for the son of one who was knocked off his cycle. One long-resident blow described these benefits as akin to old family reunions, where he would meet people he had not seen in years: 'Somehow they hear about the event and they all come along.'

Whether as individualists or occasional participants in a broad but thin community, the blows had still to survive. From the 1980s on, it became harder and harder to live off the dole. Government inspectors might visit to see how big one's kitchen garden was, and then lop a proportional amount off one's allowance. This shrinking of many blows' core income forced them to examine their future, and whether or not it was time to start making money.

One early incomer said how fascinating it was to see what blows would turn their hand to in order to remain in the area. Almost all have set themselves up as skilled craftspeople, tradespeople, or managers of small businesses: for example, carpenters, gardeners, landscape gardeners, boatmakers, housebuilders or renovators, decorators, signwriters, cheesemakers. Some work for local fishermen. There are some lasting cooperative ventures, but most concerns are based on individuals or couples. A large number of these workers and their small companies are dedicated to the promotion of an 'alternative economy', broadly understood. Some practise as homeopaths or masseurs. Some have established small to medium-size working farms, run on biodynamic or organic principles, often selling their produce via veggie-box schemes. Several are assisted from time to time by 'woofers', volunteers sent by the Irish branch of Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms, who donate their labour in return for bed and board and a chance to learn organic farming principles and realities.<sup>15</sup> In 1996 blow-ins made Scariff the home of the Seed Savers Association, dedicated to promoting native apple varieties and assembling a

national seed bank. Today it has twenty staff, running an educational facility, shop, and cafe.<sup>16</sup> One incomer couple bought the former workhouse in Gort and turned it into a school of homeopathy. One blow set up a company importing ergonomically designed tools. Another set up an 'alternative energy company' which successfully produced wind-driven water pumps for several years. Today, in the Ennis street market, one can find blows selling organic vegetables, potting compost, dried flowers, and home-cultivated herbs, for medicinal and culinary purposes.<sup>17</sup>

These industrious blows have had to be very adaptive in order to survive economically. If one venture or occupation did not work, they had to switch to another. Given their generally high standard of education, most were not resistant to the idea of undergoing formal retraining, even when middle-aged. Sue co-ran a health food store and, after doing a course in accountancy, became a distributor for health foods, acting as an intermediary between wholesalers and retailers. Her former business partner, whose formal schooling ended at sixteen, now runs two similar stores, one in Gort, the other in Ennis. Probably the best examples of just how adaptive blows can be are James, and Diana and Chris, former housing activists, friends of Roderic's:

James: over the years, he has worked as a restorer of horse-drawn vehicles, as a professional gilly; he has repaired boats, promoted local angling tourism, and now manages his own forest. He today makes furniture, produces timber, and stages in his wood well-attended 'eco-festivals' dedicated to the propagation of eco-traditional woodland crafts, such as thatching, basketmaking, bowmaking, and green woodwork.

Diana and Chris: in the twenty-five years since their arrival, they have made for sale patchwork clothes and furnishings, homespun jumpers, buttons from twigs and branches, tongue drums, wooden furniture, and sandwiches. They now have a regular stall at Ennis market where they sell home-cultivated flowering plants and salad vegetables.

One long-resident blow noted how some had by now become quite affluent while others, through the decisions they had made, remained poor. Jimmy, an Irishman, who formerly busked around Europe, became a jeweller and today owns a one-hundred acre farm. Sue does his accounts. James, though from time to time short of cash, is rich in assets as his lakeside forest could, in the hands of an ambitious developer, become a prime tourist site.

The other major factor that changed the blows' outlook was the education of their children. Several blows taught their children at home, until they were about eight or nine years old. However, as one said, 'I had had a choice. To be fair I had to do the same for my children.' Schooling, however, could become a major cause of tension between blows and locals. Many blows were shocked at how very hierarchical and traditionalist Irish state schools were. To their surprise they had very little say in the running of these schools which, to them, appeared strictly controlled by the headteacher in league with the parish priest. The great majority of the blow-in parents with whom I spoke stated that their children had had problems at the local

schools they had attended. Many state that their children did not make friends with local boys and girls. As the teenage daughter of a Dutch couple complained, 'I have to be like them otherwise I'll have no friends. So I have to go to dances, listen to pop music, and talk about hurling.' One parent said his children would be asked in the playground, 'Are you a Catholic or a hippie?' He went on, 'You could tell a blow-in child at lunch because they had weird things like carrots and raisins. Anyone with brown bread in their lunch was a hippie.' Some blow-in children were bullied, many were stigmatised, local pupils deriding them as 'hippies', who mocked them as 'red-necks' in return. Even though these mutual rebukes might have been the work of a minority, they were sufficient to prevent easy play between many local and blow-in schoolchildren. One single mother said the headmaster of her son's school had aggravated matters, by refusing to accept there might be any conflict between children of either group. More than one couple removed their children from formal education completely because they were so unhappy with their local secondary schools.

Some dissatisfied blow-in parents took matters into their hands by establishing independent schools. In mid-Clare, an energetic Dublin blow, who had established a business making windows and doors and cutting flagstones, worked with local incomers to set up a 'Hedgerow' school, whose aim was to teach how to learn, rather than training pupils in rote learning. It ran successfully for five years but ultimately proved too time-consuming for many parents who acted as volunteer assistants. In Scariff, east Clare, concerned parents agreed to follow the suggestion of some very enthusiastic German blow-ins that they set up a Steiner school. Raheen Wood, as it is now known, takes children between the ages of four and thirteen and is today the largest Steiner school in Ireland, with over 125 pupils. After initial opposition, locals have started sending their children there: about one third of the intake is now native east Clare.<sup>18</sup>

As this example suggests, in some ways the blows have had a clearly innovative or revitalising effect on local life. Williams is clear about this, in a book that he wrote with his wife:

It seems that if the West is to survive it will do so not because of some sudden change in the economic viability of farming, nor even because of the bestowal of local employment by foreign industries, but because of the 'blow-ins' ... Such people bring with them an appreciation of what the countryside has to offer without feeling the pessimism or sense of entrapment of some who have never left. New settlers bring new energy to the area ... The influence of these new people will eventually bring new ways of thinking about life here – about being enterprising and looking forward, about possibility and richness and a value for life that is available in these rural townlands. (Williams and Breen 1995: 154)

Besides providing educational alternatives, these incomers have also acted as potential harbingers of change in a variety of other ways, including: experimenting with drugs (usually nothing harder than cannabis); maintaining non-conventional relationships; new housebuilding styles; organic farming; and production of a much

broader range of foods. John spoke of locals who had never seen peas or beetroots until he started growing them. As far as he was aware, locals rarely cultivated much more than potatoes. In architectural styles, the blow-ins have demonstrated that new houses need not be all-concrete edifices. Some homemaking incomers have reintroduced timber-framing and thatching; a few have produced almost fairy-tale like houses (Figure 1.1). John has designed a string of very striking modern houses. One blow, a self-taught carpenter, built a well-insulated timber home in the Burren. The initial reaction of some locals was sceptical: 'What are you doing that for? It'll blow away.' Several years later the house is still standing (Figure 1.2), and some locals have since had timber houses built for themselves (Figure 8.2) (see also Williams 1995: 154). By chance, none of the blow-ins I spoke with were musicians, but recent work by an anthropologist of tourism in north-west Clare suggests that incomer musicians have played a major role in the sustained revival of traditional Irish music in the county (Kaul 2004: 21).

It is illuminating that the one time a blow-in was included among the characters of an Irish radio soap opera, he played the role of agent of change. Most blows would not be so presumptuous as to compile a list of innovations and brandish it as their positive contribution to the local scene. But many of the longer-established ones are well aware of some of the effects they have had. Even though they readily acknowledge many of these changes would have come to the west of Ireland eventually, as they were beginning to happen over much of Western Europe, they do still hold up the likelihood that they were early, possible models for these changes.

The blows' innovations have been important. But what has been even more significant on the local scene is their ability to organise themselves and others, for blows have proved time and again that they are effective coordinators and activists. One local noted this difference: 'Most of the blows have that get-up and go. The local attitude to new ideas would be, "We always did it that way", or "We couldn't do that because we never did it before"'. Some of the blows' energy was directed towards revitalising local life. In the general area around Gort, for example, incomers have over the years embarked on a diversity of initiatives, such as creating or re-animating local drama groups; organising a film club (the majority of its regulars came from the local home for the mentally handicapped); setting up a community cafeteria, which for a while acted as a focus for a local LETS (local exchange trading system) scheme; and forming a Tree Society, an actively cooperative venture which involved large numbers of incomers and townspeople to plant out municipal plots.<sup>19</sup> In Scariff, setting up the school stimulated further activities, above all the East Clare Community Co-op, which operates community employment schemes. One of its founders states that these schemes include 'not just digging holes in the road or tidying graveyards, but painters, seedsavers, coppicers, weavers, basket-makers. Whatever energies people bring in, we help them'.<sup>20</sup> Other spin-offs of the Co-op are a travelling puppet theatre; The Graney, a whole-food store vaunted by local blows as one of the most dynamic and profitable in the country; and a tele-



*Figure 8.2* This blow-in's house has been built around the original caravan (just visible through the leftmost window).

cottaging business, giving the otherwise unconnected access to the Net. Teachers and parents of pupils at the school also revived or revitalised seasonal celebrations: in particular, they boast of transforming the town's St Patrick's Day parade into a very popular, lively event.

Where the blows have indubitably made the greatest difference is in their environmental activism, both in halting controversial developments and in changing the awareness of locals to their surroundings.

### **Blows against pollution**

An early campaign was one against the Irish tobacco company Carroll's, which wanted to establish fish farms in a very shallow north Clare lake. Several blows gathered scientific data about the probable deleterious effects of the proposal and protested. Planning permission was subsequently refused, though blows today admit they do not know how influential their protest was in the making of this decision.

The most significant, most memorable campaign, however, in which the blows played a noteworthy role, was that against the creation of a National Park and interpretative centre at Mullaghmore, in the heart of the Burren. First announced in 1991, the centre was supported by those who saw it as a needed opportunity for local development and the generation of jobs. Those against thought the consequent crowds of visitors would destroy the peace of the Burren and irreparably damage its fragile ecology. The debate about the centre swiftly moved from the local to the national

level, and even became a key campaign issue in the country's elections. The historical course of this debate has already been detailed by others (e.g. Saunders 1996).<sup>21</sup> Its effective end only came in 2000 when An Bord Pleanála, the country's pre-eminent planning review board, definitively turned the development proposal down.

When asked to recall those days, activist blows are keen to emphasise the deep and (to them) surprisingly vigorous feelings which the controversy exposed. Jane said it took a brave blow-in to stand up in a town hall meeting and oppose the project. "Who are you to tell us how things are to be done?" was a common attitude then,' she stated. Some locals did admit that during the conflict, 'there was a basic lack of courtesy'. One local priest, who praised the Burren in spiritual terms, even had to take a farmer to court for assault in a pub, because the man had abused him 'with obscene and filthy language' and labelled him 'a hippie priest': 'A gun should be taken to you, you bastard' (*Clare Champion*, 22 May 1992).

Blows also underline the stereotyping, by local supporters of the project, of those opposed to it. One remembered the placard placed above a tractor on the pathway of a demonstration:

*Dublin 2*  
*Vegetarians*  
*Blow-ins*  
*Go Home*<sup>22</sup>

Blows also take pains to point out that membership of the two sides should not be stereotyped: not all farmers, they underline, were in support of the centre. As one local woman wrote to the county newspaper,

Yet rather than meet these arguments, the supporters of the site have cast the opponents as hippies, outsiders and elitists. It won't wash. My ancient ancestors were land-grabbers and cattle rustlers in and around the Burren, as many a graveyard around the Burren will attest. (*Clare Champion*, 6 March 1992)

Some locals, when asked to discuss the conflict, stress that differences of opinion are usually dealt with in a quiet, informal manner. The common aim is to resolve tension without fuss, and to avoid open confrontation. One consequence of their ideology of egalitarianism is that, in the words of one, 'You don't put your head above the parapet.' The question, of course, is to what extent that applies to the blows. As one local put it, 'Newcomers can be movers and shakers because they are not afraid of stepping on anybody's toes. In the village people would be intermarried. Everyone would know everyone's seed, breed and generation.' In other words the blow-ins were able to stick their neck out, to publicly argue against the project precisely because they were not hobbled by a lifetime entanglement to the local community. Even though they might get on well with all their neighbours, their modulated alienation from the indigenous way of life gave them the freedom to spout unpopular views.

