

Deirdre O'Mahony *Abandoned Clare- 'Bad' Nostalgia or Re-membling?*

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The opening of the *Abandoned Clare* exhibition in the *X-PO* in Kilnaboy, North Clare is appropriate on many levels. The former post office closed in 2003 and like some of the buildings documented in *Abandoned Clare*, it has since changed function and purpose. Reopened as a durational public art project in 2007 it performs as a socio-cultural prism, reflecting the interests of incomers and longstanding residents and aspects of the local and the global, much as the post office used to do when it served the diverse communities of the area.ⁱ The old post office had become an abject and forlorn reminder of rural conviviality. Now reframed as an artwork it functions as an active reflexive space providing a location for the collective public consideration of place-based knowledge.

Farming is the primary economic mainstay in the region. The imminent reconfiguration of EU agricultural subsidies in 2013 means that the maintenance of 'farming landscape', or sustainable heritage farming will become an option for farmers in North Clare in coming years. This policy reconfiguration represents a paradigmatic shift from conceptualising rural environments as sites for raw food and energy production to recognising the 'design value' of rural areas as arenas for cultural production. In North Clare, although family farming is still the main means of generating income at present, it is now increasingly combined with off-farm work.ⁱⁱ The generation of farmers for whom 'traditional' smallholding was a way of life will soon be retiring. Making visible the scale and nature of rural farm closures *Abandoned Clare* draws attention to the mute traces of specific, local farming knowledge that are vanishing, along with their potential value to future generations.

Agri-culture has inspired the local social, cultural and economic logic in County Clare. In pre- 'Celtic Tiger' times when property was cheap, people from all over the world with interests in ecological self-sufficiency and alternative ways of living settled in the region. The formation of a co-operative school in Roxton near Corofin was evidence of social movements in the locality in the early 1980s. Called 'the Shed' the school was later expanded to include a shop, a restaurant, a playgroup, a window manufacturing company and a Liscannor stone workshop. In time, children grew up, people moved and in 2009 the only part of the complex in use was the window company and the stone workshop, now used as a car repair shop. The abandoned school building may once more find a new purpose as it expands to include car dismantlers. The story is not over, simply taking a new turn.

The repair shops for electrical equipment, bicycles, tractors, and the businesses that supported these trades have closed. The craft skills used by men like Paddy Cahir from Rinnamona, who built a fine stone cowshed with his brother Sean are being lost. Paddy made carts, wired houses, plastered walls, cut stone and built walls.ⁱⁱⁱ His father John Cahir was a wheelwright and on artist Barrie Cooke's *Map of Kilnaboy* 1954 – 1984, he is named along with others in the area. Now all the businesses in Kilnaboy are gone; the tailor, the blacksmith, the three shops, the

last of which, Mary Shop's, closed in the 1990s. Cooke's Kilnaboy home where he lived when he first arrived in Ireland, stands empty and derelict.

The march of globalisation is evident in the multi-national supermarkets opening in out-of-town shopping centres in medium size towns like Ennis and Kilrush. Grocery shops, creameries, pubs, butchers and post offices are gradually closing in places like Mullagh and Ballyea. Cinemas are dark in Scarriff and Kilrush, and in Ennis traders are finding it hard to compete with Internet shopping. Ennistymon's famous shop and pub fronts are full of estate agent signs and an iconic landmark like Blake's corner in Ennistymon is presently a contested planning issue as it is scheduled for demolition or relocation to make room for a new access route to Lahinch.

The intention with *Abandoned Clare* is not to lament a lost utopian past but to stimulate, provoke and provide evidence of other ways of doing things. When reviewing the relationship between radicalism and nostalgia Lucy Lippard reminds us that 'utopia, too is a necessary and authentic goal, the object of a longing that may never be fulfilled but functions positively and authentically for just that reason.'^{iv} By making visible the ruins of abandonment; the bike repair shop, the mushroom farm, the alternative school, the images remind the viewer of the frugal, mindful habits, the utopian dreams that once played out in rural Clare.

Given the near-collapse of the unregulated free-market economy, is there now a case for re-visiting a revived idea of rural collectivism in the face of anxiety over food security and the unsustainability of an agricultural system entirely dependant on oil? Lippard makes a case for 'emotional retrospection', balanced by local knowledge and critical curiosity. This quality is best understood in the words of cultural theorist Homi Bhabha quoted by Lippard in her book *The Lure of the Local*. 'Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection. It is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present'.^v

When *Abandoned Clare* was first proposed in 2009 rural Clare looked very different. The frenzied building developments, housing schemes and hotels, seemed to signify an obsession with shedding any reminder of the economic stagnation in the past. Now that the boom is over, the 'Abandoned' project, with its focus on the signs of rural abandonment could be read as a melancholic coda to the all-pervading litany of economic disaster. Yet behind the images lie stories, and within the stories are the germs of ideas and possibilities for the future, a kind of common sense that might serve as a generative catalyst for ideas on a sustainable future for rural communities.

Deirdre O'Mahony November 1st 2011

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ⁱ X-PO was established as an interstitial space enabling new connections and collaborative exchange between the various knowledge-making communities in the locality of Kilnaboy, Co Clare. For more information see <http://www.x-po.ie>

ⁱⁱ Kathy Walsh, *The Voice on the Ground. A Survey of the Needs of Burren Farm Families*. The Heritage Council/BurrenBeo Trust Ltd., accessed Sept. 2009

ⁱⁱⁱ Paddy Cahir also had much of the oral knowledge of place, *dinnseanchas*, of the family relationships, place names and the stories of North Clare. Much of this knowledge has formed the basis of two group's research at X-PO; the X-PO Mapping Group Research and the Rinnamona Research Group. For more information see <http://www.x-po.ie> and see Anne Byrne and O'Mahony, Deirdre, "Family and Community: (Re)Telling Our Own Story", *Family Relations Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies*. SAGE, Dec 2011.

^{iv} Lucy R. Lippard, "Taken Aback, or the Nostalgia Trap", *On the Beaten Track. Tourism, Art and Place*. (The New Press: New York. 1999) 164.

^v Homi Bhabha, "What Does the Black Man Want" *New Formations*, Spring 1987, qtd., Lucy R. Lippard, "Introduction: All Over the Place," *The Lure of the Local - Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The new Press 1997) 61.