



## THE DUBLIN SENSE OF PLACE: LANDSCAPE VS. LITERATURE

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Ted Relph points out that "we live, act and orient ourselves in a world that is richly and profoundly differentiated into places, yet at the same time we seem to have a meagre understanding of the constitution of places and the ways in which we experience them."<sup>1</sup> To achieve a deeper understanding of place, a variety of elements must be considered. Symbols, such as the Eiffel Tower or the Taj Mahal, are among the first clues to the identity of a particular place; but comprehension of place is not based solely upon such highly recognizable imagery. Arrangement of buildings and the spaces in between creates contextual awareness of place. Other, often less obvious components of place knowledge include an historical/time element; cultural representations of the human experience, such as art and literature; and human behavior within a landscape. Combining some or all of these aspects can enhance perception of place, or even result in an overall sense of place, which is more or less a consensus of perceptions.

Why should geographers bother to identify a sense of place? Two of the most important areas for which an under-

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standing of place is valuable are historic preservation and urban planning. For example, city planners should be able to interpret what impact a change—in the form of destruction, preservation, or modification of buildings or neighborhoods—will have on the sense of place for an area.

This paper explores the use of literature as an extension of current landscape interpretation methods to achieve a more complete concept of a sense of place in Dublin, Ireland. Contemporary human interaction within the environment is omitted, as that topic would necessitate a paper of its own. Dublin was chosen for a case study because of its history of occupation and the contrast in its class distinctions, both of which have helped to create an interesting, multi-faceted city.

### **Literature and Landscape Interpretation**

Early landscape studies include various interpretations of the English landscape, such as those by Lowenthal and Prince<sup>2</sup> and later by Hoskins.<sup>3</sup> These studies classify the landscape, discuss the English perception of landscape, and interpret landscape development. To give meaning to place, several geographers have evaluated ordinary landscapes throughout the world by concentrating on various elements, such as architectural forms,<sup>4</sup> aesthetics,<sup>5</sup> technological advancements,<sup>6</sup> and landscape tastes.<sup>7</sup> In particular there has been a focus on the cultural and symbolic significance of these landscape elements.<sup>8</sup>

All of these various interpretations lead to a better comprehension of the visual landscape. Although landscape interpretation can provide substantial insight, it stops short of a more complete understanding of place. It is an outsider's approach; the researcher interprets place with his or her own cultural biases and tastes. Biases of this type are a problem in any study, but they can be partially alleviated in the study of place by using literature, when available, to obtain an insider's viewpoint.

Salter and Lloyd argue for the use of literature in geographic research:

The strength of landscape in literature lies in its subtle human qualities, its potential for revealing the hidden dimensions of human meaning . . . the sensitivity of creative authors to allow them to capture the essence of vague dimensions of landscape experience, such as the perception or absence of the ambiguity of shared perceptions.<sup>9</sup>

The study of sense of place is well suited to the use of literature, since identification with place is crucial to many novels. According to Durrell, "what makes 'big' books is surely as much to do with their site as their characters and incidents."<sup>10</sup> Some geographers have found a strong sense of place in works by authors such as D. H. Lawrence,<sup>11</sup> Thomas Hardy,<sup>12</sup> and William Faulkner,<sup>13</sup> as well as Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers.<sup>14</sup>

### Case Study: Dublin

Certain locations suggest a combination of landscape interpretation and literary imagery to create a greater consensus on sense of place. Dublin is such a place because its history of English occupation has been a major cause of the ongoing conflict between historic preservationists and other Irish citizens. Understanding Dublin involves the comprehension of a paradox of the city—its "terrible beauty." Some see the city as dirty, forsaken, and crumbling. Others see Dublin as having a significant architectural heritage which is worth saving,<sup>15</sup> while yet others see the "Irishness" of Dublin in its people, rather than in its built environment. Brendan Lehane portrays this human quality of Dublin:

Like many women of the Irish countryside, Dublin is a great beauty wrapped in a tattered shawl . . . to the despair of aesthetic purists, Dublin refuses to turn herself into a museum. She is more heart than head . . . certain sights and smells seem to be eternal, incontrovertible essentials to the city's character: the reek of stale beer emanating from pubs . . . the tetchy moodiness of winds that rise suddenly from torpor and blow papers and

bags of discarded cigarette packets across open spaces . . . a pervasive untidiness and a universal leavening of dirt.<sup>16</sup>

During the late nineteenth century, one-third of Dublin's families lived in one-room apartments; the city's death rate compared with that of Calcutta; and its sewage was still being pumped into the harbor.<sup>17</sup> Although conditions have improved, they are, unfortunately, still below modern European or American standards.

