

Geography in Ireland in transition: a retrospective

Niamh Moore-Cherry*

School of Geography, Planning and Environmental Policy, UCD, Dublin, Ireland

Ten years ago, in the 60th anniversary edition of *Irish Geography*, Rob Kitchin wrote a short commentary reflecting on the major transitions that geography in Ireland (hereafter, Irish geography) had gone through since 2000. His article, together with the range of responses written by a number of academics from across the island, published in Vol 37(2), makes interesting reading. Given the seismic shifts that have occurred in the intervening period, not only in the institutional and national context but also within the discipline itself, it is worth revisiting this commentary in the journal's 70th anniversary volume.

It is heartening to witness the continued vibrancy educationally and in research terms of Irish geography over the last decade, especially given the many challenges the discipline has faced. Across our range of higher education institutions, geography continues to be a popular undergraduate choice, yet this very strength also presents one of the major challenges. In the face of very large student numbers and significantly reduced resources, particularly since the budgetary crisis of 2008, some schools and departments struggle to maintain the integrity and diversity of the discipline. While we have large student cohorts, arguably it is becoming more difficult for those students to build identity with the discipline because of the dramatically changed contexts within which their learning occurs. For many, their primary learning experiences are large class lectures with minimal fieldwork and few practical classes, fundamentally altering the perception of the discipline as field-based and exploratory. While much of this is a response to fewer resources, it is also representative of a broader shift within the discipline in Ireland noted by McCarthy (in Gilmartin, 2004, p. 140):

While geography in Ireland moves away from its empirical traditions and increasingly embraces social theory, I am disappointed and somewhat alarmed by the reluctance on the part of some lecturers to organise fieldtrips for their students.

This goes to the heart of a major challenge facing those of us working within the academy. If we wish to position ourselves as a 'core discipline' we need to articulate much more clearly what a graduating geographer today should look like. What are the core, non-negotiable elements of a geography curriculum that

* Email: Niamh.Moore@ucd.ie

we believe are fundamental in certifying a student as a geographer? The growing specialisation of degree programmes challenges long-held understandings of geography as a broad-based discipline spanning the natural and social sciences. It could be argued that today some students graduate with little ability to understand the discipline beyond very narrow niches. Simultaneously, our fundamental core is coming under increasing scrutiny from external sources, such as the Teaching Council, for example. This agency requires all students, if they wish to be accredited as geography teachers, to have a minimum requirement of physical, human and skills-based geography training. Recent suggestions from the Department of Education and Skills point towards the likely and imminent development of a subject benchmark statement similar to that produced in the UK by the QAA (2014). What this will mean for course content, teaching loads and appointments is unclear but I would argue that we, as a community of scholars, need to play a much stronger role in articulating what it is that defines our discipline today. Davies and Taylor in their original response to Kitchin's article argued the importance of 'forming a coherent view of what geography is and how and where it can contribute to society that is widely shared among geographers' (in Gilmartin, 2004, p. 126). This would have been a natural project for the former National Committee for Geography, but given the visibly weakened position of the discipline within the new Royal Irish Academy committee structures, a more grass-roots and pro-active approach may be necessary. This could complement or inform the work that the geographers on the new Geosciences and Geographical Sciences committee will be able to do. If we ultimately wish to be the authors of our own destiny, there needs to be an urgency and a desire within the community to debate our disciplinary identity and norms, before they are imposed by external regulatory bodies, but also to support our colleagues fighting to retain staff and investment. Given the scale of change that the discipline has experienced in the last decade, now is an opportune time to ignite a debate on what we would like Irish geography to become into the future.

Partly this identity crisis has emerged from the significant generational shift that the discipline has undergone. The intensity of this recent transformation is abundantly clear; 70% of academics working within the various institutions have been appointed in the last decade (Moore-Cherry, 2012). Many departments have recently celebrated major milestones (40th or 50th anniversaries), and these have coincided with the retirements of major disciplinary figures. While many retired geographers remain active in the life of the Society and community more generally, their official departure from academic departments has resulted in the re-shaping of the discipline in different institutions. In the case of UCD and UCC where historical geography was traditionally a central component of degree programmes and research profiles, this sub-disciplinary area is now staffed by part-time or temporary academics. Presently, Queen's University Belfast is the major stronghold of historical geography on the island. The strength of the sub-discipline there is demonstrated through the recent establishment of the *Living Legacies 1914-18 Engagement Centre*, funded by the UK Arts and

Humanities Research Council. With the notable exception of Mark McCarthy's recent book, *Ireland's Easter Rising 1916* (Ashgate, 2012), geographers in the Republic of Ireland have been slower than their counterparts north of the border to engage with the academic and wider community possibilities in this decade of commemorations. For example, there is no geographer on the Advisory Group for Centenary Commemorations and history and heritage is being discussed without any acknowledgement of the importance and the role that geography plays in such matters. To redress this issue, a recent proposal has been made to the Geographical Society of Ireland for a special project *The Geography of 2016/Spatialising 1916* and, as a discipline, we should embrace the opportunities that this might provide to enhance our visibility and impact.

