

# Geographical regions in Ireland— Reflections at the Millennium

**Arnold Horner**

*Department of Geography, National University of Ireland, Dublin (UCD)*

## ABSTRACT

Fifty years after T.W. Freeman published *Ireland: its physical, historical, social and economic geography*, this article reviews the issue of dividing Ireland into regions, and proposes a 'first order' division into six major units based on a mix of landscape and lifestyle characteristics. An initial division between the city-regions and the area beyond, 'rural and small town Ireland', can be refined by identifying proto city-regions, more- and less-favoured rural regions, and regions where remoteness imposes constraints on lifestyle. Northern Ireland is seen as a distinct region because of its administrative identity and because widespread polarisations within communities pervasively influence lifestyle. Further sub-divisions based on local lifestyle and landscape can be applied to produce a total of twenty-six areal units. This style of regional division, which is largely independent of official or administrative influence, could be appropriate for describing some of the major regional contrasts prevailing in Ireland at the start of the twenty-first century.

*Key index words: Ireland, Regional Geography.*

## Introduction

Arguments for dividing Ireland (which is here considered as the entire island) into regions, and for thinking about regional issues in general, have both academic and practical dimensions. Practically, some sort of sub-division of the country is essential for many administrative purposes. This can take two forms. On the one hand, one or more parts of the country may be identified for particular administrative issues; such has been the approach for designating Gaeltacht areas, the area under the aegis of the Western Development Commission, and the recently-created Upper Shannon 'rural renewal' zone now favoured with special tax incentives. On the other hand, a general regionalisation may involve the whole country (or at least the whole of the Republic of Ireland or the whole of Northern Ireland). Such an approach (which, from a more academic than administrative standpoint, is the subject of this article) has featured in some well-established regionalisations for State-coordinated administrative and development services that are strongly user-oriented or strongly place-specific (Gillmor, 1985). For example, from the 1960s on the Republic of Ireland has been divided, and has sometimes later been re-divided, into regions for health, planning, tourism and various other purposes including EC/EU structural fund applications. This type of division is also evident in the designation, during the mid-1990s, of eight local government regions, each with a very limited, mainly advisory, role. Northern Ireland, likewise, has a number of regionalised bodies such as the area boards for the education/ library and health/ social security services. In each of these instances, a system based on the 34 local government counties and county boroughs of the Republic (or, in the case of Northern Ireland, based on 26 district council areas) would produce too many small, inadequately-equipped, administrative units (Figure 1), while a single administrative centre covering the whole

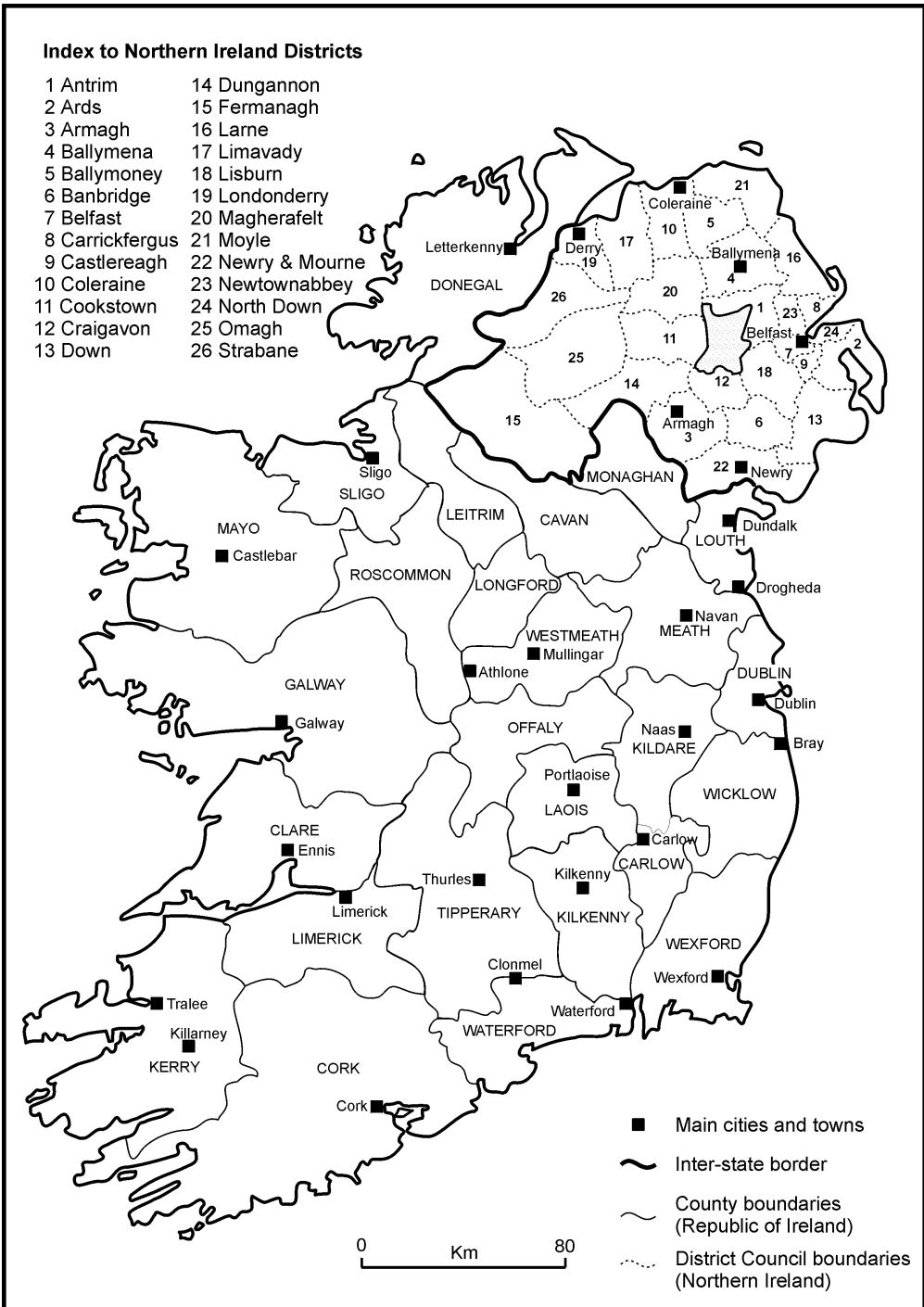


Figure 1: Location of county (Republic) and district (N. Ireland) units.

territory would be too remote for much of the population. Regions offer a possible compromise, achieving some level of scale efficiency yet allowing accessibility and some sort of spatial equity.

Many of the regionalisations effected within the Republic during the 1960s/ 1970s involved the creation of seven to nine units from county building blocks, with various, broadly similar, configurations being used. In these delimitations, although some important attempts were made to debate the underlying issues (e.g. Institute of Public Administration, 1971), pragmatic considerations dominated, with little sustained attention to the cohesion and co-ordination of the designated regional frameworks. So long as the pace of economic development remained modest, and so long as general issues— such as unemployment, raising living standards, and confronting social and identity inertias— dominated, the rationale for the regional frameworks attracted relatively little debate.

Recently, however, perhaps very noticeably from around 1998 on, a new ‘spatial turn’ has been evident in the preoccupations of politicians and administrators in Ireland. This has happened for a variety of internally- and externally-generated reasons. Initially-resistant administrators came to appreciate that the diminishing flow of EU funds could only be maximised through some sort of regionalisation and so accepted a two-unit division of the Republic. Alongside this was the belated realisation that a major infrastructure programme, with significant regional development implications, was inescapable, and was quite feasible, during a period of unaccustomed prosperity. Contemporaneously, the merits of a spatial development strategy were being illustrated in a new long-term regional strategic framework for Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Department of the Environment, 1998), and were being legitimated in major professional commentaries (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1999; Irish Academy of Engineering, 2000) and in the emerging ‘European Spatial Development Perspective’ (EU Commission, 1999). It has been observed that official receptivity to regional policy is greatest in periods of full employment (Richardson, 1969: 14). This certainly seems true for Ireland. For the first time since the early 1970s, regional and spatial issues have moved close to the political centre stage. Now— with a warmth not evident since the days of the ‘Buchanan Report’ in the 1960s— they have been recognised in the Republic in a national plan which proposes the formulation of a ‘national spatial strategy’ (Buchanan, 1968; Third Programme, 1969; National Development Plan, 1999; Department of the Environment, 2000).

But Geography goes beyond these pragmatic outcomes, and has a further, more deep-rooted, intellectual interest in visualising regional contrasts within Ireland. At its most basic, Geography, as a discipline with a strong interest in space and place, is challenged to describe Ireland, past and present, in an accurate, effective manner. One way of doing this is to use regions as a framework for organising information. Such an approach, as many geographers have discussed (e.g. Haggett, 1995: 70-94), is a major challenge, not easily met. In the following discussion, a guiding principle is that “we should not expect to see a definitive regional geography for each part of the world; rather a series of regional interpretations...” (Haggett, 1995: 89). Regions considered in this manner can be developed flexibly, in a variety of ways. In contrast to the limited but specific requirements of the administrators, they do not have to be based on particular building blocks, and they do not have to conform rigidly to any particular type (for example, the frequently-contrasted homogeneous and functional varieties). Arguably, they do not necessarily have to be mutually exclusive. Ideally, they will serve to highlight major spatial contrasts. More basically they can be seen as devices of convenience for integrating information and portraying relationships that might otherwise be less readily understood.

Within this broad context, this article expands on an earlier discussion (Horner, 1993) to offer one particular interpretation of a geographical division of modern Ireland. The aim is to identify some of the underlying regional contrasts that may get overlooked, or understated, when particular sectoral, administrative or thematic concerns are paramount. The discussion focuses on what is termed here a 'first-order' division into major regional units, with no detailed attempt being made to explore the complex webs of smaller-scale territorial structures, informal as well as formal, which co-exist across the country (Smyth, 1984; 1986; 1993; 1997; Whelan, 1993b). The division being proposed involves the recognition of what are here called '*lifestyle regions*' identifying major geographical contrasts that can be associated with access to 'opportunity', social and economic organisation and— less tangibly— attitudes of mind.

Although there are some parallels to the regionalisation of Freeman (1950) described below, such regions give less priority to physical factors and involve a wider range of social and even psychological considerations. They are, to say the least, slippery constructs, and the author's rather variable mixture of desk-based and field experience undoubtedly exercises some, perhaps rather uneven, influence on their identification. They can be also readily criticised on other grounds, for example for the mixture of criteria employed. Yet as descriptive devices they serve a purpose if they draw attention to contrasts within modern Ireland that may otherwise be incompletely recognised. The discussion is introduced by a short review of some other attempts, by geographers and others, to visualise Ireland in regions.