A persistent image of Dublin over the past 150 years is that of a grimy, economically unstable, deteriorating city. If this is accepted as a normative perception of Dublin, why do so many people, residents as well as visitors, have such affection for the city? One reason has to do with the dominant architecture of Dublin: the Georgian architecture which was brought over in the 1700's by the British when they designed and constructed the city. Most of the city was erected during the Georgian period, and very little of this construction has since been torn down. Therefore, it is the dominant form of architecture within the city. Another reason has to do with human reaction to the environment, a form of reaction which can be illustrated by examination of selected passages of Irish literature.

### **The Rôle of Architecture in the Dublin Sense of Place**

Some geographic research on the Georgian architecture of Dublin provides interesting insights into the visual elements of the city.<sup>18</sup> Georgian Dublin was designed and built between 1714 and 1830, a period of English Protestant settlement. The elegant homes, squares, and parks which the Protestants created were a symbol of beauty to other European people, and a symbol of British power to the Irish. It was as if the English had brought London with them to Ireland (Figure 1). In the early 1800's, the parliament governing Ireland moved from Dublin to England; and, therefore, many of the powerful and wealthy English moved back to London, leaving many Georgian structures vacant. As the

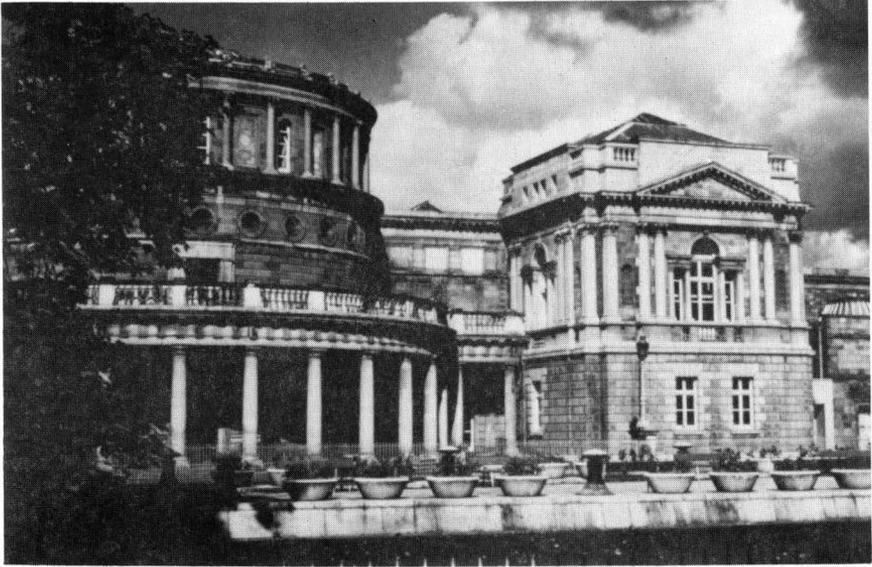


FIGURE 1. *Monumental Georgian Architecture.*

buildings no longer had regular upkeep they began to deteriorate. Greater degradation occurred during the great famine of the mid-nineteenth century, when many rural people moved to the city looking for jobs. The only housing which they could find was in tenements carved from the existing Georgian structures. The interiors were torn apart and restructured, and the people could not afford the upkeep of the exteriors. As more and more rural Irish moved to the city, the wealthier Anglo-Irish moved out to the suburbs. Most of these tenement conversions occurred in Northern Dublin, while in South Dublin "the Georgian squares and streets survived as pockets of respectability for the remaining nobility, gentry, and professionals in the city."<sup>19</sup> Further deterioration occurred throughout the twentieth century, especially after Irish independence in 1921, as the economic structure of the city continued to stagnate (Figure 2).