Linked to the significant changes in personnel in recent years, one major challenge for the community is to address the weakening collective memory on the development of the discipline in Ireland. This might be an opportune time for a major archival project that would centralise the material and record the oral history of the discipline before records are lost or destroyed. For example, the records of the Geographical Society of Ireland are now scattered in different offices around the country. While the Society will not reach its centenary year until 2034, it is important to begin the process now of securely archiving materials so that future scholars can reflect on and chart the growth of our discipline over time. While a major research project in itself, this potential archive could generate substantial educational material for modules on the history and philosophy of the discipline and also aid new staff in recognising and appreciating the traditions within which they work. A collaborative archival project has the potential to build cross-institutional connections north and south of the border, generating better understanding of the roots of the discipline and providing a contextual framework for both staff and new graduate students.

In fact the growth of the graduate student body has been one of the undoubted successes of Irish geography over the last decade, whether through structured doctoral training programmes or at Masters level. The growing internationalisation of our graduate student body as well as our academic staff (in 2012, nearly 65% of staff held PhD degrees from outside the Republic – Great Britain (41.1%), Northern Ireland (9.3%) and US (14%) – marks a major transition in Irish geography and one that can be embraced for linking us into important international networks. New appointments have developed capacity in fields such as geopolitics, development, climate change and economic geography (see Table 1), pertaining to issues of global reach and popular concern. Our well-connected research community has had significant success at national and international level in recent years, including the attraction of 6th Framework, Interreg, ESPON, SFI, EPA, IRC and ERC funding. Academic geographers working in Ireland are committed members and indeed leaders in international associations such as the AAG, RGS-IBG and IGU and undertake editorial and other duties for a range of highly ranked international journals. Indeed, Mary Gilmartin from Maynooth University was recently appointed Managing Editor of *Social and Cultural Geography* ranked 13th of 76

Geography journals on the Social Science Citation Index; Anne Buttimer, UCD, was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award at the AAG annual conference in Tampa in April, 2014; and Rob Kitchin was recently awarded an ERC Advanced Investigator Grant for his project 'The Programmable City'. This is just a snapshot of the many successes on the global stage of geographers working in Ireland. This visibility and recognition is impressive but must be balanced with leadership within our national context and better recognition of the international significance of research on Ireland.

One area of concern for me is the increasing difficulty for our own PhD and post-doc students to progress into more permanent academic careers in Ireland. While we push to recruit more PhD students into our programmes, we have a responsibility to ensure that they have clear paths to future careers whether within the academy or outside. This island has gone through one of the most dramatic transformations during the last decade – economically, socially and environmentally. Those working on issues of national significance – housing, migration flows, environmental change – have much to share with the international academic community but it is as important that we influence agendas and critical discussions among policymakers, the media and general public at home. Our graduate students and their work provides a link to these important groups and into decision-making arenas. Another forum through which the excellent research on Ireland might be shared is this journal, *Irish Geography*. It has a significant international and national academic and public policy readership and geographers in Ireland should be actively supporting it through the submission of papers, timely review work and the encouragement of submissions by their graduate students. The argument that the journal is not 'international enough' is simply weak when the readership and subscription data suggests otherwise. While academic geographers look outside the island to international gatherings to present their research and engage colleagues, this must be balanced with a commitment to national activity.

In his original reflection, Kitchin identified the development of a geographic community as a major challenge facing Irish geography. A decade later his comments are worth reiterating:

There is certainly a group of scholars who regularly attend seminars and conferences outside of their institutions and act as stewards of the discipline by organising events, running societies, sitting on national committees, and so on. However there are others who are much less frequently visible. ... Here the challenge is to extend the active, wider geographic community (Kitchin, 2004, p. 18)

Although having brought major and quantifiable benefits, the prediction of Strohmayer that the growing international visibility required by many institutions would act as a 'centrifugal force that ... [pulled] the geographic community apart, rather than unite it' (Strohmayer in Gilmartin, 2004, p. 122) is evident in practice. The Irish Postgraduate Training Consortium (IPTC), once an important

networking event for graduate students and a bridge between departments north and south has been one of the casualties of changes in the last decade. This annual weekend event, organised by staff who volunteered some of their time, provided an excellent opportunity for postgraduate students across the island to meet, participate in joint training and build community but it has not run now for over five years. At the recent Conference of Irish Geographers (May 2014), the minimal participation by many senior academics within the discipline was noted. The opportunity provided by the conference to showcase work within our own community and build cross-institutional networks within Ireland should be embraced by disciplinary leaders as a key site within which a greater identity for the discipline can be built internally and projected externally. Given the very small number of senior geographers in Ireland (only 10% are at professorial level), it is crucial that we all contribute to fostering cross-institutional synergies and alliances to position geography within the academy and national landscape. Perhaps the upcoming Conference of Irish Geographers at Queens University Belfast in May 2015, the first foray of the conference north of the border in over a decade, will provide a forum within which capacity within the discipline can be built.