### Freeman's Ireland

Fifty years ago, in 1950, T.W. Freeman, one of the pioneer academic geographers in Ireland, produced a major comprehensive geography of contemporary Ireland. Informed by the type of 'areal differentiation' perspective on the nature of Geography most readily associated with Hartshorne (1939: 147; also Haggett, 1995: 8-15), *Ireland: its physical, historical, social and economic geography*' (or *Ireland: a general and regional geography*, as it became entitled in 1960) had extensive thematic and regional sections. The latter part, almost 300 pages, was a regional survey based on a subdivision of Ireland into twelve regions (later eleven— Northern Ireland being treated as a single region after 1960), with these in turn more finely divided to provide 84 sub-regions (Figure 2). This subdivision, based on a suite of physical, agricultural, demographic and, to a limited extent, administrative characteristics, was more systematic and detailed than anything previously attempted— forty years earlier, for example, Howarth (1911) had used a frame of just seven physically-defined regions (Ferguson, 1977).

Two factors stood out as of supreme importance for Freeman (1950: 262): first, the physical features, and, second, the type of farming, evolved through the centuries. Their significance is highlighted in the brief thumbnail sketches summarising each region. For example, here is the description of Kerry and West Cork (1950: 264):

*The Armorican ranges terminate in peninsulas, and there are Carboniferous plateaus in the north. The cultivable area is limited by blanket bogs on the lowland, and the farms, though generally small, are larger than those of West Connaught or Donegal, and the region is less congested. Young cattle, butter, eggs and poultry are the main products, though creameries have spread into parts of the region from the great Munster dairying belt to the east.*



Freeman had serious reservations about some aspects of his regionalisation. His introductory remarks for the regional section in 1950 included the observation that he was “in sympathy with those who refuse to draw [regional boundaries] in case they suggest a local individuality more distinct than that shown in the actual landscape”. Ten years later in a revised introduction, he pointed out that while all eleven regions showed some distinctive traits, “Ireland does not lend itself readily to [regional] division”. These comments highlight problems of continuing relevance for writing and interpreting a regional geography of Ireland, yet Freeman’s own work is also enduring evidence of the potential of such an approach. The massive bulk of Galtymore rising out of the Tipperary plains, the distinctive drumlin-and-lake topography of the Ulster girdle, and the extraordinary lowland bogscape of Connemara remind us that, even if the boundaries are not always sharp, there are marked physical contrasts which cannot be assumed away.

### **Regionalisations since Freeman**

Since Freeman’s time, most geographers interested in modern Ireland have worked mainly within a thematic frame, among them the authors of the most recent general studies (Brunt, 1988; Gillmor, 1985; Carter and Parker, 1989; Johnson, 1994). Occasional attempts have been made to produce regionalisations based on particular techniques (e.g. Horner, 1980) or on particular themes (Figure 2), for example, Drew (1979) has considered water resource regions, others have sought to identify agricultural regions or zones (Gillmor, 1977: 149; Lafferty, Commins and Walsh, 1999: 141), and Hall and Hay (1980) have divided Ireland into five metropolitan and sixteen non-metropolitan regions as part of a wider study of growth centres in the European urban system. Most recently, Cook *et al.* (2000: 52-55) have used a six-region frame for an analysis of ‘comparative spatial deprivation’ in Ireland. Their regionalisation was devised to take account of the political division within Ireland, metropolitan— non-metropolitan contrasts, and the desirability of creating regions that are relatively similar in population size.

Other groups, notably the administrators discussed in the opening paragraphs and those concerned with planning and with administrative reform, have been at least as much involved in the (admittedly still rather sporadic) exploration of such regionalisation issues. For example, the Republic was divided into nine physical planning regions during the mid-1960s, was re-divided for Local Government purposes in 1993, and was twice re-divided for EU funding applications, in the late 1980s and in 1998-9 (Figure 3). Other divisions include those of Buchanan (1968), who recognised five regional ‘sectors’ within the state for his report on future physical planning structures, and the several attempts of Barrington (undated; 1994, and, in an official capacity, as chairman of Advisory Expert Committee, 1991) and Fennell (e.g., 1985), among others, to stimulate interest in new regional-level administrative structures.

As already suggested, most of these inquiries have arguably followed relatively specific agenda, with other aspects of regionalisation being relatively neglected. Until the review by Whelan (1993b) and the re-evaluation of Ireland’s cultural geography offered by Graham (1997), geographers seem to have added little to the pioneer explorations of regional identity by Jones Hughes (e.g. 1962/63; 1963) and Evans (1970), while Smyth’s (e.g. 1984; 1986; 1993; 1997) exploration of territorial structures has yet to receive the substantiation (at least in publication format) that it deserves. The pitfalls in doing so, the general intellectual climate, and the existence of many other challenging problems, have in combination meant

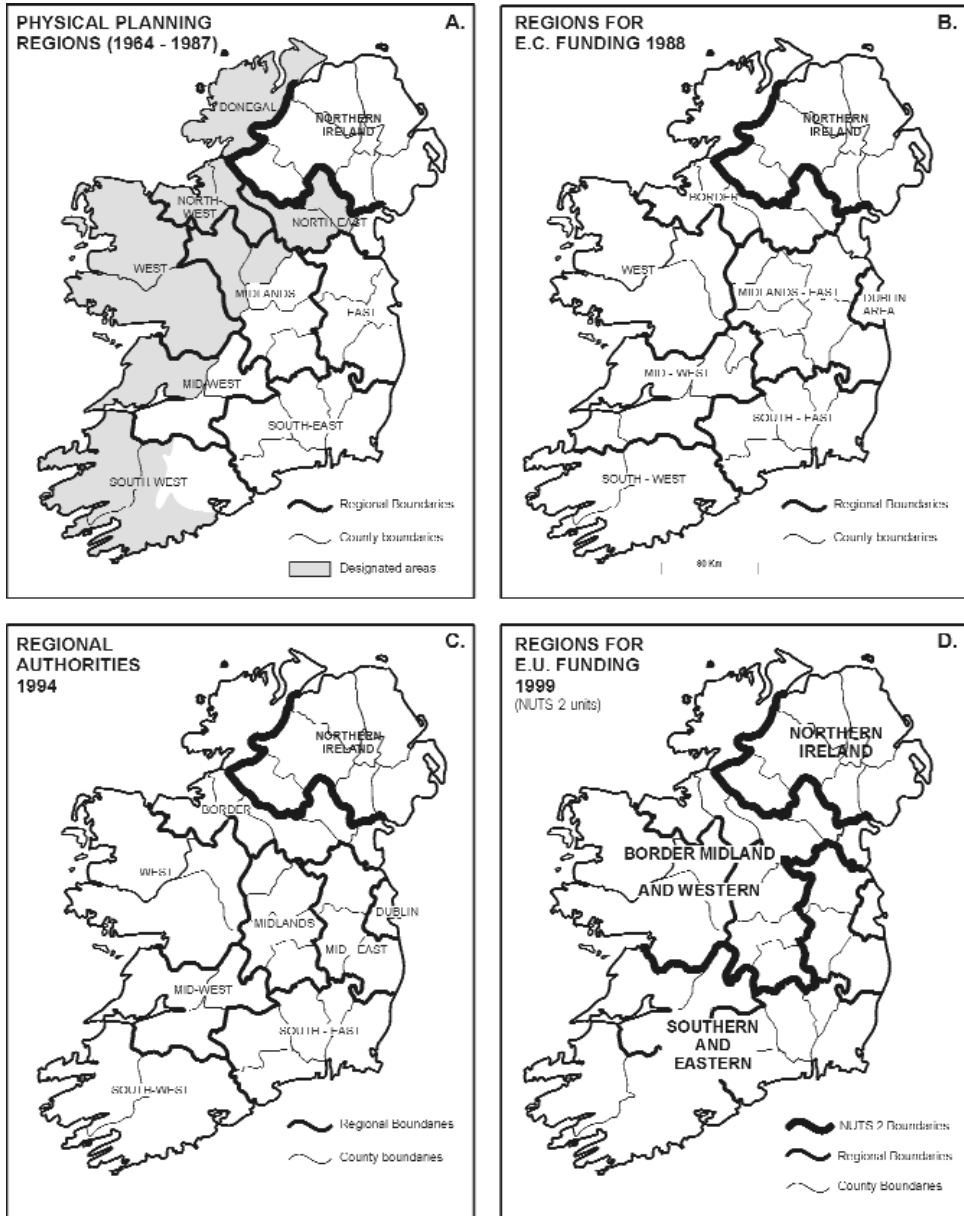


Figure 3: Regionalisation of the Republic of Ireland for planning/administrative purposes.

- (a) Physical planning regions (1964-1987).
- (b) Regions for EC funding 1988.
- (c) Regional authorities, 1994.
- (d) Regions proposed for EU funding, 1999.

that the regional geography of Ireland, and especially the development of more multifactor 'general' regions, has apparently been of limited interest to geographers as research topics *per se*.

### **Regionalisation in the early twenty-first century**

The economically and socially deregulating Ireland of 2000 shows vast changes from the country described by Freeman at mid-century (Central Statistics Office, 2000). The exclusionist unionist and nationalist projects have foundered, the population is over a million more, and, in a global context, the country now rides high on the crest of a still-beneficial 'fifth Kondratieff' (long-term global economic cycle). Some of the most far-reaching developments, associated with a re-scaling and internationalisation of economic activity and cultural attitudes, are epitomised in the popular use of 'Celtic Tiger' as a description of the Republic in the late 1990s. Now firmly set within the arena of the European Union, the integration of Ireland into the EU and global economies— which was facilitated by permissive government policies and a benign taxation environment— has been marked by a sustained flow of inward and local investment in a wide range of skilled manufacturing, producer services and tourism activities. As flows of mobile international capital wash across Ireland, cities, particularly Dublin, act as gateways for global capital and find themselves integrated into, and articulated by, externally-driven, supra-national 'networks' (Amin, 1997; Borja and Castells, 1997; Breathnach, 1998; 2000).

Alongside this, the labour force, in line with comparable processes across Europe (Keeble, 1989), has restructured radically. Those engaged in agriculture are now less than one-fifth the numbers of 1950, while globally-driven de-industrialisation processes have eaten into, and largely destroyed, both the protected industries of the mid-century Republic and the traditional vertically-integrated linen, ship-building and engineering industries of Northern Ireland. Services and various types of foreign-owned 'hi-tech', other skilled and footloose manufacturing now dominate employment, and much higher levels of female participation prevail. Many other changes have taken place in parallel with these shifts. For example, major improvements in educational standards have facilitated adaptability and training for new skills and new technology, while changing patterns of international labour mobility mean that Ireland has now crossed the 'European migration divide', to become a place of significant immigration, a focus for asylum seekers and others seeking new opportunities. Whereas hundreds of thousands left Ireland during the near-static 1950s, fifty years later a comparable scale of in-migration is being (still rather uncritically) contemplated as the country struggles with the adjustments demanded by an unprecedented phase of exceptionally fast economic and demographic growth.