Preservationists argue that the architecture is worthy of attention, not only because of its detail and beauty, but also



FIGURE 2. *Crumbling Georgian Architecture.*

because Dublin—although it has deteriorated—is one of the few places where the Georgian landscape has actually survived with little change or damage. Many buildings in London and other cities that went through major growth during the Industrial Revolution were torn down to make way for factories. Also, while other European cities were heavily bombed during World Wars I and II, Dublin escaped damage. One geographer's perception of the city is that

. . . the heart of present-day Dublin is still its Georgian core, the crowning architectural achievement of the eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish community that dominated life in the city during its Golden Age. The aesthetic splendour of the Georgian City, so evident to the discriminating observer, is lasting testimony to an age of refinement, formality, taste and wealth.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, many Irish residents have difficulty caring for this "aesthetic splendor," since doing so means using British tastes as the norm for an Irish city.

Why have large numbers of Georgian buildings been

neglected for so long? Why have some been gutted and converted into office buildings, or demolished to make way for more modern offices? To many Irish, the Georgian structures symbolize the economic and political power of British Ascendancy; and the past is not easily forgotten in a nation that has suffered foreign domination for so long. A sense of duality has emerged within the city:

... the city of Dublin has something of a split personality which is well revealed when some Georgian square is threatened with demolition and the Dubliner's instinct to defend a thing of beauty is tempered by a feeling that he should not grieve at the disappearance of reminders of England's past ascendancy.<sup>21</sup>

There is a duality between the attractive appearance of well-kept Georgian architecture and the symbol of British control that it represents. In this sense, Dublin is struggling for an identity of its own—one independent of British aesthetics.

Some aesthetic and architectural purists urge the preservation of the Georgian architecture to include both form and functional integrity. A few private individuals have purchased and painstakingly restored some of the Georgian mansions to their original condition (Figure 3). They have spent tremendous amounts of time and money in restoring the interior and exterior to original detail. This is important work, but it cannot be expected to be carried out at a large scale. Many Irish residents' ambivalence toward the Georgian architecture and their immediate concern for adequate and inexpensive housing precludes extensive structural and functional rehabilitation.

A lack of understanding of these attitudes may stem from a purely visual landscape approach to the interpretation of Dublin. A walk through the city will reveal a mixture of crumbling Georgian tenements, beautiful, well-kept or restored structures, and modern box buildings. The simplified social solution is to ask why Dubliners do not just restore the rest of the Georgian buildings and make the city clean, neat, and uniform? If this were to occur, however,



FIGURE 3. *Restored Georgian Architecture.*

what would happen to the sense of place which is so emphatically tied to Irish history? A more holistic understanding of the city is needed to comprehend possible reasons behind the circumstance that most Irish still see Georgian architecture as a symbol of British Ascendancy, and therefore are reluctant to preserve the aesthetic and functional aspects of the buildings. A sampling of passages from Irish literature of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Dublin may help to provide needed insight into both the ambivalence toward Georgian architecture, and a more complete interpretation of sense of place in Dublin.

### **Irish Literature and the Dublin Sense of Place**

Although some may feel that the "Irishness" of Dublin lies in its architecture, an examination of Irish literature will reveal that the "Irishness," in the eyes of Irish authors, lies in its people and in their reaction to the landscape. Authors James Joyce, James Stephens, and George Moore each had a



FIGURE 4. *Busy Grafton Street.*

talent for evoking a mental image of Dublin for the reader. James Stephens, for example, addresses the conflict within Dublin's "split personality." Some of Stephen's writing is a celebration of the beauty of the city, the nearby hills, or the sun glistening off the clouds. Yet, when he presents a more in-depth look at the city, the human and often darker side of Dublin is revealed. An excellent example of the latter is his 1916 poem entitled "The Street":

Two narrow files of houses scowl,  
 Blackened with grime, on either side  
 Of the road, and through them prowl  
 Strange men and women, shifty-eyed  
 And slinking, and a drink-shop throws  
 Its glare of yellow light adown  
 The cracked pavement. The gutter flows  
 A turbid, evil stream. A clown,  
 Drink-sodden, lurches by and sings  
 Obscenely. A woman trails behind  
 With old, bad eyes; her clothing clings

