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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7zq131cf>

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Publication Date

2011-06-21

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Peer-reviewed archaeology blogging

Ireland and the 'vagaries of war'



There's a somewhat long tirade by way of an introduction to this post on distance, perceptions from afar, and the current state of Ireland so, indulge, or bear with, me while I set the scene!

Writing in the Irish Times just before the visit of the queen of England to the Republic of Ireland in May, wherein, as we are not subjects of her majesty, we are not required to bow or curtsy, or capitalise the word 'queen' (I may have made that last bit up – or my Republican Grandmother did), Irish comedian Dara Ó'Briain notes that:

'There is a joke that all Irish comics have a version of, but the most economic expression is from Andrew Maxwell. He would declare in an English comedy club "The Irish love the Muslims..." and after a long, long pause, "They've really taken the heat off us".'

Ó'Briain's point is that, in Britain, the Irish have ceased being identified a major 'terror threat'. We have been normalised in British society. The visit of the queen signals a further stabilisation of our relationship with our nearest neighbours and the culmination of a long and difficult peace process on our Island. Unfortunately no member of the public, other than some local celebrities (they're always smaller than you thought, you know) were allowed within 50km of her majesty, in case we'd do something embarrassing like keep our hands in our pockets or something! Our local media framed the visit as 'the Nation growing up', a sign of our 'maturity', and carefully sanitised the past.

President Obama's later visit, predicated on his (very) tenuous family links to a small village in County Offaly (see Moore Group's blog [here](#)), took place over less than 24 hours, and copper fastened his vague Irish credentials, as well as providing US media outlets the golden opportunity to promulgate the great Irish clichés (drink) and document the new national stereotypes – our newly poor property developers and other Celtic Tiger grotesques (sorry, but I'm too stuffed with potatoes, and langered with porter to summon up any outrage). Inevitably, the local media for both visits were fawning and obsequious, and internationally the most memorable images presented were of a British queen politely ignoring a pint of Guinness, and an American President embracing one (and sinking it with gusto). Guinness, owned by the multinational company Diageo, had a great advertising opportunity and, after the guests had left, promptly announced 400 future layoffs. No mention or query during Obama's visit about US treasury secretary Timothy Geithner's apparent blocking of an IMF plan to allow Ireland to burn some of our bondholders, thus maintaining the financial burden on the country and adding greatly to our general misery and wretchedness – no, it was all hugging babies, our two countries being bound by affection, history and friendship.... Nice articulate, inspiring, bondage, nonetheless.

Meanwhile back in the US, Imagine Ireland is pitching Irish 'Culture', which according to their website 'is the means by which most Americans now encounter Ireland'. Funded by the Irish Government, the project aims to connect with Irish-Americans (all 40 million of them – down mysteriously from 70m in the previous census [maybe I made that up too]) and other Americans (all 271,353,043 of them), by presenting a wide ranging programme of arts and cultural events and collaborations across the States.

'Brand Ireland' has clearly been in overdrive for the past month.

These events, and the associated marketing, are all part of a huge effort to repair our perceived international reputational damage as a result of our economic collapse, to change our tourism

pitch from the overly expensive Celtic Tiger garish spa tourism of the early 21st century to 'culture' (archaeological sites, music and drink) and green tourism, and to present a new, positive face to the world. So, the main pitch of our tourism chiefs is that Ireland is a place of fun, stout and 'the craic', with green fields and archaeological sites featuring prominently in that marketing, depicting a country which is both rural and traditional. The Presidential and queenly visits provoked an all-pervasive 'positive thinking' rhetoric in both the new and old media and even infected the pubs (the cynics have only now in the past week begun to rear up again). In the end this might sell a few more pints of Guinness over the next few years and fill up our empty hotels (financed by ill-advised tax breaks for the ultra-rich in the noughties).

From the dizzying heights of the Celtic Tiger years, when we were 'the envy of the world', a shining light of economic openness, Ireland has now descended into economic freefall, and our cultural heritage sector has not escaped the collapse. The current best estimate by the Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland (IAI) of numbers working in the profession is 350 – from a peak of 1700 in 2008. This may even be overestimated, as, anecdotally, we're hearing of widespread unemployment nationwide, with people working only sporadically and others on short term or part time hours, a scenario reflected in my own business, which now employs 4, down from a peak of 18 four/five years ago.

It's in this context that my attention was drawn to the recent AIA ball and its focus on Ireland. Part –funded by Imagine Ireland as an element of their great American Journey, the Gala was addressed by our cultural ambassador, Gabriel Byrne (of In Treatment and Bracken fame). The event seems to have been a great success and showcased our remarkable cultural heritage and stock of monuments with apparently excellent addresses by both Pat Wallace of the National Museum of Ireland and Gabriel Byrne; but I was surprised by a small paragraph describing how some of the proceeds from the Gala were to be used:

Each year hundreds of irreplaceable archaeological sites are destroyed by unrestrained development, looting, the vagaries of war, and environmental changes. With the help of gala attendees, we are able to preserve these sites for the future.

During the Gala, guests had the special opportunity to support the AIA's efforts to preserve Irish cultural heritage—a portion of the proceeds from the Gala auction will be used to directly support archaeological sites in Ireland...



AIA SITE PRESERVATION PLEDGE DRIVE

Saving Archaeological Sites in Ireland

Each year hundreds of irreplaceable archaeological sites are destroyed by unrestrained development, looting, the vagaries of war, and environmental changes. With the help of gala attendees, we are able to preserve these sites for the future.

During the Gala, guests had the special opportunity to support the AIA's efforts to preserve Irish cultural heritage—a portion of the proceeds from the Gala auction will be used to directly support archaeological sites in Ireland, including sites like:

1. The Blackfriary at Trim in County Meath



This may be a case of a simple cut and paste on the part of an AIA website editor. However, it did elicit a brief stir on twitter with a few Irish archaeological tweeters noting the tone and import of the paragraph, a paragraph which was later repeated in the introduction to a new AIA Irish Archaeological Heritage Google Earth skin announced here. As Charles Mount points out in his blog 'I hope this misplaced rhetoric won't discourage any visitors to Ireland'. Further to Charles' blog post the section was removed from the Google Earth announcement on the AIA site (although it still appears on the 'Saving Irish Sites' section of the website).

With regards to 'the vagaries of war' mentioned therein, it should be pointed out that the conflict in Ireland is a sensitive subject and we have gone through a long and difficult peace process, building on the 1998 Good Friday agreement. Ireland is now one of the safest places in the world (consistently ranking in or around the world's top ten safest and most peaceful places).

We haven't had war in the Republic for 90 years (both my Grandfathers were locked up for that one – but that's another story), we have one of the lowest murder rates in the world, no one

carries a gun, and, shure, we're half stupefied with de demon drink most of the time, so, 'vagaries of war' – not a threat to our cultural heritage or prospective visitors...

As to unrestrained development: Well, the recklessness of our bankers and the hubris of our property developers, aided by ineffectual government, political clientelism, the general global collapse and our innate cute-hoorism (see [here](#) and [here](#)) has put the kibosh (which word some would say is derived from the Irish word *Cabáiste* meaning 'cabbage', or *caidhp (an) bháis* meaning 'cap of death') on that.

Looting in Ireland has not been a huge problem, metal detectorists require a And, 'environmental changes'; well apart from coastal erosion, sea level rise and other climatic processes, not a great problem...

No, the most pressing threat to Irish archaeology is none of the above... it is a combination of decreased funding, cut throat competition in an era of much reduced developer funded work, growing unemployment, emigration and the resultant brain drain. Experienced archaeological field workers face the choice of retraining, pursuing a new career path or leaving the country. Those who remain (and are lucky enough to have a job) face a different challenge – crap conditions and pay.... a reversion to the bad old days when archaeology was seen as a 'vocation' (this word is creeping back into the Irish archaeological lexicon and should be taken as code for badly paid, crap conditions), a job you do for the 'love of it'. From the anecdotal evidence this is becoming a reality, with indications that those who remain in employment at the lower grades are being paid barely above the minimum wage (which itself has been reduced, but will apparently be raised again shortly).

Another problem is dissemination of all the data from the past few years. The last 20 years have resulted in an unprecedented number of discoveries and a wealth of new information on Irish archaeology, the road and house building boom producing unequalled amounts of data, but this is so far largely hidden in technical reports and unpublished material archived in formal Department locations. Although state agencies such as the NRA (National Roads Authority, nothing to do with guns) are busy publishing the results of the road projects, and some of the surviving consultancies are getting their data out (witness eachtra's exemplary Journal and our own humble blog), there's still a danger that much of this information will get lost along the way, if the excavators leave Ireland or consultancies shut down or simply no longer have the resources.

I've a much longer list of the problems and dangers for Irish archaeology in my head, but I won't go into them here. Anyone who wants to read more on the great challenges and apparent opportunities, just [click here](#) for a discussion document on the Archaeological Profession in Ireland, arising from a recent seminar facilitated by the Irish Heritage Council.

Doubtless there are dangers to our cultural heritage, but certainly not from the vagaries of war, nor from looting or unrestrained development (perhaps from environmental changes).

Irish commercial archaeology has come a long way, and our knowledge of our past is being transformed but right now we're busy taking stock of where we are and where we're going, in terms of our society at large and also in terms of our cultural heritage. Tourism and our well preserved and presentable cultural heritage is an integral part of our future sustainable survival and perceptions from distant markets are important to that future. Our nations story of progress to independence, through poverty and emigration, sudden wealth and subsequent collapse, with the prospect of lasting unity and peace has not been untroubled, but, despite my earlier cynical tone, that trouble is largely behind us, and we wholeheartedly welcome all our visitors... and they can rest assured that we won't hurt them.

And as a reward for getting all the way to the end, please stand for Ireland's alternative national anthem...

[yt video=UVj7cwnFtYI]Ireland Ireland Duckworth Lewis Method[/yt]

