

A Sense of Place: Travellers, Representation, and Irish Culture

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In the closing pages of his memoir, *The Road to God Knows Where*, the late Sean Maher sounded an almost apocalyptic note. Recalling a Traveller life that had been characterised by traditional associations with the road, Maher lamented ‘that soon this simplicity would be no more, that a people, a language and a culture would die in this horrible, modern world’.¹ Maher’s remarks were made in 1972 and were set against a backdrop of increased industrialisation and urban development; evidently, they were also informed by the findings of the 1963 Report of the Commission on Itinerancy. Established by the Lemass administration, this report had sought to identify and solve ‘the problems of itinerancy’ in Ireland; its recommendations shaped official policy for decades to come. The report famously found that there was no alternative to housing ‘if a permanent solution to the problems of itinerancy, based on absorption and integration is to be achieved’.² It goes without saying that *The Road to God Knows Where* and the report of the commission were directed towards very different ends—the former text was supportive of a nomadic lifestyle, for instance, in ways that the latter was not. However, when the two texts are read alongside each other, one could argue that they both prompt questions which are central to discussions with and about the Irish Travellers.

Both texts are concerned with ascribing the Travellers a ‘place’ in modern Ireland, for example. Whereas Maher is anxious that changes in the base of the economy might result in the annihilation of an entire community (with Travellers apportioned no place to go), the reporters for the commission appear worried that, unless changes are brought about and Travellers are ‘settled’, this community will continue to remain marginal to the interests of Irish society (they will remain ‘with-out’, both literally and figuratively). Both texts also attempt to explore the often fraught relationship that has existed between the Traveller and the settled communities in Ireland. For Maher, this relationship had become

increasingly uneasy by the early 1970s, to the point where it threatened the very existence of the Travellers; for the commission, the relationship had always been problematic and could only ever be resolved through strategies of assimilation and economic redress. Clearly, Maher's *Road to God Knows Where* and the report of the commission were underwritten with opposing aspirations—they were concerned respectively with the survival and eclipse of what Maher was to term 'a people'. In the pages that follow, I want to suggest that Maher's use of this term bears some relevance for the philosophy of republicanism (keeping in mind the fact that republicanism is founded upon the concepts of *res publica* and 'the people' and that it privileges principles of democracy and citizenship), and I want to suggest this by drawing particular reference to questions of representation and culture.

In the inaugural issue of this journal, Liam O'Dowd distinguished between nationalist and republican thinking by remarking that 'the question for nationalists is who belongs to the nation?; for republicans, it is who are the people?'.³ This distinction is both succinct and suggestive and should be kept in mind in the course of this brief essay. At the same time, it will be useful to remember Daltún Ó Ceallaigh's rejoinder, also included in a previous number of this journal, concerning the compatibility and interplay between nationalist and republican positions.⁴ Ó Ceallaigh drew attention to the national *and* international dimensions of republican thought and warned against imagining too ready a division between nationalism and republicanism; he argued this through reference to what he perceived were the different evocations of nationalism, which, in turn, are expressive of fundamentalist, conservative, liberal, and/or socialist concerns. Ó Ceallaigh's point is derived from recent comparative studies that have discerned a historical ambiguity at the heart of the nationalist project. This ambiguity has been used to point towards a characteristic 'double-poise' in political nationalism—as it looks forwards and backwards, to modernity and the archaic, and as it threatens to always slip between emancipation and aggression (in the fight against imperialism, for instance, but also in maintaining strategies of exclusion and underdevelopment). It is worthwhile to explore these issues a little further. The Marxist critic Tom Nairn, for example, has argued that 'all nationalism is both healthy and morbid', since 'progress and regress are inscribed in it ... from the start. This is a structural fact about it. And it is a fact to which there are no exceptions'.⁵ Significantly, this sense of ambiguity has been used to distinguish between ethnic and civic forms of nationalism.