Rain-soaked about her. No daring wind  
 Light-hearted, from the garden blows  
 Its sweetness here from any rose.<sup>22</sup>

The paradox in Stephens' work lies in the fact that he sees not only the sadness and frustration of the Irish lower class, but also the beauty in the city as a whole. "The mountains are near in Dublin, the sun is next door, and the clouds hang so low that they must be reckoned with the town; pre-war clouds they are, and the colours last and are forever delightful."<sup>23</sup> There are obviously two Dublins for Stephens, one of color and beauty when he looks at the sky, and one of filth and despair when he looks at the city streets. These are two extremes chosen to show the vast difference between the physical Dublin and the human Dublin in the mind of James Stephens, a disparity which still exists for many contemporary Dubliners.

George Moore, in his novel *A Drama in Muslin*, uses the technique of personification to reflect a human quality in the buildings:

The Dublin streets stare the vacant and helpless stare of a beggar selling matches on a doorstep, and the feeble cries for amusement are like those of the red gleam of a passing soldier's coat. On either side of you, there is a bawling ignorance of plaintive decay. Look at the houses! Like crones in borrowed bonnets some are fashionable with flowers in the rotting window frames—others languish in sill cheerfulness like women living on the proceeds of the pawnshop; others—those with brass plates on the doors—are evil smelling as the prescriptions of the threadbare doctor, bald as the bill of costs of the servile attorney. And the souls of the Dubliners blend and harmonize with their conatural surrounding.<sup>24</sup>

One gets the feeling of people behind the facades. It is the people within the buildings who constitute the real substance of Dublin, not the buildings themselves.

James Joyce, in his novel *Ulysses*, was one of the first authors to use Dublin as a central character. Says Joyce: "I want to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city

one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book."<sup>25</sup> In *Ulysses* he supplies a clue to the apathy of the Irish people by linking their indifference to their perception of being used by the British to build the city, but having no power or wealth themselves:

Cityful passing away, other cityful coming, passing away too; other coming on, passing on. Houses, lines of houses, streets, miles of pavement, piled up bricks, stones. Changing hands. This owner, that. Landlord never dies they say. Other steps into his shoes when he gets his notice to quit. They buy the place up with gold and till they have all the gold. Swindle it in somewhere. Piled up in cities, worn away after age. Pyramids in sand. Built on bread and onions. Slaves Chinese wall. Babylon. Big stones left. Round towers. Rest rubble, sprawling suburbs, jerrybuilt. Kerwan's mushroom houses built of breeze. Shelter, for the night. No-one is anything.<sup>26</sup>

The masses are nothing in the eyes of the powerful, and the monuments to the powerful are nothing in the eyes of the masses.

The paradox which one encounters in a reading of James Stephens, is also evident in Joyce. A Joyce scholar, Donald Torchiana, sums up this paradox: "Young and old, Joyce the man reacted to Dublin in extremes—extreme disdain and extreme affection, sometimes both at once."<sup>27</sup> In the *Dubliners*, a lively collection of short stories which are "candid-camera shots of people caught up in life's everyday dilemmas,"<sup>28</sup> Joyce's theme is that of the "paralysis" of the city and its people. The paralysis is an economic one. The urban Irish have never known a continued prosperity. The characters are trapped in their economic and social positions, which they cannot hope to escape unless they leave Ireland. They tend to have very little control over their lives, since they are dominated by the wealthy, land-owning Irish. Joyce describes the "stagnant society"<sup>29</sup> of the ordinary middle-class of Dublin. For example, in "Eveline" the title character wants to leave her drunken, violent father and run away with her lover to Buenos Aires. As she is about to step onto

the boat, however, she is overwhelmed with guilt. Eveline had promised her departed mother that she would keep the family together. She is tied to Dublin by religious and moral guilt. For Joyce, religion is an important and constricting element on the lives of his characters. The people are bound to Dublin not only by guilt, but also by a sense of duty to family and God.

Farrington, in the story "Counterpart," is constricted as well, but by a dull, monotonous job. His only escape is into the pub every chance he can get. Many of Joyce's characters congregate in pubs to discuss the day's events and release themselves from their problems at work and home. Little Chandler of "A Little Cloud" is similarly frustrated as was Farrington. He has longed to be a writer and escape to London, but he has settled for an office job to support his family. While walking to meet an old friend who works for the London Press, he contemplates his life:

For the first time in his life he felt himself superior to the people he passed. For the first time his soul revolted against the dull inelegance of Capel Street. There was no doubt about it; if you wanted to succeed you had to go away. You could do nothing in Dublin . . . Every step brought him nearer to London, farther from his own sober inartistic life.<sup>30</sup>

After drinking with his friend, Chandler eventually goes home and takes out his frustrations on his small son.

In one of her many articles on the *Dubliners*, Florence Walzl sets forth a perceptive summary of the collection of stories:

The lively throngs on the streets and in the pubs, the properties of the front parlors and the earthier realities of the dingy back parlors and kitchens, have a convincing credibility. Moreover, the book is founded on an accurate, detailed knowledge of Dublin's political, economic, social, and religious realities at the turn of the century.<sup>31</sup>

James Joyce used real places in his work—real streets, buildings, and businesses. At the time the *Dubliners* was pub-

lished in 1914, most readers had some knowledge of the places mentioned and of their significance. Today, investigation of the history behind the place names provides insight into the ambivalent attitude of the Irish toward certain locations and buildings.

For example, in "An Encounter," two boys play hooky from school and wander around Dublin headed for their destination, the Pigeon House, which though once a fort has been turned into a power station. Each location mentioned along their route had been a place of defeat for the Irish. Thus, the Pigeon House, while it was a fort, had been the landing place for many British leaders—Oliver Cromwell in 1649, Lord Berkeley the Viceroy in 1670, and King James II in 1690. The Pigeon House was also used as a British arms storage depot, beginning with the rebellion of 1798. The Irish tried to overtake it then, and again in 1864, but were defeated both times. The boys walk along the North Strand Road, where the Battle of Clontarf was fought against the Scandinavians. Although the Scandinavians eventually had to retreat due to a rising tide, it was not until after they had slain the great Irish leader Brian Boru and two of his sons. The two boys never reach their destination, the Pigeon House, but instead end up playing in a field that is the site of the first Scandinavian landing in Ireland. There, on the grounds where trials were held by the Viking invaders, they encounter a man. Each place that the boys visit exemplifies the Irish people's ineffective struggle for freedom. The boys, too, are unable to achieve their own independence. Thus they must eventually shed their dreams of adventure and go back to home and school.<sup>32</sup>

In the story "Two Gallants," the Kildare Street Club—mentioned at the outset—is where British landowners sold and traded much of Ireland's land. The two main characters walk through Rutland Square, a place where the Anglo-Irish walk "on parade" on Sunday afternoons.<sup>33</sup> This is one of many references to remainders of the Ascendency. Each

specific place is mentioned not by chance, for Joyce wanted to show the significance of history to the characters' feelings about Dublin. Partly due to persistent domination by the English, the Irish of Dublin are unable to take control of their own lives, a circumstance which leads to many of their frustrations.

It is interesting to examine the kinds of places in which Joyce's characters spend their time. The work place is not a common setting; for if his characters have a job, it is usually that of a laborer or some similarly tedious occupation. They rarely go to cultural events such as plays or concerts; they don't eat out at fancy restaurants; nor do they spend time walking through the stately parks. Instead, they are often found at home dealing with family problems; or they may wander the streets chatting with friends. Places that are connected with the English are passed by rather quickly. The characters never enter any British clubs, buildings, or parks. They are more interested in places that have a sense of "Irishness," such as pubs, small businesses, or Catholic churches. The pubs and the streets are particularly people-oriented. The physical structures play a secondary rôle to the interaction of the people in terms of their own environmental significance. Joyce reveals that although the human-made environment of Dublin is important in terms of the reaction of the characters to that environment, it is the people themselves who are the essence of the city. Thus, it is the Irish and ordinary daily occurrences—far more than monumental events or buildings—that create the sense of place.

These authors, especially Joyce, through their lasting and well-respected works, had an impact on future generations of Dublin citizens. Their works may help to perpetuate the frustration and anger against the past repression by the British. Yet, because of the influence of the authors' interpretations, as well as their powers of observation, both the literature and the history of the nation add to and understanding of the sense of place in Dublin.

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