

# 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 elucidates 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 Burtonport, 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.

### Placenames

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

- **Leabgarrow**, for example, translates into "rough ground."

- **Uaimh an Áir**, the cave of the slaughter, located at Illion, was the townland where Cromwell's soldiers murdered a group of hiding islanders. Sixty-seven women and children were murdered by orders of Captain Conyngham (Fadó Fadó, 2008). It is a historical event linked to the physical location, giving even greater importance to the event that occurred.



Map of Beaver Island

## Beaver Island

Originally inhabited by Native Americans and fur trappers, James Strang chose Beaver Island as home for him and his sect of Mormon followers in 1847 (O' Hara, 1968). James Strang's theocratic leadership was alienating, and he was eventually assassinated by two of his followers. Irish immigrants evicted the Mormons and reclaimed the island.

They recreated a place for themselves, establishing a close-knit, Catholic and Irish speaking community, similar to that of Árainn Mhór.

Beaver Island is a two-hour ferry ride out of Charlevoix, Michigan, and relatively flat with lots of forested area. Beaver Island is more remote and disconnected from the mainland, which is usually not visible from the island.

### Placenames

- Historically commemorative
  - **Luney's Point** : named after the lighthouse keeper Pat Luney, who settled there in 1846 ("Names and Places", 1976)
  - Used in songs and lyrics (importance of Beaver Island's Irish roots)
    - "**Donegal Bay**" refers to a bay on the east side with a large boulder near the middle of the bay, referred to as the "Grandson of the Blarney Stone stock" in the song (Hendrix, 1980).



Map of Árainn Mhór

## Linking Past and Present

Places have a unitary identity, a marked sense of uniqueness and character (Cresswell, 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 homes.

Twinning ceremony in 2000 formally linked both islands.



Twinning Memorial on Árainn Mhór

The Story of Paid een Og



The Irish Fisherman - William Thon

## 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. Jerry Early 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

- Remoteness
- Economic difficulties
  - "Everything brought 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 : 1935 Disaster
  - Beaver Island: The song "Lost on Lake Michigan" is a tribute to the loss of Johnny Gallagher to Lake Michigan. (Hendrix, 1980)
    - Said Owen, "Brother Johnny it grieves my heart sore,  
To think that we'll ne'er 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.

### Memory, Practice, and the Physical Landscape

Memory is a powerful component of history. 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 feel a connection to the land and the people who grow and live 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 undoubtedly 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 ancestral 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, sooner or later. Those who grew up as islanders generally carry with them a love and pull to the ocean, a pull to memory, family, and home.

## 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 and the sea, both of which are life giving and home. Mass emigration 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 environs, places are encoded with stories, legends, and memories that contribute to a greater sense of self and community identity. The tangible space can trigger recollections that solidify and reinforce certain island identities and histories. Placenames contribute to keeping the stories alive, for the landscape speaks volumes if people know how to read it.

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