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It's all I have to bring today  
This and my heart besides  
This and my heart and all the fields  
And all the meadows wide  
*Emily Dickinson*

## **INTRODUCTION**

All I have to bring you this morning are questions. I've been working on and in the Irish landscape for twenty five years now and I'm supposed to be an expert – but I'm not here today to share any of that with you. Today I want to tell you what I don't know, what I doubt.

Let me tell you about the fields and meadows of the countryside first. Let's talk the naturalness of the countryside. We all believe that some parts of the countryside are more natural than others. Let's start by looking at the most natural. I know that it's entirely natural because I can see it being made – with my own eyes – twice each day. The land exposed between high and low tides- the foreshore - is the only truly natural Irish landscape. Trace a figure on the strand and it will soon be gone, overwritten by the next tide.

## **OLD LANDSCAPES**

As you vividly saw from the lecture on the Burren last night, since the last Ice Age ended, about 8,500 years ago, the landscape has been made and marked by men for nearly 6,000 of those years. Ireland barely ever knew a natural landscape, for almost all of its existence it has been what it is today – manmade.

The Age of manmade landscapes can be hard to grasp. Our first farmers who felled our forests, who fenced fields, made meadows and tilled the soils, also built Newgrange. It's hard to imagine that it was already 500 years old when the Egyptian pyramids were built, that it was 1,500 years old when Troy fell, 2,000 years old when Pericles rebuilt the Parthenon in ancient Athens. If Caesar had conquered Ireland, he would have stood before a 2,500 year old structure – already far further in his past than he is now in ours.

Since those ancient times we have made and remade our landscape again and again, sometimes expanding, sometimes contracting, but always continuing that ancient way. Stand by a gate on the bend of the Boyne early in the morning with your eyes closed, smell and listen instead. The rooks rising, cattle calling, damp smells of growth mixed with smoke. This pattern has been repeated in these fields and meadows every morning of every day of every month of every year of each of five thousand years. Keeping that pattern of little things is an enduring monument surely as wonderful as anything cut in marble or stone.

That landscape of the Neolithic was followed by those of the Bronze and Iron Ages, which were followed by the distinctive and different early medieval landscapes and those of the monasteries and later those of the Normans. The Planters also made the countryside their own as did their more secure inheritors who first enclosed, and later cleared, the land to make demesnes for their great houses. Great new utilitarian patterns were laid down then – first benevolent landlords to improve their estates and next by tenant farmers who acquired holdings after the Land Wars to make what we now think of as the 'traditional' landscape. The penultimate chapters devised were by the fledgling State through the Land Commission, Forestry, Bord na Mona and other agencies. Twelve great waves that added layer upon layer to the tapestry and palimpsest that is this countryside of ours today. The landscape changes, always has, always will.

## **CHANGING LANDSCAPES**

There is no natural landscape; there are only landscapes of people and their lives as you learned from the two speakers last night. There is no single landscape; there are landscapes, layers upon layers upon layers of them. The landscape is no more and no less than the land uses of the people who control, own and use it. The landscape and its people are inseparable.

That's how we got to where we are now, but what's next? What does the future hold? There are many possible futures – each the product of different 'drivers' – demographic, economic, social and others – that will combine to promote or retard the use and ultimate appearance of future landscapes.

Throughout all of these variables only one thing is certain – the landscape will change – as it has always done. Acknowledging and accepting that the landscape will continue to change casts a fundamentally different light on such commonly expressed objectives of 'Conserving' or 'Preserving' or 'Protecting' the landscape. 'How can constant change be reconciled with conservation?' This is the first and most fundamental question that I bring to you today.

## **ACCEPTING CHANGE**

Change is always difficult to accept. Big changes are the hardest. People react to changes in familiar surroundings in the same stages and ways as they grieve at a death – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance. We're having this debate today mixing denial, anger and depression – hoping, in tragic futility like the Government's Guidelines on Rural Housing, that we can bargain our way out of the changes that we see all around us in our countryside.

One of the classic manifestations of grief is denial. On the landscape we try to deny change by insisting on 'tradition'. If changes must occur, they must be carried out in ways that respect traditional shapes, designs and patterns. There is no intellectual substance or logic to this, of course. Insistence on tradition, cowering behind conservation is just denial - fear of acknowledging and accepting a new reality, a new landscape. We bully and badger the rural homebuilder to produce houses with traditional windows, doors, roofs and walls. But what about the traditional wind turbine, the traditional motorway, the traditional power line, or any of the other vital infrastructure that we need and make in the 21st Century. This brings me to another question. 'Why must the Countryside be Traditional?'

## **OUR COUNTRYSIDE IS CHANGING AGAIN.**

We've begun one of those periodic changes that I've described from the past. It's a profound change and yet it creeps up on us slowly, unnoticed and unremarked upon, like a filling tide. Further generations will think it very strange that we, who lived through this change, never seemed to notice or to speak about it. Their records will be full of our fretting and fussing about rural housing – a mere symptom, a very superficial symptom, of a much greater and far deeper change – I refer of course to the collapse of agriculture.