The rural and urban worlds have changed radically and become increasingly integrated during these developments (Cawley, 1989a). In agriculture, processes of modernisation and commercialisation have been paralleled by processes of marginalisation, with very uneven structural and regional effects (Gillmor, 1989; 1999; Lafferty, Commins and Walsh, 1999). Mechanisation is normal, working animals are almost extinct, and part-time farming now prevails on at least one-third of all farm units. Whereas at mid-century there were over 300,000 farm holdings in the Republic, there are now less than half that number (Central Statistics Office, 2000). Scenarios for the year 2010 project around 100-120,000 farms, of which over half may be part-time, with a further one-fifth either terminal or 'non-viable'

(Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, 2000). A prolonged series of changes advancing capital over labour have worked against the smallholder while contemporaneously promoting what many would regard as a much-improved quality of life in rural Ireland. Over the last half century, a suite of socio-economic changes, initially accentuated by the 1950s/1960s electrification and piped water supply programmes, freed rural Ireland from the 'tyranny of distance' and helped take the drudgery out of many farm and household chores. Other changes include the emergence of new types and new scales of agribusiness, the transition to silage-making, a vast increase in fertiliser application, the widespread winter housing of cattle, and the introduction of new higher-yielding breeds. (One of the subtler changes to the Irish landscape is in the colour of the cattle: dairy Friesians and other new 'continental' cross-breeds have taken over from such traditional cattle types as the Shorthorn and Hereford). Now the EU— in the seventies and eighties associated with a 'productivist' incarnation epitomised by the Common Agricultural Policy, more recently in a 'post-productivist' role— is the major arbiter of the farmer's future. Now, too, rural diversification is a major challenge, and— as the creation of over a hundred new golf courses during the 1990s demonstrates— the landscape can become a tradeable commodity of increasing significance for recreation and tourism.

At the same time, the reorganisation of many key services has brought a strengthening and re-scaling of the established central place system of towns and cities. The larger urban areas, including large towns outside the main cities, have been favoured in various commercial and public initiatives, among them the significant (even if still rather limited) decentralisations of many Civil Service activities and of third-level education, and the concentration of the more complex hospital services. At a more localised level, many smaller towns have been promoted, at the expense of more dispersed institutions such as the parish, the village and the country shop, by the development of supermarkets and centralised post-primary schools. Against this background, the populations of almost all cities and towns have expanded significantly. For example, compared to 1950, the population of Galway has trebled (+40-50,000), that of Dublin has doubled (+400-500,000). Moreover, urban-generated housing, fuelled by property price differentials that leave many rural and small town localities very attractive for new housing, has spilt out into the hinterlands of all the main centres, contributing to the creation of very distinct halos of longer-distance commuting and of relative affluence around the main cities (Fitzpatrick Associates, 1999a; 1999b; Haase, 1999; Williams and Shiels, 2000). Ribbons of roadside bungalows now punctuate the rural landscapes in city and urban hinterlands and have superseded the thatched cottage and isolated labourer's cottage as the most typical rural buildings (Duffy, 2000).

In terms of social attitudes the country has been transformed. Consumer values, attitudes to religion, and expectations about inter-personal relationships, are based on parameters quite different to earlier generations. Births outside marriage, less than three percent of total births into the 1970s, now account for 30 percent. 'Total fertility rates', until the 1980s well in excess of it, are now around the west European norm. Alongside all this, there is immensely greater personal mobility— more than ten times as many vehicles as in 1950. And there is also now a pervasive telemobility, helping internationalise attitudes as well as activities, and promoting de-localised, aspatial lifestyles. Inside the house, the religious pictures and Sacred Heart devotions (at least in many Catholic households) of an earlier era have been increasingly eclipsed by secular television, video recorders and computers with Internet access. Outside, hilltop telecommunications masts and domestic satellite dishes are

landmarks of new linkages— visible expressions of a new order and an affluence which has been accompanied by increased individualism, the decline of fixed social boundaries, and the rise of secularisation (Whelan, 1994).

In this cascade of technological development, much that was traditional has been either transformed or discarded. For example, the Irish language, in 1950 still a household language in some western areas, now seems to be in its death throes as a genuine vernacular (Hindley, 1990; O'Riagáin, 1997); initiatives such as the Gaelscoileanna in urban areas and a separate television service appear to be too late. In other respects, however, characteristics of mid-century persist or have become accentuated. For example, although many aspects of the physical environment are now analysed with unprecedented thoroughness (Environmental Protection Agency, 2000), the level of environmental debate remains muted. No coherent framework yet exists for dealing with the vast volume of waste that is a by-product of modernisation. The windfarms now prominent on some slopes and skylines may be harbingers of an emerging energy consciousness, but there are still very few of them. Notwithstanding some recent official aspirations (Department of the Environment, 1997), it seems that Ireland has yet to fully embrace the implications of the sustainability ethic. And Ireland is still significantly influenced by its European 'peripherality' (although the problem would not have been recognised by that word in 1950). Modern telecommunications may give the country some sort of centrality in cyberspace, allowing the Ireland of 2000 to become a major European e-commerce hub on the Global Crossing trans-atlantic fibre-optic cable (e.g. *Irish Times*, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2000). Yet the basic facts remain that Ireland *is* an island, that a fixed-link to Britain is still little more than a glint in an engineer's eye (Ferris, 1998), and that significant distances must be traversed in journeys to most of mainland Europe.

Moreover, tensions continue to pervade inter-community relationships within Northern Ireland, and between north and south. In some parts of Northern Ireland (for example in Derry/ Londonderry and in north and west Belfast) significant population movements have further reinforced established spatial and mental divisions (Kennedy, 1986; Boal, 1995). The 'peace lines' of Belfast, represented by roads, open spaces, walls and wires, are testament to the fact that, in many areas, religious/ ethnic segregation is even more starkly defined than in the past. At a larger scale, the north-south contrast has been reinforced economically by a separation of currencies, and is sufficiently fundamental psychologically for two different types of identity to be recognised. An 'ethnic nationalism' in the north contrasts with a 'civic nationalism' in the south— the former being seen as more in keeping with the prevailing 'closed' values of earlier decades and centuries, the latter being regarded as more appropriate to the 'open' Euro-world of the present (Poole, 1997).

Any attempt at regionalisation must try to take account of this kaleidoscope of continuity and change, seeking to portray regional contrasts in terms that have contemporary relevance. To do this, a regionalisation based on lifestyle characteristics is used here. The controlling principle can be summed up as 'What is / are the dominating influence(s) on the way most people organise their lives?' Such a question allows some very important influences in modern Ireland to be touched upon: (1) the opportunities associated with urbanisation, (2) the problems of really remote areas, (3) regional contrasts in the balance between open and closed communities, (4) contrasts in type of farming, (5) social and religious polarisations, and (6) deep-rooted attitudes of mind.

An emphasis on lifestyle characteristics carries echoes of *genres de vie*, the phrase used

by the great early twentieth century French geographer, Vidal de la Blache, to epitomise the distinctive patterns of living associated with different French regions. The analogy should not be over-extended, however. Vidal was concerned with an intimate relationship between man and nature which allowed *genres de vie* to take on the quality of an ecological system (Jones and Eyles, 1977: 27-8), and he applied his ideas in rural areas. In the present analysis, as befits a different era, different considerations dominate. No intimate man-nature links have been sought, and issues of relative location may be said to be more important than matters of absolute location.

On this basis, six major regions are presented as a primary sub-division for reviewing contemporary Ireland (Figure 4). Brief additional comments on the characteristics of each region are given below. Important sources for these comments have been recent maps and atlases displaying major characteristics of the population and economic activity of Ireland. Local variations in the demography of Northern Ireland were displayed in detail in the pioneering census atlas of Compton (1978). During the 1980s two further census atlases highlighted regional contrasts across the whole island by using a 180-district subdivision for most of their 300-plus maps (Horner, Walsh and others, 1984; 1987). More detailed mappings for the 1990s, involving a *c.*3000-unit subdivision of the Republic, have amplified these perspectives, and have further demonstrated the extent to which a local variety co-exists within a broader regional contrast. This is evident in agriculture (Lafferty, Commins and Walsh, 1999; Department of Agriculture and Food, 1999), in some other aspects of economic activity, and in demography, where some local contrasts are often related to distance from a city or strong town (Fitzpatrick Associates, 1999a; 1999b; Jackson and Haase, 1996; Haase, 1999). Most recently, the innovative population-based cartograms produced for the whole of Ireland by Cook *et al.* (2000) have strikingly demonstrated the local variety that is embedded within urban areas and which cannot be revealed using conventional small-scale, area-based, maps. Pattern is therefore at least partly related to geographical scale and to the type of map representation. However, at the general countrywide, 'first order' scale, some broader areal patterns are strikingly recurrent and may have a greater regional significance.

### **A framework for a regional geography?**

An initial distinction is made here between 'City-region Ireland' and 'Rural and small town Ireland'. The former comprises the main cities and their immediate functional regions, i.e. their main commuting hinterlands. City-region Ireland so defined includes almost half the total population and can be divided into two sets of discontinuous regions: (1) the two major city-regions, both of which stand out for their urban mass and metropolitan dynamic, and (2) five developing city-regions. Further distinctions can be made depending on whether community segregation is based mainly on social class or on a mixture of religious background and social class. These strongly urbanised areas fade outwards into 'Rural and small town Ireland', which covers most of the land surface, has around half the total population, and is here divided into four major regional units based on variations in lifestyle characteristics.