This distinction can be summarised briefly: ethnic nationalism has been

defined as a collective form of identification that is based upon the significance of an almost mystical *ethnie*—that is to say, a racial essence, which grounds identity in exclusive and inherited characteristics. Civic nationalism, by contrast, has been thought to stress the importance of fluidity and self-awareness in the make-up of any populace and to understand the basic idea of the nation in terms of an imagined community of citizens living in a prescribed geographical space (a classic literary example of this being advanced by Bloom in the ‘Cyclops’ section of *Ulysses*). Ethnic nationalism, it is argued, frustrates the potential for any form of development and inevitably leads to states of exclusion and paralysis, whilst civic nationalism is alive to change and allows for expansive conditions of citizenship and cultural inclusivity. (‘What is your nation if I may ask, says the citizen.—Ireland, says Bloom. I was born here. Ireland’.) Distinguishing between these formulations, students of nationalism have, nonetheless, also remarked that *all* nationalist projects share to varying degrees in ethnic and civic ambitions. For example, Nairn, once again, has warned against delineating too easily between good and bad forms of nationalism, arguing that a regressive/progressive ambiguity is inherent within all nationalist formations, since ‘forms of irrationality’ and prejudice ‘stain’ their founding principles.⁶

I want to suggest that such theories confound any clear-cut republican-nationalist division. Returning to O’Dowd’s thesis, for instance, one is reminded of the claim that nationalists traditionally ask ‘who belongs to the nation?’, whereas, republicans ponder ‘who are the people?’. Rehearsing this claim in the light of ethnic and civic formations, it could be argued that civic nationalism transgresses O’Dowd’s implicit either/or logic by raising questions of belonging *and* engaging with issues of citizenship—civic nationalism subjects the conditions for belonging to scrutiny, for instance, and does this through an interrogation of the concept of ‘the people’. How this concept is defined, whether it incorporates marginal as well as dominant forms of identity (‘a people’ ... ‘the people’), how it negotiates with ideas of difference, and whether it manages to represent marginal interests within an inclusive or participatory model of democracy—all of these issues are vital to the projects of republicanism *and* civic nationalism, and all of these questions are raised in cultural representations of the Travellers.

As much is suggested in the titles—and also in the underlying arguments—of two comparatively recent texts: Jim Mac Laughlin’s *Travellers and Ireland: Whose Country, Whose History?* and *Travellers: Citizens of Ireland*, which was compiled by the Parish of the Travelling

People.⁷ Mac Laughlin's text is interesting, here, since it attests to the extent to which the Travellers have been traditionally precluded from discussions of modern Ireland. Although Travellers are occasionally included in the pages of Irish literature (in works by Synge, Yeats, Lady Gregory, Pádraic Ó Conaire, Thomas MacDonagh, Liam O'Flaherty, and Bryan MacMahon, amongst others), most canonical historical texts, by nationalist and revisionist scholars alike, have excluded all mention of this vulnerable minority. Indeed, on the rare occasions when the Travellers have been included within the index of Irish history, it has typically been in the guise of non-agents or passive recipients of the historical process—either as extra-national vagrants, for instance, or as victims of evictions, plantations, and the great famine. The consensus, as Patricia McCarthy once suggested, has been that the fight for independence 'was not theirs and did not involve them', since they were too personally preoccupied by the struggle for survival to appreciate a conflict that was based on ideology or long-term ambition.⁸ Such readings have been used to authorise and foreclose discussions about the Travellers' non-involvement in the course of Irish history. (This is despite the fact that alternative references to the agency of Travellers do exist—a celebrated instance being provided by Nan Joyce, when she alluded to the involvement of some families in the smuggling of arms during the revolutionary period.⁹) Such readings have also been used to deny Travellers a place in Irish society and to see them, rather, as an irritant and an anachronism in the modern nation state.

A counterblast to all of this was provided in *Travellers: Citizens of Ireland*. Acknowledging the social and cultural importance of Travellers to Irish society, the contributors to this volume advanced the need for an acceptance of the rights and the responsibilities of Travellers as citizens of the republic. The double-stressed nature of this demand, for rights *and* responsibilities, evoked principles that are implicit in any understanding of civic politics and was founded upon a spirit of protection and public accountability—quite simply, it recognised that Travellers have duties to live up to as well as rights to claim. The contributors argued that such recognition was reliant on an engagement with and a reassessment of the Travellers by members of the settled populace. According to the contributors, settled society needs to rethink the ways in which it approaches the Travelling community—a previous edition of this book was appropriately entitled *Do You Know Us At All?* and focused precisely on this issue. For one thing, members of the settled republic need to recognise that Traveller identity is not determined by a history of dispossession—it is not characterised by a subculture of poverty, it is not descendant from

those who took to the roads during the Famine, and it is not desirous of some form of resettlement, as the report of the commission originally advanced. Instead, settled society needs to review its attitude to the complexities of nomadism, accommodation, and difference and to accept that Travellers are fellow-citizens, with a distinct cultural identity and a legitimate ethnic inheritance. It has been argued that such an acceptance would provide the necessary safeguards for the protection of Traveller rights—and that this, in turn, should provide a further incentive for Traveller groups to address questions of civic responsibility.

It goes without saying, however, that this is a controversial issue, which has been contested in political circles, and that the question of rights and responsibilities has been appropriated by various elements of the media and used to signify a variety of different purposes. For example, in the aftermath of a rather notorious incident on the banks of the Dodder in 2001 (when damage at an illegal halting site provoked public outrage and cost the local council a substantial sum), a number of broadsheets chose to discuss Traveller-settled relations under this banner. Many papers, including *The Sunday Business Post*, for instance, editorialised on a supposed ‘imbalance between the rights of the Travellers and those of the settled community’ and warned that this imbalance ‘has created a scenario that is ripe for exploitation’.¹⁰ It was suggested that this imbalance stemmed from an inability to weigh the rights of the settled community (to private property and recourse to the law) against the responsibilities of Travellers (to abide by the rule of law and respect ownership rights). By focusing on these responsibilities, the vital issue of Traveller rights was slighted and was seen rather as part of the perennial excuse of law-breakers and politically correct interest groups. What is more, by alluding to the supposed threat of invasion and exploitation and by drawing upon a language of excess and misrule, the papers discursively demonised an already poorly represented section of the populace—a section that has been historically represented according to type (Travellers are often represented as pariahs, blackguards, tricksters, or thieves, for example) and whose needs have traditionally remained undocumented in Irish politics and print culture.¹¹

As suggested, the stress on responsibility obscured important concerns relating to Traveller rights and needs, and these rights and needs must be recognised urgently. The sense of urgency in this matter can, perhaps, be best gauged through reference to a series of statistics which, although neither complete nor entirely up-to-date, are shocking to a contemporary mind. The lives which underlie these statistics must be brought to bear witness to a very real division in modern Ireland—a division which not

only revolves around ‘the haves and the have-nots’, but which is expressive of an insistent rupture ‘between rhetoric and reality’ in the Irish psyche. Colm Walsh has traced aspects of this division in an earlier issue of this journal and has remarked on how the core principles of republicanism (liberty, equality, fraternity) continue to hold a paradoxical significance for many in the modern-day republic.¹² Without wishing to reiterate all of Walsh’s argument, it is worth recalling his central premise: that although a belief in liberty, equality, and fraternity is vaunted and cherished by many members of the settled populace, it is nonetheless constantly flouted in relations with the Travelling community.

What statistics are available bear this out and make for appalling reading. In terms of health, for instance, it is known that Travellers have specific requirements that are in need of pressing consideration: infant mortality rates among Travellers remain substantially higher (three times) than the national average, and Traveller men and women continue to have a much lower life expectancy than other members of the Irish populace—it is reckoned that only 5% of Travellers live to the age of 50 and 1% to 65. In the area of education, literacy levels remain disproportionately lower among Traveller adults and children, and the numbers of children who make their way through the educational system is fractional. (It is thought that six thousand Traveller children attended primary school in 1999; the same year, one thousand were in their first year at secondary school, and only a handful were in their final year.) Moreover, in terms of accommodation, many Traveller families live in dangerous, unhealthy, or substandard conditions, and a sizeable proportion live without access to basic services such as water, electricity, toilets, and refuse collection; according to Pavee Point, a significant number of families still live on the roadside, without access to any of these facilities. All of this flies in the face of the recommendations of the 1995 Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community. The task force (a broad-based inter-party group and a liberal-minded successor to the 1963 Commission on Itinerancy) recommended that over 3,000 units of accommodation should be provided for Travellers by the year 2000; only 127 of these units were ready by that time. Since then—and notwithstanding the obligations that have been placed on local authorities under the 1998 Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act—the number of units remains derisory, and many Traveller families continue to live without provision on illegal or unofficial halting sites. The condition of these families has grown all the more uncertain with the recent passage of the controversial Trespass Bill.¹³

Many organisations, including the Irish Traveller Movement and Pavee Point, have argued that this bill is assimilationist in strategy and discriminates against Travellers by criminalising the practice of nomadism. The basis of their argument rests on the woefully inadequate number of appropriate and serviced halting sites that are available for Traveller families. If there are so few sites available, it is asked, then where can Travellers go without breaking the laws of trespass? Are Travellers required to accept some form of housing?, and, if they do, can they still claim access to a discrete sense of identity? Is Traveller identity dependent upon patterns of mobility?, and, if so, should one describe those who move into housing (on either a temporary or a long-term basis) as having been successfully assimilated or settled? That, to recall the closing lines of *The Road to God Knows Where*, was Sean Maher's abiding fear—that, apart from everything else, a people would cease to exist as a result of some kind of settlement. That was also the guiding principle behind the report of the 1963 commission—that there was no alternative to housing 'if a permanent solution to the problems of itinerancy ... [was] to be achieved'. Such claims continue to be heard in popular and political thought: for instance, they are often used to militate against any claims that might be made on behalf of the legitimacy of Traveller culture; they are also used to denigrate Traveller identity and to describe the Traveller life in terms of custom and class rather than ethnicity. (Custom being understood as the simplification and mummification of culture, or as something dead rather than alive, according to Frantz Fanon.¹⁴) According to such arguments, nomadism is an aberration in modern Ireland and should be discontinued since it is without any genuine cultural value or lasting significance. Indeed, and as the Travellers practise it, it is often considered a deterioration of the truly nomadic practices that are carried out by other, more legitimate groups, like the Roma.

One could retort, however, that such arguments misconstrue the complex and vibrant significance of nomadism to Traveller life. It has been claimed by Traveller activists, for instance, that nomadism says 'everything about Travellers', and that it is 'vital to our survival' as a distinct people.¹⁵ It is significant that the idea of nomadism that is evoked in such discussions is fluid and vital: it incorporates Travellers who are housed, as well as Travellers who live by the road, and it signifies a way of thinking about the world, as much as a way of living through it. Indeed, many Travellers are at pains to point out that nomadism is not restricted to those who live in caravans or on halting sites—it is not dependent upon acts of physical movement, they argue, but, rather, it is

suggestive of a certain mindset and an approach to life. This is not to romanticise the concept of nomadism, but to suggest that nomadism is an intrinsic part of Traveller identity and the Traveller psyche. Jean-Pierre Liégeois, the acclaimed Roma scholar, has diagnosed the situation as follows: ‘whereas a sedentary person remains sedentary, even when travelling, the Traveller is a nomad, even when he (or she) does not travel. Immobilised, he (or she) remains a Traveller’.¹⁶

Such thinking deconstructs a division that is often supposed to exist between housed and camping Travellers—this division holds sway in popular discourse and has been regularly depicted in fiction and in film. (In Mary Ryan’s *Into the West*, for instance, it is only after Papa Riley leaves the house into which he has tried to settle that he rediscovers his identity as a true Traveller.) By breaking down these divisions, one is able to comment on the various ambiguities and contradictions with which issues of accommodation have been historically riddled. Moreover, by breaking down absolute distinctions between mobility and housing (whereby one is designated *either* settled *or* nomadic), one is able to touch on a wealth of interrelated questions and explore some of the greyer areas in intra-Traveller behaviour—such as the lived experience of shared housing and the fact that many housed families still take to the road at certain times of the year. Breaking down this distinction also allows one to note a rather paradoxical phenomenon. According to recent work by Jane Helleiner, housed or so-called settled Travellers are often more mobile than those who live by the road, since the latter group are often worried about losing access to facilities and forfeiting their right to a site if they choose to travel.¹⁷

Nomadism, then, should be considered a complex practice that incorporates sedentary and migrant forms of behaviour—it is a practice that is inscribed with a profound material and emotional significance, and it provides for a close arrangement of social, economic, cultural, psychological, and familial activities. Indeed, many of the defining features of Traveller society are determined by some kind of commitment to a nomadic lifestyle. The continued commitment to the idea of the extended family, for instance, relies in part on the idea of travel. As Martin McDonagh has explained it, ‘keeping up with news, building contacts, strengthening relationships—these are all strong reasons for travelling: the pull factors for nomadism’.¹⁸ In addition, there are the push factors that also prompt travel and that incorporate a range of external and internal pressures—if Travellers are sometimes moved on by local authorities, for example, they also take to the road to avoid conflict with other families or groups. According to McDonagh, this is of

‘major importance’ for the well being of Traveller society since it can prevent inter-family disputes from escalating into something far more serious. Economic factors, of course, also contribute to the store of pull factors. For instance, traditional work-practices (such as horse-dealing, metalwork, trading, hawking, and harvesting) largely depended upon patterns of seasonal movement and allowed the Travellers to remain a typically self-employed people. Although many of these practices have died out, as a result of the mechanisation of the land and the introduction of plastic, the Traveller economy still stresses the value of self-reliance and incorporates a choice of occupations that call for some measure of mobility (including scrap, recycling, tarmacking, dealing, and hawking). All of which is to say that nomadism—for all its ambiguities and ironies—remains vital to the structural identity of Traveller society.

Nomadism is a complex practice, which has ambiguous links with many of the predominant ways of living and thinking in the republic. Its conflation of sedentary and migratory habits notably transgresses what was once a founding principle of life in the Irish state: the primacy of a territorialised identity and the importance of rootedness and kinship with the land. Moreover, nomadism is a vibrant concept, which has changed much of its material existence in accordance with the demands of historical circumstance. It continues to be a living principle and is of vital significance to the cultural identity, rather than the customary behaviour, of Traveller society. Dealings with the Travelling community need to engage with the implications and the complexities of nomadism and to accept it as the legitimate basis for another form of identity. Much of the legal groundwork for such an acceptance has already been put in place in the recommendations of the 1995 *Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community*; these recommendations need to be enshrined and enforced, in order to protect the health, the promise, and the identity of a very small native community. (It is estimated that there are approximately twenty-five thousand Travellers in Ireland.) Without romanticising the issue, it could be argued that such an acceptance would help society at large to move beyond the anomalous impasse that was recently noted by Seán Ó Riain, whereby settled society was seen to object to the provision of facilities for Travellers, whilst also complaining about conditions at halting sites.¹⁹ It might help people to realise that issues of rights and responsibilities are intimately linked, and it might also help to advance calls for a greater recognition of Travellers as citizens of modern Ireland. The suitable provision of accommodation, health-care, and educational facilities, for example, and the setting up of more appropriate schemes of training and employment might help to

provide more apposite modes of accountability and assist in the promotion of a greater sense of civic belonging.

For too long, Travellers have been represented as the ghosts of an earlier form of existence—this is an idea which underpins Maher’s reflections, and it is an idea which was iterated by John Millington Synge, almost a hundred years ago, when he lamented that the Irish Travellers were representative of a way of life that ‘we have all missed who have been born in modern Europe’.²⁰ This idea needs to be confronted. Instead of describing the Travellers as the leftovers of an earlier age—and dismissing them, accordingly, as the remnants of some kind of ‘remaindered community’—artists, commentators, and critics need to engage with the significance of the contemporary presence of the Travelling community.²¹ They must engage with the various needs, problems, and promises that have been prompted by the history of Traveller-settled relations. (Peter Brady’s richly textured novel *Paveewhack* provides a daring example of what might be attempted.) They also need to examine what implications, if any, the presence of the Travellers has for broader discussions of Irish culture. Do claims for the legitimacy of Traveller culture, based on the importance of nomadism, for instance, help to break open any homogenous conception of Irish identity and Irish culture? Do they help to promote the realisation that the concept of culture is always contested, dissonant, and vibrant?; do they represent marginal interests in an inclusive fashion?; do they provide a viable place for Travellers in the modern state?; and do they point towards a model of identity which is defined civically not ethnically? Ultimately, perhaps, one might ask whether these claims provide the necessary space for more critical representations of and by Travellers in contemporary Ireland?

Notes

¹ Sean Maher, *The Road to God Knows Where: A Memoir of a Travelling Boyhood* (2nd ed.) (Dublin: Veritas 1998), p. 164. The Talbot Press originally published Maher’s memoirs in 1972.

² *Report of the Commission on Itinerancy* (Dublin: Stationery Office 1963), p. 62.

³ Liam O’Dowd, ‘The Changing World Order and the Republican Ideal in Ireland’, *The Republic*, no. 1 (June 2000), p. 29.

⁴ Daltún Ó Ceallaigh, ‘Republicanism and Nationalism: An Imagined Conflict’, *The Republic*, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2001), pp. 138–143.

⁵ Tom Nairn, ‘The Modern Janus’, *New Left Review* 94 (November–December 1975), p. 17. For a more recent discussion, see Tom Nairn, *Faces of Nationalism: Janus Revisited* (London: Verso 1997).

⁶ Nairn, ‘The Modern Janus’, op. cit., pp. 8 & 18.

⁷ Jim Mac Laughlin, *Travellers and Ireland: Whose Country, Whose History?* (Cork:

Cork University Press 1995); Erica Sheehan (ed.), *Travellers: Citizens of Ireland* (compiled by Frank Murphy and Cathleen McDonagh) (Dublin: Parish of the Travelling People 2000).

⁸ Patricia McCarthy, 'Life with the Travelling People', in Victor Bewley (ed.), *Travelling People* (Dublin: Veritas 1974), p. 87.

⁹ See Nan Joyce, *Traveller: An Autobiography*, (Anna Farmar, ed.) (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan 1985), pp. 26–27.

¹⁰ 'Call a halt to Traveller invasions', *Sunday Business Post*, (17 March 2002).

¹¹ Aoife Bhreatnach, 'Travellers and the Print Media: Words and Irish Identity', *Irish Studies Review* 6: 3 (December 1998), p. 285.

¹² Colm Walsh, 'Between Rhetoric and Reality: Travellers and the Unfinished Republic', *The Republic*, no. 1 (June 2000), pp. 86–88.

¹³ Many thanks to the officers at Pavee Point for providing me with these statistics.

¹⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (trans. Constance Farrington) (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1967), p. 180.

¹⁵ Michael McDonagh and Winnie McDonagh, 'Nomadism', in Sheehan, op. cit., pp. 33–34.

¹⁶ Jean-Pierre Liégeois, *Gypsies and Travellers*, cited in Sheehan, op. cit., p. 209.

¹⁷ Jane Helleiner, *Irish Travellers: Racism and the Politics of Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2000), pp. 109–110.

¹⁸ Michael McDonagh, 'Nomadism in Irish Travellers' Identity', in May McCann, Séamas Ó Síocháin and Joseph Ruane (eds.), *Irish Travellers: Culture and Ethnicity* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies 1994), p. 97.

¹⁹ Seán Ó Riain, *Solidarity with Travellers* (Dublin: Roadside Books 2000), p. 60.

²⁰ 'People and Places', in J. M. Synge, *Collected Works, Volume II: Prose* (Alan Price, ed.) (London: Oxford University Press 1966), p. 199.

²¹ I borrow the phrase 'remaindered community' from Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1997), p. 163.

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