Once it was believed that as the population expanded it would relentlessly use up all of the soil and land until eventually everyone would starve. Today of course we know otherwise. In a period when the globe's population is greater than it has ever been – and is set to continue to grow for another century – the demand for agriculture land is falling not rising. Europe, which contains one of the largest concentrations of fertile soil in the world, is relentlessly removing land from production. The 'Green Revolution' of this Century has increased agricultural productivity by 8 – 10 times the levels of the 19th Century. Starvation in today's world is always the result of civil unrest, war or political ideology – never a lack of land.

In Ireland the process has been gathering momentum for nearly 15 years now and the Fischler Reform of the Common Agricultural Policy will bring a rapid and dramatic conclusion to it. By 2020 productive agriculture in Ireland will be confined to a narrow band stretching from north

Munster to south west Leinster. Outside of this area all agriculture will be part time, specialist and secondary. Very extensive areas will cease to be farmed, the more productive lowland soils being used for forestry, the rest will naturally return to woodland cover. You were shown last night how quickly woodland cover returns to ungrazed land.

Across large swathes of the Irish countryside this generation will witness something that hasn't happened for six thousand years. For the first time since the late Stone Age the tree canopy will close out the sun and the sky from the ancient fields and meadows. It has begun already. As you leave this place to travel back to your homes look for out for the splashes and yellow and white – the gorse and the hawthorn – see how extensive they are becoming. It starts on the marginal lands – the steep slopes, the edges of streams, the smaller fields and it slowly spreads. Hedges go untended and expand to fill the fields - it's all around us here in Clare. Watch out for it as you travel home..... and wonder.

### **A NEW PARADIGM**

This is just the visible change. Another change is afoot, just as profound, but much more difficult to see. Control of the countryside is changing hands. Not the ownership, just the control. Since first settlement the organisation and appearance of the countryside has been determined by agricultural practices. The collapse of agriculture as the organising paradigm is leading to a vacuum which is rapidly being filled by other systems of organisation.

Where agricultural productivity – for substance or profit – was dominant in the past, today's landscape is increasingly controlled by ideas and beliefs. The landscape is becoming a place to receive and reflect the value systems of an increasing urbanised European population. These value systems are scientific (ecological designations; historic, archaeological designations) aesthetic (scenic areas and drives, national parks, special amenity areas) and cultural (landscape associated with history, art, ethnicity).

### **LANDSCAPE PLANNING?**

The landscape is beginning to become a patchwork quilt of designations and rural protection schemes which determine where and how the land uses of the future will be arranged. It will be a new landscape – one that is currently emerging very haphazardly as a result of the well-intentioned but uncoordinated imposition of such designations and schemes. In the medium to long term these will not prove to be sustainable in financial, social or environmental terms. They will not be capable of being 'scaled up' to organise an entire countryside. These problems are rapidly becoming apparent and in response there are already signs of the emergence of 'planned landscapes' in Ireland. Currently those involved in large scale planning – and they are pitifully few and ill prepared – proceed in the belief that a plan will 'emerge' from a synthesis of such designations and schemes together with an emerging raft of other legislation and guidelines - to protect water, control rural housing and accommodate specialised land uses such as wind energy and forestry.

For too long planning in Ireland has been able to survive by passing off prevention and protection as issues of substance. By contrast in cities we 'zone' lands – which usually means providing for the extension of existing patterns – but that can't and won't work in the large areas of the countryside. It won't be enough to say what we don't want. We will need to be much more proactive and positive to make provision for the wide range of existing new uses that will continually want to use the countryside – wind farming, forestry, water management, rural housing, mineral extraction, infrastructure – to name only a few. This brings me to my second question.

'Who is planning for a new countryside?' No existing planning at county, regional or national level has any coherent positive vision for the countryside after agriculture. We've explored the fields and meadows now let us move to matters of the heart - to beauty. There is an implicit assumption that the countryside is Beautiful. This idea isn't discussed very often – which is a pity because beauty can be a terrible burden; it can twist and skew thinking, sometimes with serious consequences.

## **BEAUTIFUL LANDSCAPES**

Architecture and Landscape Architecture are disciplines that are separated fundamentally from structural and civil engineering by one unique trait. They can deliberately create beauty, or at least that's the theory. Teaching design, one notices that this is a very rare ability – just how rare isn't often appreciated. Out of a typical graduating class of about twenty architects perhaps one, often none, has this gift. It's very difficult, but there is something worse. Those few, those very few, who go out into the world with this talent to practice will be dismayed to find that after about 25 years their, once wonderful, gift will wither in the eyes of the world. Another batch of bright young things will catch the fickle public eye. Tastes will change. We are accustomed to this cruelty and yet we are unconscious of one of its most important consequences which is my next question; - 'How can we make policies and rules to protect and preserve beauty if our sense of beauty keeps changing?