Compared to the city zone, the daily life of much of the population in rural and small town Ireland involves different stresses and rhythms. A minority, if still growing, population in parts of this region subject themselves to the extreme rigidities of long-distance commuting. However, for many others daily life can be more under individual control and is

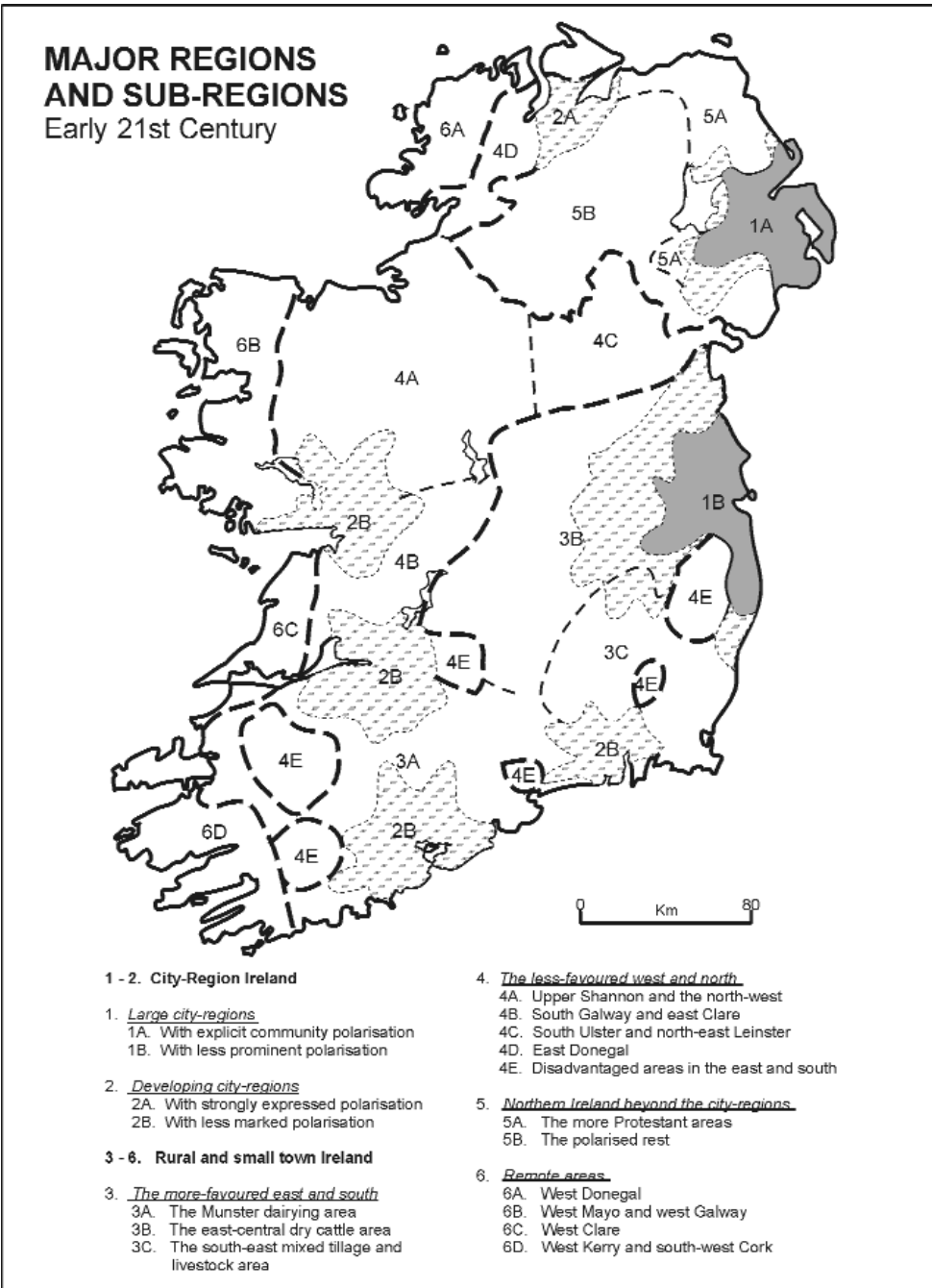


Figure 4: A possible framework of major geographical regions, early twenty-first century.

less rigidly time-regulated. Moreover, as local newspapers have long demonstrated and as some of the local radio stations established during the 1980s (e.g. Highland Radio in Donegal) were quick to exploit, many of the preoccupations of the population in rural and small town Ireland are with local concerns that find little identity in the centralised, urban-oriented and seemingly remote national media. Even though the branch factory, the shop, the small office or a tourism initiative may be as important as agriculture, many daily interactions are independent of the city-regions. Notwithstanding the possibilities of growing spill-over effects from the larger towns and city-regions, such independence may remain a major characteristic over the foreseeable future, the more so as tele-working and job-sharing developments provide growing opportunities for less-structured lifestyles.

Demographically, this area has also been distinguished by generally higher marital fertility rates and by higher dependency rates. For these reasons, and even though now no longer synonymous with agricultural activity, the term 'rural and small town Ireland' seems a useful shorthand title for this zone.

### *1. Major city-regions*

The Dublin and Belfast areas, as the most strongly urbanised parts of Ireland, are immediately distinguished by their highly diversified range of economic, social and cultural activities. Potentially at least (and notwithstanding some marked intra-regional contrasts and the limiting effects of high levels of unemployment in some parts), these areas can offer *accessibility to, and diversity of, opportunity*. Each of these areas has a local population exceeding 900,000, with the central city (considered as the main continuous built-up area) generating a significant commuting hinterland that is very marked within a radius of 50km and which has a weaker expression out to 100km. Whether in an Irish or an international context, these areas have the most favourable 'relative location' attributes of any place in Ireland, being the places where the best long-distance route systems converge and having the gateway airports with the best links to Britain and mainland Europe.

Dublin, especially, has been able to exploit its size and locational attributes to develop in a supra-national environment as, in the phrase of Borja and Castells (1997: 44), a 'space of flows', a dimension which complements its established dominant function in relation to the Irish central place hierarchy. This new role, which has prompted Breathnach (2000) to recognise Dublin as a 'niche transnational city', is evident in such developments as the centre-city 'international financial services centre', a concentration of international call centres, and the attraction of 'hi-tech' firms of global significance (Compaq, Dell, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Intel, Microsoft) to establish European headquarters and/or major production facilities at or near the edge of the main built-up area. In combination, these have produced a particular dynamic during the 1990s, and have contributed to the extension of the Dublin city-region so that it can be regarded as now reaching to all areas within one hour's travel of the main built-up area (Horner, 1999; Williams and Shiels, 2000). A similar, if at present less intense and more fragile, dynamic is evident in Belfast, most notably in the recent infusion of British and overseas capital for the development of call centres. Major areas currently being appropriated by the Dublin and Belfast city-regions are indicated by grey stripes on Figure 1.

In both cities, there are many distinctive sub-regions. The development of the modern city-region has been greatly influenced, over the last forty years or so, by the impact of large-scale physical planning, for example in the determination of land use zoning and in the

promotion of particular housing densities. Extensive garden-city suburban areas of near-homogeneous density have been created, most obviously in the large local authority-promoted housing estates, featuring short terraces or semi-detached two-storey dwellings, which are widespread in both Dublin and Belfast. In marked contrast are the older inner areas of both cities, part-redeveloped, part-blighted and part visually-intact. These places are now the locus of some of the most far-reaching changes associated with globalisation and the changing lifestyles that create a growing number of well-to-do one- and two-person households. Population changes affecting extensive parts of the inner city were precipitated in Belfast as the 1970s 'Troubles' and State-inspired motorway and housing clearances produced new spaces for redevelopment. In Dublin, areas of long-standing blight gained new life from the mid-eighties on as a result of strongly tax-driven urban renewal schemes. Some of the sharpest social divides in the country are to be found in the south-west inner city of Dublin (postal district 8) where the appropriating apartment blocks of a new city class grind against the run-down housing of an older, socially excluded, population; similarly, in Dublin 1, the synthetic Custom House Docks development, one of the flagships of the 'tiger economy', lies uneasily close to an older, and comparably run-down and excluded, community who once provided the unskilled labour vital for an earlier city incarnation.

These changes are representative of a re-imaging, which is part of a more general late twentieth century redefinition of metropolitan areas (Brotchie *et al.*, 1995; Borja and Castells, 1997). Rejuvenating central business districts now contain cosmopolitan shopping complexes and main streets with many leading international retail names. Nearby, both cities have espoused new interpretations of their riversides (Boal, 1995; Moore, 1999). In Belfast, the work of the Lagside Corporation has included the creation of the Lagan Weir and has facilitated major new landmark buildings, notably the Waterfront Hall/ Hilton Hotel complex and the main Millennium project, the Odyssey indoor arena and science centre. The factories and warehouses that once lined the riverside are now being superseded by apartment blocks and call centres. In Dublin, the Financial Services Centre and the Point Theatre, the late eighties/early nineties forerunners of downriver change, now look set to be subsumed in a much more extensive dockland redevelopment that will be driven by international capital and will ultimately produce new high-rise business and residential quarters on a grand scale.

Considered as *units*, however, the two city-regions display differences as well as similarities in their social geography. Although middle-class and 'working class' areas are strongly differentiated in both cities, the contrasts in Belfast are compounded by high levels of segregation related to identities denoted by religious background and (although how this should or can be measured is open to some question) ethnicity. Fortified police stations, peace lines, and the obsessive concern with territoriality denoted by flags, painted gable-ends and painted kerb-stones make Belfast distinctive. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between Region 1A, Belfast, a city-region with quite explicit community polarisation across large areas, and Region 1B, Dublin, a city-region where community polarisation is much less stridently expressed (although still present in the distinct zones of economic and social deprivation, e.g. in parts of the inner city and in the western suburbs, and in distinct zones of affluence).

## 2. Developing city-regions

Areas around Derry/ Londonderry, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford also stand out for their level of urbanisation. These places have favourable 'relative locations', a quality

which is now being reinforced as they attract significant levels of foreign inward investment in 'hi-tech' industry. Like the larger cities, each also contains significant areas of central area rejuvenation. With immediate local populations in the range 50,000 to 200,000, these centres can offer a much wider range of opportunity than anywhere else outside the two main city-regions. Compared to the latter, however, opportunities are on a reduced scale (for example, each of these centres has just one regional-level hospital, while in some instances the main third-level educational institution is an institute of technology/ technical college). The surrounding commuting region has some significance up to about 30-40km, but, particularly at greater distances, is less pronounced than is the case around Dublin and Belfast. As with the larger city-regions, it is necessary to distinguish between 2A, the Derry region where community polarisation is strongly expressed, and 2B, the other hinterlands where, at least in terms of religion and ethnicity, segregation is not explicit.

A number of other towns, with populations between 10,000 and 40,000, might have some claim to be considered as lesser regional centres. Letterkenny, Sligo and Tralee have third-level colleges and modern general hospitals. Athlone, Carlow, and Dundalk in the Republic, and Coleraine in Northern Ireland, are other centres with sub-regional significance on account of their third-level facilities. Drogheda, Kilkenny and county towns such as Ennis have commercial centres that attract custom from well beyond their immediate localities. Most places in this size range experienced significant urban renewal and commercial expansion during the 1990s. As their very active land markets demonstrate, many of these places, particularly those towns such as Portlaoise, Mullingar and Athlone which are strategically located to act as regional or sub-regional distribution centres, are now the focus of unprecedented growth and major private investment. If current regional development proposals continue to be pursued, some places, notably Athlone and Sligo, will be foci for further, accelerated, growth in the coming decades (Fitzpatrick Associates, 1999a; 1999b). However, compared to the centres already identified for Region 2, their scale of operations is as yet much smaller; their functional regions cannot be distinguished separately in a first-order regionalisation.