In some cases, the open nature of this continuing controversy led to a deep drawing of lines between neighbours, and even kinsfolk. According to one Dublin

blow-in who played a major role in the protest campaign, 'The locals who opposed the project were ostracized for going against the consensus and that hurt them.' In 2003, when I did my fieldwork, several locals stressed that its effects linger. They all knew examples of former neighbours who are still not speaking to one another.

### Evolution

The entry in 1973 of Ireland into the EU has had a great and continuing effect on life in the country. It was, for instance, a major cause behind the rise of the 'Celtic Tiger' in the 1990s, when the national economy boomed. This belated, relatively sudden development shifted many people's attitudes and expanded their expectations, as they sought to come to terms with, and for some to take advantage of, the new Ireland that was rapidly emerging.

The blows note manifold changes. Perhaps top of their list was the spectacular rise in the value of land and property from the late 1980s to 2008, when Ireland officially entered into recession. Next would come changing attitudes to the sale of property. In the 1970s, one could agree a price with a local vendor, go back to England to work, and then return a year later with the cash. During the Celtic Tiger years, one might agree a price, then find the local vendor had raised the price in the two weeks it took to raise the money, or had sold it to another buyer who had since appeared, making a higher offer. The housing boom also led to a changed sense of landscape: villages formerly near but beyond Ennis became part of its suburban sprawl. The continuing construction of more and more houses in even out-of-the-way villages plus the massive increase in the use of cars, which can travel fast down small country roads, meant that a sense of isolation and rural peace became ever more difficult to achieve in Clare. In the 1970s John would take his children to school in a horse and trap. As he lamented, 'That's unthinkable now. There are too many cars on the road and they go so fast!'

If the formerly stagnant economy enabled people to be so cooperative and so generous with their time, then those busy in a buoyant economy will no longer have the resources to show similar levels of kindness or concern for others. Many, both Irish and blows, argue that this is precisely what has happened. Synge was prescient on this point. In 1911 he wrote,

One's first feeling as one comes back among these people and takes a place, so to speak, in this noisy procession of fishermen, farmers, and women, where nearly everyone is interesting and attractive, is a dread of any reform that would tend to lessen their individuality rather than any very real hope of improving their well-being. One feels, then, perhaps a little later, that it is part of the misfortune of Ireland that nearly all the characteristics which give colour and attractiveness to Irish life are bound up with a social condition that is near to penury. (Synge 2005: 145)

Blows will state that today it is almost only among the aged that one can find 'the old ways': a slow pace, a love of conversation for its own sake, an active willingness to help others, especially those in need. In this new world of harried employees and

budding entrepreneurs with their eye always fixed on the long chance, the 'charm' of Ireland, which so attracted the early incomers, becomes ever harder to encounter. As one long-resident blow, now in her fifties, put it, 'A lot of the older people have some of the old magic about them. But people our age are all on the same European fast track.'

The blows no longer seem so distinctive because Clare has become so much more multicultural and because so many of their original ideas have been taken seriously, if in a diluted manner, by locals. Many cite the fact that in 2000 an Indian psychiatrist working in the Ennis mental hospital was elected to the Irish Parliament. In 2001 the winner of a regional beauty contest, Miss Lisdoonvarna, was a Brazilian. She is one of the hundreds of labour migrants who are given one-year work permits to labour in a north Clare meat-packing factory. In Ennis, African refugees now reside in the city while the majority of low-status jobs in local service industries, for example in fast-food outlets and restaurants, are occupied by East Europeans. This broadening of Clare society has met some resistance; both locals and blows will quietly claim that some of the West African and Brazilians are thieves.

Today there are many signs that locals are accepting ideas and approaches once almost exclusive to the blows. At a thriving yoga centre in the Burren, the majority of clients at their morning and evening classes are local housewives, with some farmers' wives, and even a few farmers themselves. Organic agriculture is no longer considered an eccentric practice indulged in by those who do not understand the land.

Some blows also underline the changes within themselves. One first-wave blow claimed that fifteen years ago they would help each other build their houses. Now they could not, as they all had jobs and mortgages to worry about. Another reason for a decline in any sense of community within the blows was that many had become much more integrated in their residential area. Also, most long-established blows are prepared to admit, however reluctantly or not, that though they strove to fulfil pre-modern ideals, they now cohabit a postmodern space where, for instance, local bands dedicated to Irish folk music may be completely composed of non-Irish players. (On these bands see Kaul 2004; 2009.) Further, many of the earlier blows are today acutely aware of the ironies they exemplify. Some of these back-to-nature types are now relatively very well-to-do because the land they bought for so little decades ago is today worth so much. It is as though they were unwitting opportunists, taking unknowing advantage of a brief window of opportunity in the 1970s and 1980s when advanced Western economies began to experience affluence and Ireland had yet to boom. The British former housing activist who has become a successful estate agent saved me the bother of commenting on the irony of his transformation, by raising the point himself.

