

THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF IRISH COAST (CLIC): REPORT ON THE 2007 FIELD SEASON

**Dr. Ian Kuijt, Associate Professor,
Department of Anthropology,
University of Notre Dame**

Context and goals

Funded through the John Tynan Family, the 2007 field season of the Cultural Landscape of the Irish Coast (also known as CLIC) represented the first year of a five year field project that will integrate both graduate and undergraduate level education and training into an international multi-institutional, multidisciplinary research program. While the rich cultural heritage of Connemara is widely recognized by the general public, researchers typically have a poor understanding of the archaeology, human ecology, and ethnology of this region. The CLIC research strategy identifies four goals; (i) Survey ancient coastlines and rural landscapes to identify heritage sites; (ii) Integrate the survey and paleoenvironmental data to model systems of land use through time; (iii) Locate and investigate select archaeological and paleoenvironmental sites; and (iv) Document oral history and folklore.

Research working group

As an international multi-institutional, multidisciplinary research program, this project draws upon the expertise and interests of American, Irish and Canadian faculty members. Core institutional members include, the **Department of Anthropology** at the **University of Notre Dame** (Drs. I. Kuijt, D. Rotman and M. Schurr), the Department of Archaeology, **University College Dublin** (Dr. J. O'Neill), the Department of Geography, **Trinity College Dublin** (Dr. P. Coxon), and Department of History and Archaeology, **Cardiff University** (Dr. E. Guttman).

In 2007, the CLIC research team consisted of 14 field staff members. This included five undergraduate students from Notre Dame, including three first year students and two juniors. In addition, four graduate students enrolled at the University of Michigan, Washington State University, and the University of Montana, Missoula, participated in the CLIC field project.

Geographical focus

In developing a detailed, multi-level understanding of the cultural landscape of western Ireland, CLIC focused on two scales: (i) the general comparative study of western coastal Connemara; and (ii) exploration of representative case studies on Inis Airc Island, Omey Island, Errislannan, and Streamstown Bay. In the 2007 season, we focused our archaeological, paleoenvironmental and agricultural research on Omey Island, Errislannan and Streamstown Bay. These areas are representatives of different physiographic locations (isolated island, inter-tidal island, and protected bay areas). This allowed for detailed exploration of critical dimensions of the changing cultural landscape of western Ireland in different ecological contexts.

2007 Phase I research results

Between June 15 and July 9, 2007, the Cultural Landscape of the Irish Coast research team lived in Clifden, Co. Galway. From this location, the project members were able to explore several critical questions:

- 1) What understanding do local people have of the years before and after the famine, particularly life in rural areas as well as the migration of people to the United States?
- 2) What architectural evidence is there for pre-and post-famine buildings remaining today, what were the living arrangements in these stone buildings, and can we trace ownership of these preserved houses?
- 3) How long have people lived in this area Connemara and what kinds of cultural remains are associated with Neolithic, Bronze Age, Celtic and Medieval period occupations?

Drawing upon aerial and satellite photography, historical records, and published archaeological reports, our field team was able to develop our first detailed documentation of heritage resources in the studied areas. This foundation provides a strong foundation for understanding the Irish-American experience and enhanced our understanding of the connections between Irish heritage and modern Irish and Irish-American identity

The 2007 phase I research achieved the following goals:

- (1) Identifying and recording unknown coastal heritage sites and land use.

This research focused on documenting the rapidly eroding, abandoned settlements of Irish coastal people who once lived on Omey Island, Co. Galway. The 2007 field project focused on the northwest corner of the island: a two by two kilometer area that makes up the commonage. Previous research had identified five heritage sites on all of Omey Island, but with outstanding surface visibility the project was able to identify over 100 heritage sites, including residential buildings from before and after the famine, Medieval field systems, Bronze Age hut circles, a possible Neolithic tomb, and a Mesolithic shell mounds dating to 8,000 years ago (Figure 1). While previous archaeological research has highlighted that areas of western Ireland were occupied for a long period of time, these results provide new evidence for extensive human occupation of western Ireland at previously unrecognized levels. This represents the first detailed and systematic archaeological survey of this rural area. Initial results of this research are now available in a preliminary report (Kuijt et al. 2007a)



Figure 1. CLIC project members Eric Carlson and Ryan Lash (ND'10) recording a Medieval period shell mound on Omey Island, Co. Galway, produced by former inhabitants of the island boiling shell fish for food and then discarding the shells. Despite being a second year student, Ryan has already taken two classes offered by Irish Language and Literature and two Anthropology classes.

Paleoenvironmental research by Dr. P. Coxon of Trinity College, Dublin, has started to explore several major environmental changes, including sea level changes. This ongoing work aids us in understanding what local conditions were like in the past. Further, to gain a more detailed understanding of the occupation of Omey Island, Dr. M. Schurr conducted two weeks of geophysical surveying on several sites. Using a range of scientific techniques, such as ground penetrating radar, Schurr has been able to help us understand what is below the surface of individual settlements. This includes the identification of probable abandoned fireplaces in Bronze Age coastal shell mounds, and mapping 7-12th century buildings associated with an abandoned church covered by sand dunes.