### 3-6. Rural and small town Ireland

If physical *planning* has been an important influence in the recent development of urban Ireland, physical *geography* may be recognised as continuing to be of basic significance for much of what goes on in 'Rural and small town Ireland'. The most fundamental contrast within this broad zone is between a more-favoured south and east (Region 3) and the less-favoured north and west (Region 4). In addition, two further regions can be identified on lifestyle criteria. In some respects Northern Ireland beyond the Belfast city-region fits into a wider rural and small town Ireland. However, in terms of attitudes of mind to it across all parts of Ireland, and as a separate political and economic unit, it must be treated as a separate major region (Region 5). In the Republic, some parts of the western seaboard can also claim distinction, in this case as a discontinuous Region 6, on the grounds that they are areas where significant limitations on lifestyle may arise on account of their distance from major towns and cities.

As is eloquently demonstrated in the *Atlas of the Irish rural landscape* (Aalen *et al.*, 1997), the broad east/ south versus west/ north distinction has been of long-standing historical significance and remains strong to-day, with the absolute advantage of the physically better-endowed south and east accentuated further through its favourable relative location to Britain

and Europe. However, as is demonstrated by the varied opinions of past commentators, no definitive boundary can be drawn between the two zones. Andrews (1967) confined the most favoured zone to a small 'eastern triangle'. On the other hand Orme (1970) and Mitchell (1976) opted for more extensive better-off areas (Figure 5), with Orme taking account of land quality oscillations associated with the midland bogs, and Mitchell focussing on a combination of physical and historical diagnostics to produce a bold, smooth line which in places pushes the better-endowed area west of the Shannon. These differences in interpretation do not, however, call in question the main contrast which can be picked out in many other ways. For example the basic physical map, and more dramatically satellite imagery, can immediately demonstrate the rawer, rougher nature of the west and north. The basic contrast in land quality is reflected in maps of land valuation (Figure 5), problem rural areas (Cawley 1986; 1989a; 1999b) farm size, farm income, and various other agricultural distributions (Department of Agriculture and Food, 1999; Fitzpatrick Associates, 1999a; 1999b; Frawley and Commins, 1996; Gillmor, 1999; Lafferty, Commins and Walsh, 1999). But, as the map of difficult land areas demonstrates (Figure 5), the transition to poor land is quite complex. The variable nature of the midlands, with its many 'islands' of lowland bog interspersed by rises of better land, means that it is neither possible nor desirable to suggest great precision in the separation of Regions 3 and 4.

For the present study, a divide between the two regions has been drawn from north Louth to the Shannon estuary. This broadly follows the original boundaries to define the less-favoured areas for agriculture and the areas designated for maximum Industrial Development Authority assistance (Gillmor, 1985). Compared to the boundary accepted by the Republic of Ireland Government for EU purposes in 1999, the line drawn here places most of Louth in the east/south and much of Clare in the west/north. Being unencumbered by any administrative considerations that might require a county-based division, the divide can here cut through parts of counties Longford, Cavan and Monaghan. A thick, broken line on the map emphasises the tentative and transitional nature of the division, while the south-eastern outliers of 'western' life and land shown as belonging to Sub-region 4E are a reminder of the complexity on the ground. Were sub-regions being identified on land quality alone, complementary outliers of good land might also be discernable in the north-west, for example the rich farmland of the Lagan between Letterkenny and Lifford in Donegal. In lifestyle terms, however, this area is peripheral to its State and has consequently been included with Region 4. While these and other possible 'exceptions' might be identified, they are not so extensive as to undermine the main contrasts at first-order level.

In a lifestyle context the contrast, repeatedly evident in contemporary socio-economic distribution maps such as those of Fitzpatrick Associates (1999a; 1999b), is between regions of more extensive and more limited opportunity. In the west, the distance between the larger urban areas is greater, urban centres generally are less abundant, and infrastructure provision is more limited. Issues of accessibility to basic services are of particular significance (Cawley, 1999; Cook *et al.*, 2000; Farrell Grant Sparks, 2000). Here distance is important as a regulator of opportunity— some areas are simply too remote for much choice in lifestyle. The generalisations expressed in Figure 6 use the imagery of Mitchell (1950) and Commins (1980) to illustrate some of the implications. Sociologically, the west has been more associated with the closed communities on the left-hand side of the diagram, with many areas having been associated with category 3: 'disintegrating or lacking integration' due to population decline, poor services and powerlessness (Figure 6). In contrast, communities in

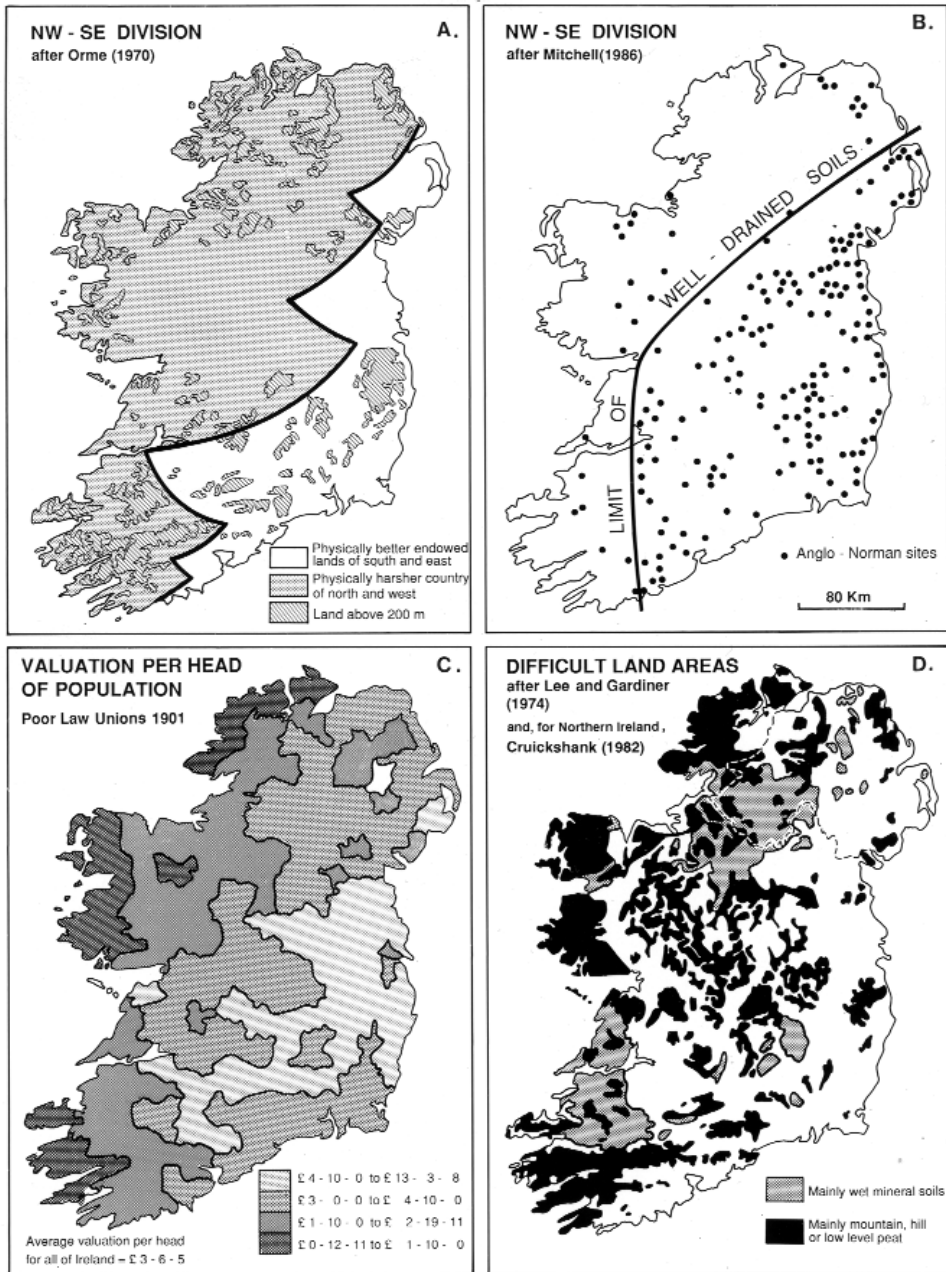


Figure 5: Interpretations of physical and historical contrasts between (a) the east and south and (b) the west and north.

	<b>CLOSED</b>	<b>OPEN</b>
	1	2
<b>INTEGRATED</b>	Inward looking; Self contained; Traditional and locally autonomous value-system reinforced by religion; Traditional leadership.	External linkages but strong local identity; Adaptable to change; Strong local organisations showing initiative; May act as focal point for surrounding communities.
<b>DISINTEGRATING OR LACKING INTEGRATION</b>	3	4
	Small area; Population decline; Poor services, facilities, amenities etc.; Apathy and powerlessness.	Rapid changes difficult to cope with such as rapid population growth, large increment of new industry; Instability in organisations and poor civic leadership; Dissension between different interests, often between new and established residents.

Figure 6: Four categories of rural community (after P. Commins, 1980).

the south and east have been more usually associated with the right-hand side, either adaptable with a strong local identity or disintegrating but in this instance due to strong urban pressure.

### 3. The more-favoured south and east

Extending from around Dundalk across Leinster and east Clare to cover most of Munster except the far west, this region consists of generally well drained land with larger farms (the majority above 20ha), relatively high stocking rates and a high level of mechanisation. Historically the area most strongly settled by the Anglo-Normans, some parts of this region have had a strong commercial tillage tradition. Communities here are ‘open’ and farmers almost everywhere make up less than one-quarter of the local labour force. With a well-developed network of central places (including ten with populations of between 10 and 30 thousand), there is a relatively wide range of non-agricultural employment opportunities; the area is also relatively well-integrated into the high voltage electricity and broadband communications systems which underpin high-technology industry. During the 1970s and early 1980s, most parts of the region experienced population growth. In the late eighties and early nineties, growth was more pronounced in the hinterlands of the main cities, around county towns (e.g. Kilkenny, Portlaoise, Tullamore) and in areas near to the east coast. However, some of the more rural areas, for example much of Tipperary and west Leinster— areas some distance from any major centre— had little change or even small declines during this later period.

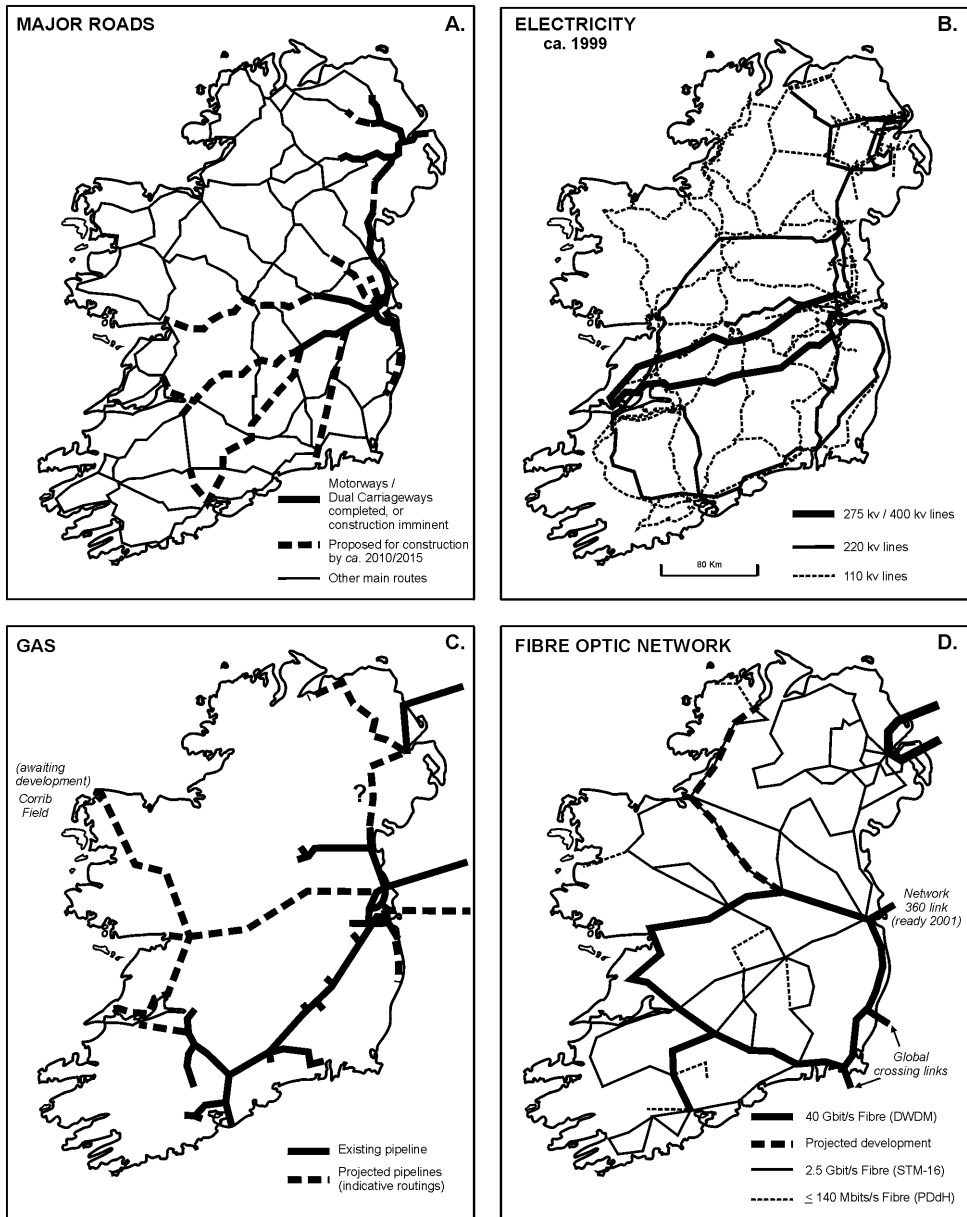
This major region can be divided into three sub-units distinguished particularly by types of farming involving very different lifestyles. While the cores of these sub-regions can be quite clearly identified, their boundaries are generally less clear-cut. Broken lines are used on Figure 3 as very approximate indicators of the areas of transition between sub-regions.

Sub-region 3A, the Munster dairy farming area, extends from Waterford to north Kerry. Major features of the local economy are giant agribusiness co-operatives (or former co-operatives now public companies) such as those at Listowel, Charleville, Mitchelstown and Mallow. Much of this area is rich grassland, where dairy cattle account for over 40 percent of all livestock units, with their proportion exceeding 50 percent over much of north Kerry, west Limerick and north Cork. Here, the twice daily milking routine is a major regulator of farming activity, producing demands on time which are quite different to those associated with Sub-region 3B, the East Midlands dry cattle area, where the buying, fattening and selling of cattle is a major preoccupation. This area extends over much of counties Meath, Westmeath, Kildare and Offaly and might perhaps also include north Roscommon; throughout these counties dry cattle represent well over 50 percent of all livestock units. Here farming life focuses much more on livestock marts and on the near-constant movement of livestock. Co-operatives have a very limited role. With farming life much less rigidly regulated in time-space terms, it is easier to avail of growing opportunities for off-farm employment.

Finally, Sub-region 3C, represents the much more diversified agriculture of the south-east. Here, dairying, tillage and livestock are all of some significance, with sheep strongly represented, especially in upland areas. This area covers Wexford, Carlow and parts of Wicklow, Kildare and Kilkenny, and might be considered to have city-region outliers in east Cork and north Dublin. Over much of this area tillage has accounted for over 25 percent of the total area, a level not reached anywhere else in Ireland. Farms are also large by Irish standards, the average size exceeding 30ha. The long-established strong commercial orientation, and the diversity of farm enterprises, mark out this sub-region.

#### *4. The less-favoured west and north*

Compared to Region 3, this region contains much more extensive tracts of physically-difficult upland and/or poorly-drained areas. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, agriculture has been, and in many areas still remains, the most important economic activity. In the early 1990s in some districts (e.g. north-east county Galway) up to two-thirds of the male labour force were engaged in agriculture, and across the region as a whole farming still accounts for around one-fifth of all employment. Farm structures limit the feasibility of mechanisation. Most farms are small (under 20ha), field sizes tend to smaller than in the east, and stocking rates are low (Commins, 1996; Frawley and Commins, 1996; Lafferty, Commins and Walsh, 1999). The urban structure remains poorly developed, with only Sligo and Letterkenny exceeding 10,000 inhabitants at the 1996 census. The potential for the development of manufacturing, particularly high-technology industry, is further circumscribed by the limited deployment of high capacity/ high-speed fibre optic communications, high voltage electricity transmission systems and natural gas pipelines (Fitzpatrick Associates, 1999a; 1999b; O'Brien, 1999, Figure 7). Over decades, new opportunities may emerge as high-capacity broadband cabling is extended and perhaps as a result of the development of recently-discovered offshore hydrocarbon resources, for example the Corrib gas field off west Mayo. Nonetheless, the most immediate prospect, in the de-regulated economic environment of the



Sources: Irish Academy of Engineering (2000), with modifications and updates from various newspaper reports during 2000

Figure 7: Infrastructural connections, c.2000.

early twenty-first century, is that this region will have difficulties contending against market forces favouring the concentration of large-scale activities.

Notwithstanding recent forestry and tourism initiatives, and the inevitability that many small farms can only continue if operated part-time, alternatives to agriculture therefore remain limited. Particularly away from the main towns and in spite of higher married fertility

rates, population decline has in the past been significant and widespread. This region has been widely composed of communities which twenty years ago could be described as 'closed' and inward-looking (Commins, 1980). Even though outlooks and attitudes are now much more open, and a growing number of non-farming households has introduced some sort of population stability in some areas, the threat of disintegration remains serious, the more so because decades of decline have skewed the population structure towards the dependent age groups and particularly toward proportions of elderly well above the state average. Together with the weak urban structure, this has created a situation where the active population available to support new initiatives is relatively low in some areas. As a result, lifestyle opportunities are arguably more limited than in Region 3.

Although all of this region (as well as significant other areas) has been considered part of the EU 'less favoured' rural areas, current policies together with sizeable numbers of 'terminal' farm households (i.e. consisting of unmarried farmers, or of households whose children have migrated or are unlikely to engage in full-time farming) suggest that there will be a major contraction in agricultural activity over the next couple of decades. Forestry has expanded in many areas, but the prospects for tourism are greatly dependent on a combination of local resources, local initiative and the future interests of European tourists. A wide scatter of lakes, rivers and some areas of attractive scenery suggest a potential— as yet exploited to only limited extent— for activity holidays and small-scale rural tourism. New tax-incentives offer new opportunities to some designated rural areas (for example in the Upper Shannon district), but these may prove more beneficial to predatory outsiders than to the established local population. For areas outside the commuting zones of the main towns, a future of an expanded tourism grafted on to a more thinly-populated countryside containing extensive tracts of forestry and with extensive areas of abandoned or little-used marginal land seems a distinct possibility. While such a prognosis has some validity across the whole region, it applies particularly to those parts of the region close to the Northern Ireland border. Here marginality has been accentuated, and opportunities for rural diversification stunted, as a result of a long period of uncertainty, insecurity and limited outside investment induced by border closures and intermittent terrorism.

Within this rather bleak general frame, several sub-regions can be distinguished, each with its own blend of the characteristics identified above. The four units used here are, like those of Freeman (1950) for this part of Ireland, closely linked to physical features and agriculture. Sub-region 4A, covering north Galway, east Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim, north and central Roscommon, west Cavan and most of Longford, represents a depressed core to the region. Although Sligo town and its environs stand out as an island of urban-led population growth, much of the sub-region is associated with persistently high levels of out-migration and with a weak urban structure. Over a period of decades other urban-led islands of growth may emerge, for example around Longford and Carrick-on-Shannon. Given the widely-spaced and underdeveloped nature of the local urban hierarchy, these county towns have particular potential as administrative and nodal centres, the more so as they are also both likely to be on a future north-western spine route for higher-capacity broadband communications. Carrick-on-Shannon also has the stimulus of a major transnational timber-processing industry and of tax-incentives for some types of residential development. Assuming no environmental conflicts arise, it should develop further as the main tourism base for the Upper Shannon. Around some urban areas, therefore, the medium term future may be less gloomy. However, across much of the sub-region the immediate context is the scale of

recent population decline— such that some rural districts now have only 60 percent of their population of forty years ago. More than anywhere else in Ireland, agricultural development faces serious problems, not only due to physical conditions but also due to the very small size of most holdings (reaching as low as an average of 11ha in Swineford, east Mayo). Perhaps not surprisingly, much of this sub-region is now part of the Upper Shannon rural renewal zone established in 1998.

In some contrast, the other sub-regions have larger holdings (although still small relative to the south and east) and display some variations in the type of farming. Sub-region 4B, south Galway, part of south Roscommon and east Clare, represents a mix of farm types, with a strong emphasis on sheep and mixed farming on the limestone lowlands of south Roscommon and east Galway but a much greater emphasis on beef in east Clare; this region is culturally differentiated from areas to the north and west by its greater sporting orientation toward hurling (Whelan, 1993a). Dairying is significant in Sub-region 4C, east Cavan, Monaghan and north Louth, which is also distinguished physically, as a part of the wider drumlin belt, and demographically, because it has experienced phases of population growth during recent decades. Much more so than areas further west, this sub-region has growing functional links with Dublin. Metropolitan influence is expressed in several ways, by providing a market for liquid milk, in the emerging interest of city-dwellers in the lakelands as foci for recreation and weekend retreats, and in a still relatively small, but growing, spillover of city-generated commuting and speculative development.

A strong, and in this instance more sustained, demographic vitality is also a feature of Sub-region 4D, east Donegal, which further stands distinct because of its location relative to the rest of the Republic. As already noted, it includes significant areas of strong farming to such extent that, in the absence of the State border, much of it might be as easily considered part of a north-western outlier of Region 3. But it is administratively peripheral, and its rather limited industrial development has been more tenuous, less readily achieved. The county town of Letterkenny is currently experiencing a development surge, and has a third-level institute of technology and a well-equipped general hospital. Yet anyone living in Donegal must travel far to avail of a university or of a major regional hospital within the Republic. These constraints on lifestyle make it more appropriate to place east Donegal in Region 4.

Finally, Sub-region 4E is a recognition of the existence of less-favoured 'islands' in the south and east which have problems similar to those more general in the west and north. Such areas include the Cork-Kerry borderlands (the Boggeraghs, Sliabh Luachra), an extensive area south of Nenagh in west Tipperary, the Nire Valley in west Waterford, the Idrone area in south Carlow, and the remoter parts of Wicklow. These are all upland areas where particular physical problems are compounded by limited farm size and, usually, remoteness from urban areas.

### *5. Northern Ireland*

As already stated, Northern Ireland beyond the Belfast city-region could on some criteria be treated as part of some more extensive region— for example the drumlin-and-lake landscapes and daily activities in south Fermanagh are much the same as in adjacent parts of Cavan and Monaghan, while parts of east Donegal might be considered as having both natural and cultural affinities with much of north-west Tyrone. In the view of one of the most respected pioneer geographers, Estyn Evans (1970), there has been sufficient deep-rooted, common ground within the drumlin-bound, historic nine-county province of Ulster to

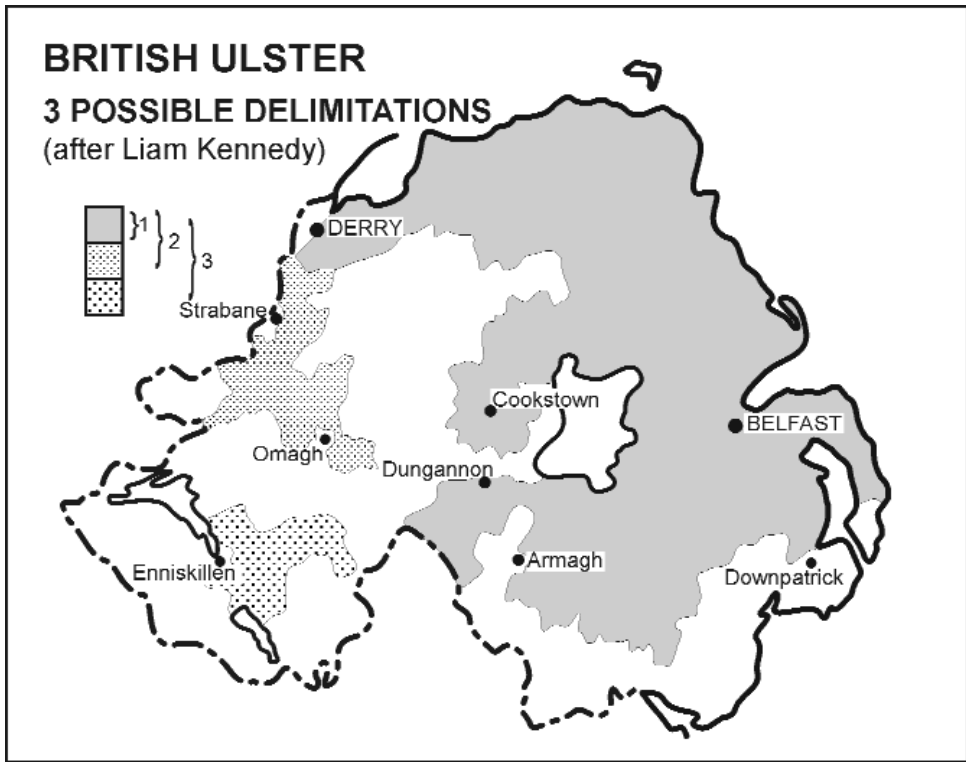


Figure 8: Three possible identifications of 'British Ulster' (after Liam Kennedy, 1986).

produce a distinctive regional personality, or individuality, that transgresses the twentieth century inter-State border. In some contrast, Evans argued that "what might be called a pathological colonialism...helped to delay the development of regional consciousness in Northern Ireland". Yet the combination of a distinct political administration and an 'identity crisis' with two major populations holding— as Graham (1997), and Boal and Douglas (1982) in their seminal survey *Integration and division*, have so carefully demonstrated— deep-rooted and often contradictory attitudes and aspirations, makes it necessary (1) to consider Northern Ireland separately, and (2) to make an internal division. Beyond the large urban areas, the principal contrast is between 5A, the areas where a population with identities centred on various combinations of 'loyalist'— 'British'— 'Protestant'— 'unionist' emotions is widely in a clear majority, and 5B, the more religiously/ ethnically mixed rest.

The areas with a strong 'Protestant' tradition— or what economic historian Liam Kennedy (1986) calls British Ulster— include most of north Armagh, north Down, Antrim, and north Derry. As Kennedy indicates (Figure 8), there are several possibilities for the precise boundaries of this region. Included in the present division are the Glens of Antrim/ Ballycastle and south Ards areas in both of which there is a Roman Catholic majority; excluded are parts of west Tyrone and mid-Fermanagh where locally there are Protestant majorities. With north Derry in and south Down out, the Protestant areas identified here are fuzzy at the edges. In most parts, however, over two-thirds— and frequently over three-quarters— of the population claim a Protestant identity, with Presbyterians particularly strongly represented. The distinctiveness of this sub-region— which is further evident in a

variety of demographic indicators, notably marital structure, low fertility rates, low dependency rates and household size— finds landscape expression in the prominence and variety of non-conformist chapels and churches, and in the neat ‘organised’ appearance of the countryside (possibly due to a combination of the following: the durability of well-constructed older buildings, a rate of population growth that is slow enough to allow planned management of the countryside, and attitudes of mind in which the notion of ‘stewardship’ of the countryside is well-established and where there is a respect for tight planning control). Perhaps most fundamental, however, are the dominant political attitudes of unionism/loyalism (and, by extension, of anti-nationalism). These, together with many other cultural and behavioural indicators (for example the prevalence of the ‘Scots Ulster’ accent/ dialect, and the situation that— in contrast to areas further south— some sports such as cricket and hockey are near-exclusively associated with the Protestant community), override any other possible regionalisations (for example the use of natural units such as the Bann valley) to make the lifestyle of the area distinctive.

In contrast, the rest of Northern Ireland is religiously much more evenly mixed, with the proportion of Protestants in most areas ranging between 25 percent and 60 percent. Compared to 5A, it can be distinguished as more rural (although less so, and on the whole with less dispersed population, than in neighbouring parts of the Republic), and it contains a greater extent of lower quality and difficult agricultural land. But, given the significance of denominational strengths for local politics, as well as for community organisations, the most important lifestyle feature of this area would seem to be more the polarisation of its communities, less its economic activity and the relatively high unemployment rates. That polarisation is visibly expressed in emblematic assertions of territoriality, for example the contrast between green, white and orange roadside kerbs and red, white and blue kerbs within a couple of hundred metres in places such as Newry and Portadown, or the Irish Tricolour flying high from the Glenshane Pass on the main Belfast-Derry road compared to the British Union Jacks and Ulster flags prominent in some lowland villages. But it is also embedded in many aspects of daily life, such as the strength of sporting organisations associated with a particular ethos (for example the powerful Gaelic Athletic Association) and in the relative weakness of cross-community sports bodies (such as some golf clubs). In this region the tensions of fine-balanced polarisations have been on occasion expressed in individual and organisational violence, but, even in ‘normal’ circumstances when this is not the case, the taboos and symbolisms of two communities who much of the time exist in proximity yet in parallel are such major conditioners of the daily lifestyle that they differentiate it from the rest of Ireland.

## *6. Remote Areas*

Finally, there are those areas in the Republic where distance from cities or large towns may represent a major constraint on lifestyle opportunity. Much of the western seaboard is at least fifteen, and usually over thirty, kilometres from any town with over 5000 inhabitants, and there are limited local support populations for the provision of services. Particularly for the elderly and those on low incomes, who may also be without private transport, the use of social and other services may be limited by distance problems (Storey, 1994; Cawley, 1999). Physically, these more remote areas include extensive landscapes that are scenically attractive but they also include extensive tracts of difficult land. Most farms are small, with limited prospects for commercial development. Except for parts of west Donegal, most have been

areas of persistent population decline over much of the twentieth century, while some are further distinguished culturally as Gaeltacht areas with an Irish language tradition. Only limited employment opportunities prevail generally, and their remoteness makes these areas unattractive to many types of manufacturing industry. Increasingly, a still strongly-seasonal tourism is of visual and social importance, although its economic impact is less clear-cut (for example many tourists pass through the remoter parts of co. Kerry each summer but, with many based at the gateway resort of Killarney and others using camper-vans, the local economic impact may be limited). Quite definitely, however, a growing proportion of the total building stock in these areas is tourist-oriented (Heanue, 1998), and holiday homes are now a striking and sometimes disfiguring component of the landscape.

Partly because they are physically separated and partly because they have somewhat different characteristics, for example the significance of foreign tourism increases from north to south, four sub-regions are identified within Region 6. Sub-region 6A, west Donegal, stands out for a number of reasons— because its population has been either growing or stable in recent decades, because of its very strong links with Scotland (for migration) and in seasonal holiday terms with Northern Ireland, because of the strong Gaeltacht in the Gaoith Dobhair area, and because of the density and distinctiveness of its dispersed coastal settlement (almost all of it single-storey buildings). Similar density of settlement occurs in Cois Fhairraige along Galway Bay, but until the 1990s 6B, west Galway and west Mayo, had displayed less demographic vitality; moreover, its external links are mainly to Dublin, England and America. 6C, west Clare, is also marked by some population decline, but has lower densities and a less harsh physique. Like 6A and 6B, large-scale tourism has yet to become highly developed. However, here, as in 6B, its forerunners are clearly evident in a recent surge of investment in holiday complexes, purpose-built second homes and some new golf courses. Finally, 6D, covers the peninsulas of west Cork and west Kerry. Here, the configuration of the coastline accentuates problems of accessibility. However, after many decades of population decline, a series of developments— buoyant tourism, various local community initiatives (e.g. a Gaeltacht co-operative on the Dingle peninsula, a EU ‘Leader’-supported scheme for south-west Kerry), and the settlement of a small but growing ‘exotic’ population of German, Dutch and British nationals— have combined to stabilise population numbers in many localities. Being relatively close to the south-eastern ferry ports and with established tourist centres at hand such as the rapidly-growing town of Killarney, the area is well-positioned for the growing volume of European visitors. Signs of the possible future destiny of its more scenic parts are the relatively large numbers of purpose-built holiday dwellings and the extent of former permanent housing that has now been converted for holiday use. More than anywhere else, perhaps, 6D displays the effects of new external dependencies that must become much more pervasive in twenty-first century Ireland.

### Conclusion

As a ‘first-order’ regionalisation identifying only major contrasts the framework outlined above is necessarily a major simplification of reality. Discrete regions do not exist in the real Ireland (or, should it be, in the real Irelands?). Even the Northern Ireland border, although administratively sharp, has less commensurate cultural precision, and most other regions are even less clearly definable. Moreover, as Smyth (1984, 1986) has so persuasively demonstrated, Ireland has a network of complex territorial structures operating at and across geographical scales ranging from the household through townland, parish and county to the

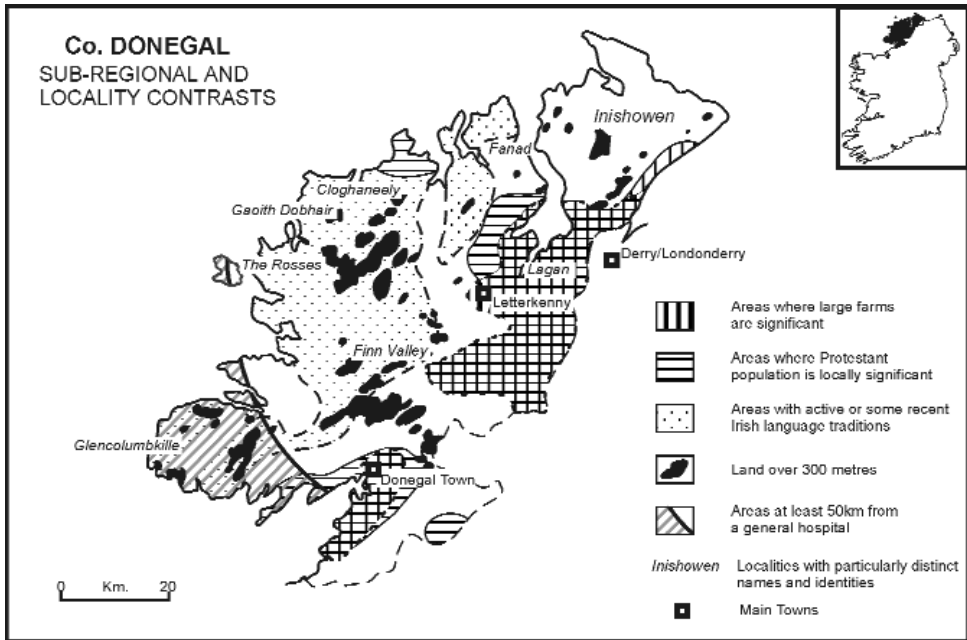


Figure 9: Sub-regional dimensions, county Donegal.

country as a whole. With more space, detailed local knowledge and a sensitivity for place, these complexities, including more localised second- and third-order regionalisations, might be explored. The contrasts in lifestyle, mentality and landscape associated with a west Longford chequered with large-scale bogland development, the small farms of north-east Galway and east Mayo, and the larger drystock farms of north Roscommon— areas which are here all included in Sub-region 4A— could be recognised at these levels, as could for example the striking contrasts within Sub-region 3C between south Kildare with its particularly large farms and the physically-distinct Castlecomer plateau with its smaller farms, coal-mining past, and very different outlook. The variety within east and west Donegal could also be identified at these levels (for example the Gaeltacht of Gaoith Dobhair in the north-west, and the cultural distinctiveness produced by the existence of locally-sizeable Protestant populations in parts of the east, e.g. the Lagan area (Figure 9)), as could the distinctiveness of localities within Northern Ireland such as the Antrim Glens, south Ards and south Armagh. Within cities, too, intra-regional variations could be recognised further, for example the cultural and class distinctions between north, south, east and west Belfast, and the economic and class contrasts between less-affluent west Dublin, the more affluent south-east, and the rural fringe with its mixtures of ‘locals’ and ‘runners’ [in-comers], of farming, recreation and commuting.

The regionalisation presented here can be challenged for the mixed range of criteria on which it is based, yet it might also be contended that such an approach is appropriate to, and a reflection of, the uncomfortable jostle of cultural, economic, political and geographical processes that compound together into late twentieth-century spatial contrasts. A recent commentary (Amin, 1997) has associated globalisation with “multilayering, hybridity and inter-dependence”: “it symbolises the blurring of traditional territorial and social boundaries

through the interpenetration of local and distant influences, therefore requiring hybrid and multi-polar solutions". It is within this complex context, in which, according to Massey (1995), our existing concepts of place are pressingly challenged by the changing organisation of space, that the present discussion is set.

While some macro-regional contrasts have persisted over long periods— most notably those between the east/south and west/north— there is nothing immutable about particular criteria, contrasts or boundaries. It might seem very difficult to predict major regional shifts of the kind produced in some European countries as a result of economic restructuring and the renewed exploration of cultural identity (Graham, 1998; Naylor, 1992; Scargill, 1992). Yet it must be recognised that contemporary Ireland is subject to complex, far-reaching, lifestyle changes, and these may have a profound geographical, as well as a cultural and economic, significance. Some of these developments have a particular local or national dimension; others are much more global. Sweeping changes in accessibility relationships are certain over the next couple of decades as a consequence of the telecommunications revolution and the most far-reaching infrastructural development programme since the coming of the railway. But the external dimension may be just as significant. As Dublin re-sizes its infrastructure frame with new ground transportation systems, and with a second airport now inevitable, the city seems secure and perhaps rising in the European metropolitan hierarchy. At the same time, it is caught up in the globalising processes of networking and cultural change described by Sassen (1994) and others. Increasingly, it is more than an Irish place, it is part of, and responsive to, global space. In the future, both short-term and long-term, its fortunes, and those of Ireland generally, are irreversibly bound in with broader changes that are far beyond the control of any single city or country. Shifts in global capital, currently considered beneficial to Ireland, could turn adverse as the inexorable rise of the Pacific Rim contributes to Europe losing its advantage as a major centre of world consumption. Just as the geography of Ireland in the year 2000 would have been difficult to predict in 1950, so to-day, in a world of accelerating change, it is difficult to project the geography of the country in 2025, let alone in 2050.

In the more immediate future, perhaps over the next decade, some already-existing regional tendencies may be accentuated. For example, the city-regions are both expanding and intensifying, while the increasing economies of scale now seemingly critical for strong commercial farming may marginalise formerly 'strong' medium-sized farms. With such farms widespread in north Meath and in parts of Offaly for example, the divide between Regions 3 and 4 (i.e. between the east/south and west/north) is not only being accentuated, it is being pushed south-eastwards (Lafferty, Commins and Walsh, 1999: 140-141). At the same time, the contrast between 'city-region Ireland', as defined in this article, and the rest of Ireland may be accentuated as a result of decisions on the deregulation of certain key economic activities. A shift away from State-wide uniform pricing systems toward more variable systems that are cost, distance, and scale sensitive may be anticipated as the electricity, telecommunications and other services are adapted to a prevailing culture of market competition. New electricity producers will primarily serve, and will facilitate the expansion of, concentrations of major industry in areas such as Dublin, Cork, and Limerick-Shannon. Moreover, with "little prospect of optical fibre being deployed outside of the cities and main towns" and with high-capacity/high-speed broadband infrastructure and services only deployed where it is "fully commercially justified" (Fitzpatrick Associates, 1999a: 46), one may agree with Warf (1995) that earlier expectations that telecommunications would "eliminate space" are simplistic—

“such systems in fact produce new rounds of unevenness, forming new geographies that are imposed upon the relics of the past”.

It is a basic fact that there *are* significant regional contrasts within modern Ireland. Geographers need to bear witness to these contrasts the more so because administrators (who so often appear so central to modern lifestyle) can find it expedient to simplify the geography of Ireland to an even greater degree than has been done here. At EU level, the Irish and British governments for long encouraged the identification of the Republic and of Northern Ireland as single undifferentiated units. Within the Republic counties have been widely treated as near-irreducible pre-set building blocks, most recently in the controversial and reluctantly-taken 1998-9 decision to split the state into two units for EU funding applications. However, such approaches are scarcely adequate for representations of spatial variation in contemporary Ireland. To take co. Donegal again, the Irish Government decision of 1993 to include it within a general Border ‘regional authority’, while superficially appealing, places it with the much more urbanised co. Louth, located in the east and wedged between the Dublin and Belfast city-regions. Two very different geographical areas, with very different linkage and economic characteristics, are submerged within a region that has little chance of developing a coherent internal identity. An impressive battery of statistical measures and comparisons can be assembled for such an administrative region (Walsh, 1995; Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1999), but the value (and values) of these indicators may be circumscribed by the uncritical combination of county units used to create the region in the first place.

Because they are independent of official considerations, the regional frameworks of geographers and other academics may have a particular value in developing a more widespread appreciation of the complex regional variety embedded in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century Ireland. They can draw attention to multidimensional, spatially-influenced features of contemporary lifestyle and can act as an integrative antidote to sectoral thinking. Everyday life in the new century will have many a-spatial influences, but— as the emerging concern with spatial development strategies demonstrates (Department of the Environment, 2000; Irish Academy of Engineering, 2000; Northern Ireland Department of the Environment, 1998)— it will also demand many spatial decisions and be significantly circumscribed by environmental and sustainability issues. Regionalisations and regional descriptions can provide invaluable visualisations, or ‘spatial development perspectives’, at scales likely to be relevant to EU, as well as for more localised, policy analysis. Even more importantly, they give us an environmental context that is part of understanding our selves.

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