

# **Irish Geography**

## **Sixtieth Anniversary 1944- 2004**

### **Editorial**

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It is not usual for the Editor of *Irish Geography* to write *in personam*, any more than it is normal for the Editor to publish his own material. This short piece is an exception justified by the important milestone that the journal has reached. It is now 60 years since *Irish Geography* first appeared and by any standards this is quite an achievement. It is also the seventieth anniversary of the Geographical Society of Ireland, a lifetime's contribution to the development of Geography in Ireland.

On an occasion such as this, it is natural to reflect on the journal, on its achievements and, more importantly, on its future. I am not qualified to write about the early days of the journal. Fortunately, Professor Gordon Herries Davies, himself a distinguished Editor of the journal and stalwart of the Society, is both able and willing to do so and his witty and illuminating paper follows this editorial.

### **An international journal**

It was an aim of the Geographical Society of Ireland to produce a journal that would have an international reputation for quality. From the very early days of the journal, it is clear that it succeeded in this aim. The journal was still young when requests were received from learned but older journals for exchange copies of the new publications. These exchange arrangements continue to the present day and there are of the order of sixty such regular swaps. Before becoming Editor of *Irish Geography*, I had the honour to serve as Hon. Publications Secretary of the society, a post that I held for fourteen years. The post was also, for reasons unknown to me, sometimes referred to as the Business Manager, giving the flattering but incorrect impression that I was undertaking two jobs. The key function that the Publications Secretary performed was the servicing of the institutional subscribers. *Irish Geography* is supplied as a benefit to members free of charge but it is also sold to libraries, both university and public, and institutions world-wide and it is this income stream that ensures its production. Important as the membership base is to the Society, the institutional subscriptions are what provide the international reach of the journal and thereby bring the work it contains to a very wide audience. Having worked on this over many years, I can attest that the journal is taken by libraries on all continents with particular concentrations in the Anglo-American realm but also with strong representation on the mainland of Europe and in Japan. The exchange agreements improve the penetration of the journal into the non-English speaking world, particularly in Eastern Europe. It should be possible to find *Irish Geography* anywhere without too much difficulty. This has been the case for as long as I dealt with the distribution of the journal and continues to be the case today.

During the 1990s, *Irish Geography* began to appear on the Internet. Initially, this took the form of contents lists and abstracts of the papers contained in each issue. About five years ago, I began making the full papers available on the net in PDF format. This format was

chosen because of its almost universal availability and the fact that it permitted the journal to appear exactly as it appeared in print. This has proved to be hugely successful in increasing the reach of *Irish Geography*. The Internet statistics for June 2004, indicate that, of the 60 percent of hits for which the server was able to identify the ultimate destination, some 26 percentage points came from users in the United States and Canada with Japan and individual European countries accounting for the bulk of the remainder. However, there were also hits from Mexico, Turkey, Israel, Argentina and South Africa to name but five. Internet search engines readily find the journal and the Society. This new audience poses a dilemma for the Geographical Society. It is very good to see our webpage being used in this manner but this access is entirely free. We do not charge for downloads and access is open to all. Partly this is due to pragmatic reasons. I am grateful that University College Dublin makes the server and storage space available without charge but this makes it impossible to put an enterprise server on the system. There is also another more compelling reason for keeping access to papers free of charge that I will touch on below. Nonetheless, there is a natural worry that free access will see a reduction in paid subscriptions. 'Why pay when you can get it for free?' is a question that University libraries will inevitably ask even when the subscription is so modest compared to most other journals? Yet it is this very income stream that is so important to the Society in producing the journal in hard copy for its members, many of whom want the paper copy. This is a dilemma that will have to be resolved sooner rather than later.

But why is it important that *Irish Geography* be read across the planet? In fact, it is vital for the survival of the journal that this continues to be the case. The relationship between authors and the journal is symbiotic. The journal publishes quality papers and on this its reputation is built but it needs quality papers to be submitted to it. All of us in academic life are now pressured to become 'international' and one manifestation of this is the pressure to publish in 'international' journals. This is where *Irish Geography* is at a disadvantage in terms of perception. It is locally produced, pretty much as a cottage industry, so how could it possibly be 'international'? Yet it is 'international' and is probably more 'international' than many of the more expensive journals produced by commercial publishers. The challenge for those of us who love the journal is to make sure that we trumpet this aspect at every possible opportunity and make the most of the opportunity that publishing in *Irish Geography* offers.