(2) Recording threatened 18 and 19th-century rural residential buildings.

Expanding on the preliminary research of the 2006 field season, the 2007 research team focused on recorded residential 18-19th century heritage sites on **Streamstown Bay**, **Errislannan** and **Omey Island**. Most of these sites date between the 1820's to 1890s

when they when regional abandonment occurred. Currently, they are quickly being destroyed by new building developments. Each of these buildings was individually photographed, mapped, and with a descriptive assessment of preservation conditions, likely period of occupation, and assessment of relative heritage value. The research team was able to record, photograph and map 36 stone cottages (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Colin Quinn (ND '04) recording an abandoned building on Errislannan, Co. Galway. A member of the 2002 Notre Dame Archaeology of Ireland educational tour, Colin has since completed his MA (2006) at Washington State University and is now a Ph.D. student at the University of Michigan studying Irish Archaeology.

Most of these settlements were abandoned after the famine when rural people immigrated to towns in Ireland and then to other countries. By documenting when these settlements were occupied and the remains associated with these sites, it will be possible to learn much more about rural Irish life before and after the famine. These 18 and 19th century residential sites serve as important case studies to gain a nuanced and detailed understanding of the process of depopulating of rural western Ireland (Kuijt et al. 2007b).

(3) Document oral history and folklore

Building upon the research foundation of the 2006 season, select members of the research team recorded oral histories and folklore from elder members of local communities

around Clifden under the direction of Dr. D. Rotman. For the 2007 season, they focused on interviewing people living along the area of Errislannan and Streamstown Bay concentrating on rural life along coastal areas. The main focus was to record kinship, personal stories of life in rural areas, systems of land use, and changing land ownership through time. While in Dublin, Dr. Rotman's research team was able to identify land ownership documents that allowed project members to reconstruct who lived in individual buildings, when they were abandoned, and with the aid of ship manifests the names of people leaving from Clifden and Galway in the 1880's. This information provides an opportunity to trace the emigration of local people to the United States of America. While much more work is needed, this first step in recording local oral histories and historical records will allow us to trace the lives and interconnections of these people to their descendants in the United States. Initial results of this research are now available in a preliminary report (Rotman et al. 2007).

Undergraduate Research

A major focus of this project is the incorporation of Notre Dame undergraduates into this research project. Student involvement included both field and archival research, as well as the presentation of findings at professional meetings, and the eventual publication of their research. In the 2007 field season Notre Dame undergraduates were involved in all stages of the phase I field research. Each student developed an individual research project on some aspect of past land-use, ownership, field systems, or heritage of Connemara. The students spent 21 days in Ireland working on their research project, and there are plans for these research teams to present their results at the *Annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology* in March of 2008.

This project provides a unique opportunity for our Notre Dame students to gain a better understanding of the Irish-American experiences and cultural connection, and to further our understanding of Irish heritage. The core of this study is centered on education through personal experience, and this project makes this vision, both literally and by extension, a reality for many of our students. The by-products of this project, both in-terms of developing an understanding of Irish Heritage amongst Notre Dame students as well as advancing our understanding of archaeological and historical studies, is direct, rewarding and exciting.

Proposed Phase II research (2008)

Building on the foundations of an inter-institutional partnership that has emerged out of the 2007 season, our team will immediately begin phase II in an intensive multidisciplinary study of the cultural landscape of western Connemara in the summer of 2008.

Assuming funding is secured for the 2008 research season, the Cultural Landscapes project will expand existing core research areas in several ways.

First, this will include expansion of the oral history, language and folklore component, and linking this data to archaeological, architectural and photographic records. This will

include extensive lab research on historical documentation, as well as expanded oral history interviews and archival research.

Second, after the phase I identification of cultural heritage, such as abandoned 18th century villages, researchers will be able to devote time towards excavation and mitigation of the most endangered of these resources. Coastal erosion and economic development are destroying heritage sites at an unprecedented rate, and excavations will be necessary to understand some of these before they are destroyed.

Third, the research team will expand their focus to address periods before the 17th century. In phase II onward, the research project will explore how the cultural landscape, such as land use and economy, of the 18th-century developed out of earlier cultural practices. This will involve more detailed survey and excavation of sites identified in phase I.

Collectively, this international collaboration and exchange between scholars and students from Notre Dame and Ireland will help us better understand the heritage of Ireland, as well as build upon the strong cultural and social links that exist today between Ireland and the United States.

References Cited

Kuijt, I., A. Nauman, J. O'Neill, M. Schurr, N. Goodale and E. Carlson,
2007a *The Cultural Landscape of the Irish Coast: 2007 Omey Island Heritage Research*. Report on file, Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies.

Kuijt, I., C. Quinn, E. Carlson, N. Goodale and L. Plis,
2007b *The Cultural Landscape of the Irish Coast: 2007 Research report on Vernacular Architecture and Landscape Interpretation*. Report on file, Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies.

Rotman, D. L., L. Plis, and L. Long,
2007 *Oral History and Archival Research: A Summary Report for the Summer 2007 Field Season in Clifden and Dublin, Ireland*. Report on file, Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies.