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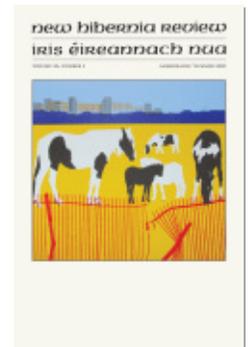
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Jeffrey A. Tolbert



Waiting for a Place: At Gravedigger's Pub

You can love a place and still feel overwhelmed by its strangeness, by its unlikeness to your own place. More than a decade ago I was an undergraduate studying abroad in Ireland, with little understanding of where I found myself and no appreciation for what a significant presence it would become in my own life. But I spent the next decade trying to return. Ireland became somewhat like a distant family member, a strange aunt whom I enjoy visiting but never quite understand.

In “Genius Fabulae: The Irish Sense of Place,” Patrick Sheeran wrote, “Death and destruction are linked to memory and place in Ireland by a deathless chain of names.” For Sheeran, place implies death, an association made explicit by centuries of Irish tradition. Unnecessarily grim, perhaps, but there is truth in this claim. I lived in Dublin for a few months while doing research for my dissertation, and certainly, death is a presence in the city, with its bus tours celebrating sites of the Easter Rising, its bullet-ridden statues, and the massive Glasnevin Cemetery. But Sheeran’s view—coming from the far side of the Celtic Tiger—obscures decades of human living that, by definition, create places in ways very different from the “funerary” mode he identified. A place becomes a place through experience, and experience takes time to accumulate.

I’m a folklorist by training, and like cultural anthropologists, our major research tool is ethnographic fieldwork. We talk to people. My dissertation deals in part with the connections between supernatural belief and sense of place in contemporary Ireland. In 2012, I went back to Ireland to learn about places with supernatural stories connected to them, and to learn about how people interact with these places in daily life. I wanted to explore how such sites in the real world—roads and fairy forts and factories—might be affected by the beliefs people held about them, and how those places in turn affect people in the present.

I rented a room in the home of a widowed retiree on Dublin’s north side, and my time in the city revealed an irony of my quest to understand Irish places: namely, that I didn’t understand them at all.

My hostess was a kind woman who refused to let me do my own laundry. “You’ve lovely T-shirts,” she told me once. We watched the Voice of Ireland

together, and sometimes we visited a large pub up the road where they served chicken fingers—which they called *goujons*—while cover bands played retro American pop songs. My hostess had a lovely home, but it was a row house, with its main bathroom on the bottom floor. At night I had to tiptoe down the stairs and across the house to use the facilities, painfully aware of every creaking step.

In Dublin, my main scholarly task was to make the trek to UCD to avail myself of the National Folklore Collection housed there. Unfortunately, there was a miscommunication with my landlady before I arrived: she had thought I meant Dublin City University, which was minutes away, as opposed to UCD, which was nearly an hour by bus. Many afternoons I'd leave the house and walk the block or so to the bus stop. I learned the hard way that buses in Dublin don't stop unless you hail them. Often I'd get off the bus on O'Connell Street or Dame Street, then walk down Grafton Street, past the statue of dear Molly Malone, and swing left around the edge of the college to walk to my next bus stop. I had a routine of sorts. I figured out the buses. But as a place, Dublin had yet to come into full existence for me.

Scholars tend to make a differentiation between space and place: space is a primarily physical thing, but place is created through experience and through assigning social values to physical space. In Dublin, my personal network of landmarks—the General Post Office and the Spire; Trinity College; the Starbucks on Dame Street where I got coffee on my way to UCD or before Irish lessons at Gael Linn; Molly Malone—was largely utilitarian. I was beginning to conceive of the city as merely a system of routes and destinations, the functions of which were largely practical and impersonal. It remained primarily “space”—though it slowly became known space. The problem, really, was my own. I'm a suburbanite, unused to life in even modest-sized cities, and it was difficult to adapt. I always felt better when I left the city to visit friends in Kerry or Tipperary.

My slice of North Dublin became a real place for me—a living one—gradually, over a space of months and years, a process which continues even now. Guinness played a role. The little place that I found, the one that helped the city become a place for me, was a pub. My field journal reveals some of this process quite explicitly; the rest has been a function of time and distance.

I discovered John Kavanagh's in Glasnevin when I turned to that most powerful of research tools, Google—and how strange and how telling it is that Kavanagh's pub was only a few blocks from where I was staying, but it took the internet for me to find it. I was looking for haunted places in Dublin, and Kavanagh's was listed on a website dedicated to the topic. I tracked down an e-mail address for the pub, sent a quick message explaining my research, and arranged to go by for an interview.

Picture a gangly American graduate student, a garish bright blue gear bag on his shoulder and a notebook in his hand, walking into a local Irish pub, an

old-time pub, to ask people about ghosts. Even I thought it was ridiculous, or I do in retrospect.

But I did my best to maintain the guise of an academic, at least for a while. I passed out business cards and made contacts. For various reasons, though, in Kavanagh's, ethnography simply didn't come together. Instead, I became another patron in the pub, albeit an awkward, hopelessly American patron. Ethnography depends on forming positive relationships, of course, and a more experienced scholar could have made a better go at conducting research in Kavanagh's; but for me, the pub became a place in a city where I felt largely displaced. Perhaps for this reason, scholarly concerns fell into the background. For all the times I went there, I managed to obtain exactly two interviews.

Kavanagh's pub is also called Gravedigger's. The pub stands directly beside the old gates of Glasnevin Cemetery, and it is as much a local landmark as the cemetery itself. Despite the name, and despite the location, there is nothing of death in the place, whatever Sheeran may have said. Gravedigger's has nothing of the grave about it. As a business, perhaps a little—but not in the way Sheeran had in mind.

When I visited, the owner of the pub was Eugene Kavanagh, a hale, compact man of seventy-three years. The pub had been in his family for more than one-hundred-and-eighty years.

"Eighteen thirty-three, it was established," Eugene tells me in the one and only recorded interview I conducted at the pub. "But they lived in here. It was their residence in the 1800s, but the cemetery opened in 1832. And my ancestors converted the bottom half of the house into a pub in 1833. And I'm the sixth generation now. . . . Five of Kavanagh, and one of O'Neil. The first originator was an O'Neil, and a Kavanagh married an O'Neil daughter. And since then the only time it was bought is when I bought it. It was passed on all the time."

The older side of the pub, the original side, was the part that opened in 1833. Mr. Kavanagh added the lounge side, which is more spacious and arranged like a contemporary restaurant with booths and tables, in 1980. He took great care to make sure that the new side matched the old. "I carried on the same facade, all done in hand—so, people think it's the same building since that time," Eugene said.

It does look all of a piece. You walk in through the single main door and turn either right to the lounge or left to the pub. The pub side wears its age well: dark wood and dim lights. There is no music, and there are no television screens; Mr. Kavanagh valued conversation. The guest books burst with the names of tourists, celebrities, and at least one American academic. When you visit you must sign—you have no choice, if the bartenders notice you're new, as they almost surely will—and your name stands with the rest, a part of the pub, a part of the place.

The lounge side is larger, more spacious, with a kitchen and more seating. Both sides, of course, have a bar; behind the counter, doors on either end connect the pub with the lounge, and staff people move frequently between them. Ciaran, Eugene's son and my friend, is the head chef, and here is one area in which Kavanagh's, on the surface a "traditional" pub, reveals how very alive it is, how little concerned with death or the "funerary" attitude that Sheeran laments. Ciaran's domain is the lounge side, the new side. He speaks Italian, fluently and frequently, and his cooking contrasts sharply with the pub's veneer of age and tradition. He serves an extensive and daily-changing menu of tapas. (Ciaran was formerly a chef for Club Med.)

I got to know people here. I made friends with one regular who seemed to me, by virtue of his rock-and-roll appearance, his leather jacket, and his thick brogue, to be the essence of Irish punk, except that he was relentlessly friendly. He knew more about Dublin history, I think, than any other person I met in the city. He gave me picture books about Vikings and Celtic legends.

In the recording of my interview with Eugene, which was held in the lounge, Ciaran interrupts to offer me a prawn, which I of course gratefully accepted (and it was an exceptionally good prawn).

It seems clear that by finding a place—the pub—within the wet, gray space of Dublin, I gained a foothold on this city of revolutions, literature, and stout. Previously it had been only a place for rain and republican history, for Irish lessons and collections of old stories from other places; now, it was a place where I had friends. I had other friends outside of the pub, of course, but there was no specific place we shared, just the odd meeting for pints or coffee. Gravedigger's was a place I could go and expect to see someone I knew. Somewhere, I daresay, where not everybody, but enough people, knew my name.

In the midst of making friends I tried to remember my scholarly duty, and began to formulate an idea for an article. I wanted to play with the idea of nostalgia, which seemed relevant to a place like Gravedigger's with its literal, spatially split personality, with its old-fashioned snug (where the women used to drink, separate from the men) on one side and tapas on the other.

I told Alfreda, then Ciaran's fiancée, now his wife, about the idea, and even sent her some articles on the topic. I wanted to explore what folklorist Ray Cashman has called "critical nostalgia," the process by which people choose elements from the past worth carrying into the future. At Gravedigger's, critical nostalgia is performed through the seamless blending of old and new, with tradition and variation existing literally side by side. The beauty of this strategy is that it creates a sort of instant sense of place. Even newcomers are made suddenly aware of the presence of history alongside the very modern, the very present.

Or that was my graduate-student idea: I was going to write a scholarly, theorized article about a place where past and present, old and new, exist in carefully

orchestrated harmony, neither intruding upon nor interfering with the other. A marketing strategy, yes, but also a working, living place, a family place. The pub is “the heart and soul of society,” said Eugene. Sadly Eugene passed away in 2015, but his wife Kathleen, sons Ciaran, Niall, and Anthony, daughter Anne, and daughter-in-law Alfreda are all still involved in running the place.

A living place, then, beside the cemetery, and moving, always moving. Guinness and hardwood floors, tapas and Tony Bourdain. (Maddeningly, the travel show host, a hero of mine, brought his film crew to the pub some six weeks after I left Ireland. I was on to something, surely.)

Ciaran gave me a tour of the pub, and showed me the backyard where his wedding to Alfreda would take place. We bought each other rounds, and on at least one occasion I—as one does with one’s publican—poured my deepest personal problems into Ciaran and Alfreda’s sympathetic ears. Fieldwork drifted further out of focus. The rumor of the pub’s haunting—confirmed by Ciaran and Alfreda—slid into the background.

It remained there until I learned, dramatically, that the Gravedigger’s Ghost Tour stops at the pub each night of its season, the bus unloading its cargo of tourists to gulp down horror-themed cocktails, prepared by Ciaran, with their costumed tour guides before piling back onto the bus again and swooping off to learn more about Dublin’s local haunts. I stood outside the pub on the little green before the cemetery gates one night, drinking and chatting with the tour guides. It was the closest I got to any ghosts in all my time at Kavanagh’s.

The Ghost Tour, the gates of Glasnevin Cemetery: death was present, surely—in a superficial way—but if anything it only added to the experience of the place in the living present. It’s called “Gravedigger’s,” after all. If the name isn’t a happy mockery of mortality, nothing is. Gravedigger’s demonstrates none of the morbid backward gaze that Sheeran decried. Likewise, if nostalgia is present here—in the sense of a concern with the past—it is critical nostalgia, very much concerned with the business of living well in the present. Niall, the brilliant bartender, is a decorated Special Olympics swimmer. After I left Ireland, Ciaran and Alfreda were married in a Joycean-themed wedding. When I spoke with him last, Eugene had run in one hundred-and-seventy marathons—he was rightly proud of his sporting history—and undoubtedly added to the tally after I left Ireland. Cultural theory, in a place like Gravedigger’s, slides off like rain. *Ah sure, that sounds good. Have another pint.*

So my plans to turn Gravedigger’s into a serious, scholarly article came to naught, and I’m happy for that. It’s a place I love, and it doesn’t require any analysis to remain a significant part of my Dublin landscape. But thinking about the pub now, at a remove, the idea of nostalgia surfaces again. Cashman traces the history of the term and shows how it originally applied not to a remembered past, but to a place—specifically, to a longed-for place. In at least some cases,

then, we can think of nostalgia as sense of place at a distance, as a conscious awareness of the physical space that lies between us and where we wish to be. For me, Gravedigger's does not represent a lost past to which I can never return; it is still very much there, and I could visit it tomorrow if not for the obligations of daily life.

If there is a kind of "uncritical" nostalgia attached to Gravedigger's, it is not an inherent feature of the pub or the attitudes of its owners and patrons. It is my own. The pub is an important place in my personal landscape, and I miss it. As a place at a remove, Gravedigger's is still an object of nostalgia for me. But this feeling is not, again, a longing for an irredeemably lost past. The pub is there. It remains a place even though I am not there to experience it. The only thing keeping me from it is the awkward placement of the Atlantic Ocean.

My time in Dublin was not pure joy; but the sense that I have a small localized attachment there, within the larger place, with friends, drastically changes my feelings toward the city. It would seem that the process of making a place continues even when the place itself is out of sight—perhaps especially then.

Sheeran lamented what he saw as a superficial concern with place in Ireland, a conceptual obsession that does not extend to actual physical sites (which, he notes, are often "allowed to go to wrack and ruin.") The larger Dublin presents a gray, weathered facade which, taken at face value, seems to prove Sheeran's point. But the lived-in quality of the place, the daily comings and goings, the vitality of living women and men that becomes obvious only through experience; all of these stand in stark contrast to the surface-level morbidity that might put off a newcomer to Dublin's wet and grimy landscape. Within the city are places of light and warmth, and even the "death and destruction" linked to Ireland's places can be seen, sometimes, to be gentle reminders of the importance of life.

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