It is interesting that people in other disciplines recognise the possibilities offered by *Irish Geography* to reach a wider audience. I found it noteworthy that a colleague in another discipline remarked to me that the reason he was submitting a paper was that he had been told that our circulation was far wider than his own journal which had a print-run five times the size of *Irish Geography*.

### **Production matters**

Early editions of the journal are now quite rare but they are worth seeking out to see how quality was at the heart of the production process from the very beginning. Many of these issues contained foldout and tipped-in illustrations. No editor should approach these without trepidation. They are difficult to handle, printers hate them and they add considerably to the expense. You rarely see them these days because of the manual intervention required. Emphasis was also placed on producing high quality illustrations from the very beginning. It is worth looking at how clear are the reproductions of maps and charts. It has always been our practice to be generous with authors in the inclusion of maps, charts and photographs. Geography, after all, is a visual three-dimensional subject and it is quite a challenge to express

geographical ideas on the printed page. This has always made the production of the journal more difficult and time consuming. In the days of letterpress, it involved the production of printing blocks that were inserted into the type frame and 'to production of blocks' was always one of the enigmatic entries on Society accounts. Of course, the printer saw to block production and screening of photographs. This is one of the tasks that has reverted from printer to editor. It is now the editor who deals with the production of illustrations and they are now digital artefacts rather than works of art. Paradoxically, maintaining quality is now more difficult than before. Authors increasingly use more and more sophisticated software packages, many of which produce visual output. It is perfectly natural that they would want to include this output in their papers. The problem is that the software designers more often than not put little effort into producing graphical output that is of sufficient quality for the print media. The graphics look well on the screen but 72 dpi is not really sufficient when it comes to print! Moreover, the computer world is a world of 24-bit colour whereas we are still stuck in the world of black and white and the 254 shades of grey in between. Colour printing is still ruinously expensive and so graphics have to be converted to our grey world. I still smile at the pie chart that I was offered some time ago that had 27 different slices in absolutely undifferentiated shades of grey. This presents another of the challenges that the journal has to face. We live in a world of colour presentations; can we continue to publish in grey? We could publish in colour easily as long as we published only electronically. Is this the way forward for the journal, as an electronic publication only?

Herein lies the rub. For all of the possibilities that are presented by electronic publishing, it is still not valued as much as conventional print. Electronic-only journals are viewed with some suspicion and this is probably because of the very ease with which they can be produced. The production of a paper journal involves cost and cost imposes limits on size and capacity. To be selected for publication on paper means that someone has taken the decision to expend money on your article, probably to the exclusion of another article. It is therefore a quality mark to appear in print. *Irish Geography* needs to pause before committing to web publication only, even if this suited the members and the institutions.

### *Frequency*

For the greater part of its sixty years, *Irish Geography* appeared once a year. It was Bill Carter, who died tragically young, who persuaded the Society to move to a twice-yearly schedule in 1986 as well as to a new physical format. We have published the journal twice a year since then with the journal going to press at the end of June and the end of December each year. The production of *Irish Geography* is now a continuous process as one issue leads directly into the next. It was the correct decision and one that authors appreciate. It is part of the pressures of the modern world that people expect to see results quickly and we can promise a pretty rapid turnaround for most papers. However, there seems no possibility to increase the frequency further, nor would it, in my opinion, be wise to revert to the single issue per year.

### **The team**

In his paper, Professor Herries Davies notes that he is in the fortunate position of having known every Editor of the journal. I cannot claim that breadth of knowledge but I am pleased to say that I have known all but two - Tony Farrington and Walter Freeman. I exclude myself from the following comments but it is my firm belief that the Society has been most fortunate

in those on whom the Editor's mantle has descended. The journal has never been richly endowed with resources. The Editor has been always a general factotum, concerned with every stage of the journal from the time that a paper arrives to the time that it comes back from the printers. Gordon writes of time spent in cutting and pasting and his battles with galley proofs. From this distance in time, there seems to have been a romantic element to dealing with letterpress as the manuscript (literally) became an unformed block of type on pages of irregular length. These pages were annotated in strange hieroglyphics known only to the initiates which told the typesetter to insert an en space or an em space or to add some additional leading. It was a mysterious world and the process was certainly a time consuming activity. For the past twenty or so years, there has been an inexorable move to computer-based production and the journal is now produced entirely using recycled electrons, being committed to paper only at the last moment. However its production is no less time consuming. The software packages have replaced the cutting and pasting but they are fickle mistresses who are just as likely to cause a disaster, as a typesetter was liable to drop a case full of type. It is an old truism that 'interchangeable parts don't' which translates into computer-speak, as 'fully compatible files never are'. If one thing has caused me to grow old in this job is the fact that the procedures that produced successfully the previous issue do not work with the current issue. Moreover, the printers, with their infectious sense of fun, are just as likely as ever to lose text from an image, jumble a header, or just plain forget that little but crucial element.

All of the above is to remind readers that the Editor of *Irish Geography* has always been a hands-on editor. Of course, the Editor is also the person who deals with authors and referees and processes drafts and redrafts. Only authors know the degree to which papers have been improved from that originally submitted through the gentle application of his pencil. [As Gordon notes it has always been a him!] But getting good papers ready for press was (and remains) only part of the process. Good papers need good production qualities. People do judge books by their covers. Thus, I return to my point that the journal and the Society has been fortunate in its editors for whom the journal was simply a labour of love. The time expended on its production was not justified in terms of any personal return nor did they expect this. In fact, editors of *Irish Geography* have been rather retiring. Gordon lists them at the end of his paper and I put the list on the webpage sometime last year. However, putting together the list was not easy, editors have tended to do the job and pass on the baton without fuss. It is therefore appropriate that the Society thanks its editors for the past sixty years and pays tribute to their sterling efforts in producing a journal of such quality.

However, it was not and is not a one-person show, *Irish Geography* is produced by virtue of the time and efforts of many people. The Review Editor performs a crucial function in bringing assessments of new texts to the readership and Arnold Horner has served with distinction in this role for at least twenty years. Centrally important are the referees. *Irish Geography* is an international peer-reviewed journal and all papers are read by at least two experts in the field. I am keenly aware of the time and trouble that readers take with papers. Their primary function is to report to the Editor on the suitability of the paper for publication but they never stop there. They also offer advice, often quite comprehensive advice, to the authors and many are the papers that have been hugely improved because of the generosity of the reviewers. Their role is truly a public good since their service must remain anonymous and their identity is known only to the Editor. It is only the entry at the end of many papers where the author thanks the anonymous referees for their advice that one gets any hint of this hidden but vital process.

### The future

*Irish Geography* is a community publication; it is produced by a community of geographers who have an interest in the Geography of Ireland. It is produced for a wider community who share this same interest in Ireland. A focus on the Geography of Ireland has always been central to the journal and remains a key element in deciding on the acceptability of a paper. There are few occasions on which a paper has appeared in the journal that did not have a connection with this island. This conscious policy means that the journal is wide ranging in the nature of geography that it includes. We publish geomorphology, climatology, archaeology, social, urban, regional geography; the list is as long as geography is broad. Herein, however, lies one of the biggest challenges for the future.

Geographers are becoming more and more specialised. The skill-set required to excel in our particular branches of the subject seems to require that we become expert in more circumscribed fields than was the case a generation or so ago. The nature of geography itself, that synthetic view that differentiated us from other disciplines, seems to be under threat. This is coupled with an upsurge in the number of specialist journals, produced by commercial publishers. There cannot be a branch of geography that does not now have its own special journal. So is there a future for a generalist journal such as *Irish Geography*, albeit one that is spatially specialised?

The answer has to be that it depends entirely on the geographical community that works on Ireland. If they decide to continue to use the journal as the vehicle for their publication, then the journal has a bright future and there is no reason why it should not go from strength to strength. It is as simple and as stark as that. The future of *Irish Geography* will not be decided by the economics of production but by ourselves.

### An invitation

However, the future of *Irish Geography* will not be determined in isolation from the future of Geography in Ireland. There is no doubt but that the nature of the academic endeavour that we call Geography is changing rapidly on this island. The Universities are in turmoil as they try to re-invent themselves for a future that is far from clear. People are increasingly polarised as to whether these changes are for the better or not.

Dr Rob Kitchin of NUI, Maynooth, offers his perspective on the nature of Geography in Ireland in a short comment piece that begins on page 15 of this issue. I would urge all to read this, but more importantly, to produce their own response to the issues raised in his paper. I would like to see a debate take place in this, the sixtieth year of the journal, and I will publish the contributions in the December 2004 issue. It may help shape the future of Geography in Ireland and *Irish Geography* and, hopefully, it will provide some interesting material for the Editor of the centenary issue of *Irish Geography*.