The Effects of Immigration on Irish Islander Place-Based Identity
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Introduction

With a strong sense of place-based identity, islanders experience a linkage between the land and one’s sense of belonging. Part of this identity is based on the stories told and the names of certain places on the island. In addition, they have a sense of independence, a “can-do” attitude that makes islanders a group apart. Árainn Mhór and Beaver Island are connected, both through the mass emigration from the former to the latter and a twinning ceremony in 2000 that linked the two islands. There is a wealth of stories and memories that define the people who live in both places, many of which are embedded in the physical landscape. On Árainn Mhór Irish place names describe the physical environment as well as a possible event, while commemorative and history-based placenames are more common on Beaver Island. Through legends and myths linked to the sea or Lake Michigan, residents and islanders of both islands feel a pull to island life, a connection to both the land and water, which draws its inhabitants back.

Methods

- Oral histories/identity narratives
  o analysis of how both islands view themselves, their physical space and sense of place
- Cartographic data
  o analysis of differences and similarities between the two islands
  o analysis of names written on the maps

Árainn Mhór

Árainn Mhór is the largest of the islands in the west coast Rosses, Co. Donegal (Hargreaves, 1962). It resembles a small mountain with areas of solid rock and craggy summits and cliffs as well as peat bogs and lakes. Today, it is only a 15-minute ferry ride from Buncatop, the mainland.

By 1866, 52 Irish families had settled on Beaver Island, relying on their small farms and fishing, similar to their way of life on Árainn Mhór (O’Hara, 1968). The fact that Beaver Island was remote and allowed former Árainn Mhór residents to remain islanders contributed to a relatively seamless adjustment to their new homeland.

Árainn Mhór always has the mainland in sight, so even though a body of water separates the islanders, there is, at the very least, a visual connection with the mainland.

Places

They describe the terrain, and the naming is based on the geographic and physical landscape.

- Leaphaughr, for example, translates into “rough ground.”
- Cùinn an dar, the cave of the slaughter, located at Blown, was the townland where Cronamull’s soldiers murdered a group of hiding islanders.
- Diversity: Sixty-seven women and children were murdered by orders of Captain Conyngham (Fado Fado, 2008). It is a historical event linked to the physical location, giving even greater importance to the event that occurred.

Results

Islandness

Family and Community

Living by a body of water’s whim is challenging, creating a close-knit and interdependent community of islanders. The fixed and unchangeable boundaries of an island force one to look inward and foster community and family relationships within those limits. Ferry Earl explains how this “islandness,” or islander way of being, is not something easily learned. It is learned from youth.

Bill Cashman, long-time Beaver Island resident and member of the Beaver Island Historical Society, expresses it is difficult for an islander to accept someone new into the community. “A bond is given and a responsibility is accepted. It is not just an abstract but a palpable burden.”

Hardship

- Demographics
- Economic difficulties
  - “Everything bought in is marked up, and every product sent off is marked down” (Cashman, pers. comm.)
- Tragedy: There is a certain understanding that those who venture out into the ocean or lake risk their life daily.

- Árainn Mhór: 1915 Disaster
- Beaver Island: The song “Lost on Lake Michigan” is a tribute to the loss of Johnny Gallagher of Lake Michigan (Hendrix, 1980).

- Said Owen, “Brother Johnny it grieves my heart sore, To think that we’ll never return to the shore.
- God help our poor parents, how their tears down will flow.
- For we’ll sleep in Lake Michigan where the stormy winds blow.

Discussion and Conclusions

Family, stories, the place, and their sense of ‘islandness’ link Beaver Island and Árainn Mhór. They are coupled through their connections to the land, history, both of which act life giving and home. Music composition from Árainn Mhór to Beaver Island began a connection that would be lost for various generations only to be restored with the twinning ceremony. The physical landscape and the large body of water with an unpredictable volatility contribute to an islander identity. Within these environ, places are encoded with stories, legends, and memories that contribute to a greater strong-willed and community identity. The tangible space cartographer recollections that solidity and remembrance certain island identities and histories. Place-names contribute to keeping the stories alive, for the landscape speaks volumes if people know how to read it.

References

Bianca Fernandez de la Torre, Deborah Rotman, “Árainn Mhór and Beaver Island: Place-Based Placenames.” 2010.

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Linking Past and Present

Places have a unitary identity, a marked sense of uniqueness and character (Creswell, 2004). Such is the case with residents of Beaver Island and Árainn Mhór. They are unified in a common ancestry and their identity as islanders, but their sense of Irish identity is uniquely positioned relative to their island home.

Twinning ceremony in 2000 formally linked both islands.

The Story of Paidie O’Gie

Memory, Practice, and the Physical Landscape

Memory is a powerful component of identity. It is assigned to the landscape to facilitate its preservation. The physical environment triggers a story or a piece of history that otherwise would reside only in the recesses of one’s mind. True of both islands, names of certain areas or roads bear the story of people, events, or descriptions of the physical environment that shape an islander’s understanding of himself or herself and his or her relationship to the natural world.

The need to return

Islanders are drawn back to their home and the water. They find a connection to the land and the people who grew and lost there. Many find jobs away from home, others travel and live elsewhere, but return to retire once more on the island (McDonough, pers. comm., 2010).

The physical space indelibly plays a large role in one’s desire to return. Bill McDonough could not imagine living anywhere else than on Beaver Island. He has also grown to love Árainn Mhór not only in part because of his inherited connections to Ireland but also because it is an island community.

The tangible places on both islands are encoded with memory and an understanding that pulls its residents and community back, over and over. Those who grew up as islanders generally carry with them a love and pull to the ocean, a pull to memory, family, and home.

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