In 2000 the rural geographer Keith Halfacree contended that the academic concept of 'counterurbanisation' was in danger of being applied in too restrictive a manner. Back-to-the-land migrants were being excluded because they were thought too marginal

(Halfacree 2001a; see also Halfacree 2001b). On the basis of my fieldwork, I argue that counterurbanisation in Clare, and very probably almost everywhere else in Ireland, cannot be understood without taking blow-ins and their ilk into account. Though their numbers were relatively low, they have had a pervasive effect on local life. Indeed they have now become an integral part of a broadened conception of local life. If we are to characterise contemporary Clare life, it would have to be as a sporadically dynamic, increasingly multicultural area, whose participative inhabitants include a culturally and economically significant number of blow-ins. They cannot be ignored.

The social anthropologists who worked in Clare, from the 1930s through to the 1970s, have been much criticised for their mischaracterisation of local life, especially their common lament that the area was dying (Wilson and Donnan 2006). The danger here is that contemporary ethnographers of the county who do not take the blow-ins and other incomers into account will be similarly lambasted in due course. For today, any fieldworker of Clare who fails to recognise the current diversity of its population would only be engaging in a modern version of the distorting generalisations their predecessors were justly accused of.

It can also be argued that the blow-ins are an illuminating counter-example to top-down approaches for agricultural development; for the sustained, disparate activities of independently minded individuals have led, over time, to a collective change. With hindsight, the blow-in smallholders may be viewed as integral, key motivating members of the *avant-garde* for environmental and organic concerns, which have today entered the mainstream. Further, they may be regarded as the model for rural resettlement Ireland, a very successful national organisation, based in Clare, which assists urban families, particularly disadvantaged ones, to establish themselves in the countryside. Indeed the EU has used it as a template for repopulating emptied landscapes elsewhere in the subcontinent.<sup>23</sup> In both cases the well-grounded example of the blow-ins' industriousness over the last four decades demonstrates the surprisingly wide-ranging and cumulative power of microeconomic initiatives over macroeconomic grand strategies. And, as such, they are deeply appropriate candidates for anthropological study.

The blows, in sum, are another example of the unexpected ways rural populations, attitudes, and behaviours can evolve. Because in the early 1960s, no Irish planner would have anticipated that a foreign, utopic movement spread by affluent youth from the cities would end up having a broad, reflexive effect first in one of the country's poorest counties, and then beyond. Yoga anyone?

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## Notes

- 1 The quotes come, respectively, from [www.shannonregiontourism.ie/clare/](http://www.shannonregiontourism.ie/clare/); [www.county-clare.com/](http://www.county-clare.com/); [www.westclare.com/](http://www.westclare.com/); [www.infowing.ie/files/clare.htm](http://www.infowing.ie/files/clare.htm); [www.doolin-tourism.com](http://www.doolin-tourism.com). All accessed 7 February 2005.
- 2 The quotes come, respectively, from Stevens 1912 (1690); Kohl 1844; Hall 1850: 60; all cited in O'Dalaigh 1998.
- 3 For a fine-grained, critical analysis of the particular versions of Irish primitivism upheld by Yeats, Synge, and Gregory respectively, see Mattar 2004.
- 4 He revealed to me it was Quilty (Brody pers. comm. 8 June 2012).
- 5 Brody 1973. For critical reassessments of Arensberg and Kimball and Brody, see Gibbon 1973, Wilson 1984, Saris 2000: 20–1. There have been so many studies of Clare and nearby that the famed Irish writer Flann O'Brien declared, "The typical West of Ireland family consists of father, mother, twelve children, and resident Dutch anthropologist" (quoted in MacHale 2002: 88). For more modern work on suicide among rural Irish males, see Laoire 2001.
- 6 *Michael Joe* (Cotter 1965), a local author's profoundly unromantic novel about west Clare in the 1940s, is particularly illuminating on the town/country social divide (see its pp. 148, 161–2, 180–1).
- 7 I am grateful to the School of Social Sciences, Oxford Brookes University, for a research grant which enabled this fieldwork, to my cousin for his invaluable research assistance, and above all to all those who gave up their time to talk with me. My host was especially hospitable, for which I thank him greatly.
- 8 On the attitudes of biodynamic farmers in Ireland, most of whom are blow-ins, see McMahon 2005.
- 9 Williams is clear about the paternal support they received, e.g. 1995: 38–9.
- 10 Adrian Peace, who in 2000 did a brief bout of intensive fieldwork in the middle of my own fieldwork area, states: 'My experience from living in X was that members of this third wave were much more strategic and calculating, because they had frequently visited Clare, as tourists especially, (less so) on business, and including men on fishing trips, for several years before making "the final leap". They had a much better sense of the finances they would require, the occupational changes they would have to make, and all-round adjustments in family life and career courses. I can think of several around X who bought land, built on it, and finally made the move over two or three years of gradual and strategic build-up' (A. Peace, pers. comm.) My own fieldwork material bears out these points.

He also states, 'In my experience, the final wave of blow-ins were often enough married couples comprising a local spouse who had been away for several years and a blow-in spouse, so the domestic unit bridged the divide which is key to your interpretation. Their encounter was often complex and difficult, even though they had made the calculations and strategies I referred to earlier. These difficulties could result in considerable despair for the blow-in spouse, in some cases leading to marital breakdown. My own landlady on the outskirts of X was a case in point: she assured me several times that it was only because her two (now teenage) daughters had grown up in Clare and had their formative networks there, that she didn't return to England after her husband left her. Her social network by 2000 was pretty well exclusively other blow-ins, and the high points of her year were when her sister and her children came across the water for their holidays' (A.

- Peace, pers. comm.) I do not dispute Peace's findings. But I found that third-wave incomers were as likely to be pairs of blow-ins as a blow-in married to a returning local.
- 11 Words of Arthur Watson (real name), quoted in Kravis and Morgan 1999: 94.
  - 12 On this point, Peace has written to me, 'Some blow-ins, at least in the final phase, ran into enormous problems with locals, especially when they became involved in joint enterprises like building and home improvement firms' (A. Peace, pers. comm.)
  - 13 See [www.theblow-ins.com](http://www.theblow-ins.com). Accessed 17 June 2014.
  - 14 See e.g. [www.moonunderwater.org/2014/01/16/blow-in/](http://www.moonunderwater.org/2014/01/16/blow-in/). Accessed 23 June 2014.
  - 15 See [www.wwoof.ie](http://www.wwoof.ie). Accessed 17 June 2014.
  - 16 See [www.irishseedsavers.ie/about-biodiversity-conservation.php](http://www.irishseedsavers.ie/about-biodiversity-conservation.php). Accessed 17 June 2014.
  - 17 In County Sligo, north-west Ireland, an informal grouping of blow-in smallholders produced a monthly magazine dedicated to alternative-minded agricultural topics, first called *North-west Newsletter*, later *Common Ground*, between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s. At first aimed at a regional readership, it soon went nationwide (Byrne 2007: 2).
  - 18 In one of her novels Edna O'Brien, who is herself from Scariff, presents locals as perceiving the schools in a dismissive, alien manner (O'Brien 2002: 71–2).
  - 19 The incomers raised funds by putting on a musical evening, one local donated two lorry-loads of topsoil, another the trees, and a large number of both turned up to plant them.

The blows can also be regarded as local saviours in certain cases. One pointed out to me that when she and her family arrived in the Gort area, the local school was about to shut. The immediate entry of four of her children prevented its closure.

The Irish social scientist Ethel Crowley studied a LETS scheme in south-western Ireland (Crowley 2004). She found it played a major role in integrating incomers and that its members could be seen as a 'neo-tribe'.

- 20 Words of A. Watson, quoted in Kravis and Morgan 1999: 93.
- 21 Peace argues that the debate was so protracted and heated because at root lay opposed conceptions of the landscape, which otherwise come to the surface very rarely (Peace 2005).
- 22 Dublin 2 is a well-known affluent district within the city.
- 23 See [www.ruralresettlement.com/about.html](http://www.ruralresettlement.com/about.html). Accessed 16 June 2014.

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