"The Landscape and natural beauty" – you object – "are different. Everyone knows that, it has always been that way!" Not so. The history of Landscape Architecture is the history changing – often wildly vacillating - views on what is beautiful in nature. Our current ideas about the sublime beauty of mountains, cliffs, seas and vast skies are less than 150 years old- a reinvention of an early medieval idea – as we have heard from Prof. O Corrain. What our eyes see as beauty is not intrinsic to us – it is conditioned by culture, education and experience. There are still many places that are commonly regarded as bleak, boring, uninviting or just dull that will be cherished in the future. It is important to acknowledge and accept this fickleness of our hearts. These feelings, which are fleeting, lie unquestioned, at the base of policy - with far-reaching consequences.

## **THE BURDEN OF BEAUTY**

In the landscape, the burden of beauty often condemns its owners and occupants to poverty and powerlessness. Landscape beauty for instance, is one of the great engines of tourism, one of Ireland's major income earners. 'Protection of the Landscape' is frequently justified by the need to preserve this important economic resource – which is a reasonable and logical conclusion- until one digs a little deeper by asking 'Protecting from what?' Or 'Protecting for whom?' We've already seen the futility of attempting to protect landscapes from change.

Who are we protecting landscapes for? For transient, fickle populations of urban visitors and holidaymakers? Are we protecting the landscape for some future society – who's aesthetic and values we cannot anticipate – except to know that they will be different to our own? Or are we protecting the landscape for the people who own it, who live in and who make their livelihood off it? If protection results in the destabilisation of these communities who sustain the landscape in the first place then are such endeavours not surely self-defeating? The adverse consequences of such well intentioned policies is a well known phenomenon to those who work in this area – the title of the main UNESCO report on the topic neatly captures the problem – it's simply called 'Loving Them to Death'

## **ACCEPTING FUTURE LANDSCAPES**

It is not fair to simply leave you with questions and doubts. You are here because you are hungry for answers, answers to a very big question, namely 'What is the way forward for our new countryside?' Professor O'Corrain has shown how our forbearers could summon new places into existence by their imaginations – just as designers do today. This is our challenge.

We must swerve back to the heart for part of the answer. Creativity in design, groping towards solutions, needs to harness feelings as well as facts – trusting intuition to organise rationality. What I bring today, from the heart, is where I have found to look for solutions without yet fully understanding knowing or understanding why.

The answer to the future of our new countryside lies in the acceptance of facts. We must accept the

fact that our landscape is now changing again. We must accept that plans to keep special places unchanged, while perhaps appropriate for a few special places, will never be applicable for the fabric of the whole countryside – for all the meadows wide. We must accept that all of the houses in our countryside already exist. We must accept that the same number again already exist on paper – as unbuilt planning permissions. These are facts we must acknowledge and accept before we can even begin to plan for the future.

There is something deeper than these physical facts that we must accept. We must learn to accept who we are. These houses and patterns of land use – that we call the countryside – are a physical manifestation of the character, history and will of the Irish people. To reject and deny them is to reject and deny who we are. It is to reject and deny Catholic Emancipation, Michael Davitt, The Land War, The Land Act, Parnell, The Land Commission, The Irish Free State and everything else that we have built and forged for ourselves. This is who we are. We cannot deny it.

If you find yourself surveying the majestic emptiness of the Scottish Highlands or the orderly pattern of village and fields in England remember that you are not looking at the fruits of good rural planning. You are looking at the physical manifestation of a political system – one that we struggled so hard to reject. You are looking at the lands of the Earl of Bute and the Duke of Cornwall. You are looking at a landscape of cleared estates and tenant farmers where the countryside is still the result of the will of a few imposed on the many – by ownership, not planning.

The answer lies somewhere in there. Accept that the landscape is manmade and ever changing. Accept that change has begun again and is unstoppable. Accept that it will change according to our ideas, needs, culture and history. Accept that the countryside is owned and lived in and lived off by other people, a minority to whom we owe a duty of care. Accept who we are. Accept these things and we'll be well on the way towards finding an answer.

## **CONCLUSION**

If we care about the countryside – if we want some continuity with our past; if we want to be confronted and comforted by its puzzling, shimmering beauty – that oscillates between man and nature, between the past and the present between the consolation of stability and the fear of change – if we want these things we must first accept these questions and contradictions. We must deepen out thinking. We must embrace change. The changes of the present as well as the past. We must accept that today's landscape reflects our choices and our history. We must accept that the landscape is part of who we are – not something apart. We must accept our duty towards the lives and dreams of the people who occupy the countryside. We must become aware of the potential for the unexamined feelings of our fickle hearts to harm the fields and meadows that we love so much. Acceptance is the key to finding our way forward.

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