While much of this commentary might be considered ‘academic’ and introspective, it is indisputable that geography in Ireland has made many strides in recent years. A decade ago, Nally remarked on ‘how seldom geographers appear in the media to discuss critically topics we have an obvious expertise in ... and why is it that Irish Geography has a relatively low public profile’ (in Gilmartin, 2004, pp. 132-33). In his reflection, Strohmayr suggested that ‘arguably the greatest challenge facing Irish Geography today ... is the willingness of Irish geographers to engage with audiences beyond the narrow confines of academia’ (in Gilmartin, 2004, p. 123). The situation today could not be more different with the emergence of social media and new technologies being exploited by geographers very successfully (Kitchin *et al.*, 2013). Of particular note is the work that scholars working within and associated with NIRSA have done in bringing geographical understandings and questioning to a broader public through the ‘Ireland after NAMA’ blog. The aim of this blog is to provide a geographically informed analysis of the global financial crisis in Ireland and elsewhere, in particular detailing a spatial and scalar reading that acknowledges how the crisis is playing out in spatially uneven and unequal ways, differentially affecting places. As of September 2014, there were 590 posts on the blog. There are 490 subscribers (a mix of academics, journalists, business sector and the public) and on average 150 to 200 views per day (523,564 in total). This site has helped facilitate the creation of a public geographies of Ireland but it is not alone. In recent months, geographers have featured heavily in the broadcast media: Susan Hegarty was a lead presenter on the *Building Ireland* RTE1 series; Anna Davies, Laura Devaney, Frances Fahy and Ruth Doyle were contributors to the *Ireland 2020* Eco-eye programme; Paul Dunlop and Pete Coxon contributed to the *Secrets of the Irish Landscape* series; Julien Mercille is a regular panellist on *Tonight with Vincent Browne* on TV3; while others such as John Sweeney, Kieran Hickey and Mary Gilmartin are regular commentators in

the radio and print media on issues such as climate change and migration. These engagements and contributions bring the relevance of our discipline to a general audience but also play a major role in positioning us institutionally. However, in order for us to leverage these contributions most effectively, there is an onus on all of us to ensure ‘that geographical endeavours are labelled as such’ (Davies and Taylor in Gilmartin, 2004, p. 125). Unless we clearly articulate and label ourselves as geographers then much of the citizenship engagement capacity of Irish geography will go unnoticed.

We are at an exciting juncture with major opportunities for development over the next decade, and it seems that our discipline has proved exceptionally resilient even during very testing times. However, I would like to suggest a number of issues that should remain on our radar in the coming years.

Firstly, there is growing concern about the position of geography in the second level curriculum and the potential impact that any changes will have on our student recruitment. While historians have been publicly exercised about the proposed abolition of history as a core junior certificate subject, geographers have been much slower to mobilise. We currently have possibly more undergraduate students than we can effectively engage. Nonetheless, this has been crucial in producing postgraduate students and justifying the proliferation of new Masters programmes on which department/school funding is increasingly based.

Secondly, while some departments have retained or grown their full-time staff cohort, others have lost significant numbers of staff and rely now on ‘buying-in’ modules at a low cost from occasional lectures. Ni Laoire’s observation that ‘departments are coping with the lack of funding for additional lecturing staff in part through employing an army of part-time staff, from among the postgraduate, postdoctoral and research communities’ (Gilmartin, 2004, p. 128) remains as true, if not more so, today. Since the introduction of the Employment Control Framework, which has limited the ability of departments to replace staff that have departed through retirement or mobility, the casualisation of academic work has increased significantly with potentially detrimental implications for both the student experience and the potential career trajectories of early stage academics.

Thirdly, as identified by Kitchin a decade ago, there is growing pressure on academics working within significant resource constraints in Ireland ‘to produce as much research, to the same quality, as international colleagues while having substantially higher teaching and administrative loads’ (Kitchin, 2004, p. 17). A concerted effort must be made by those in leadership positions to ensure that these growing pressures do not result in the continued individualisation of academic effort. Are there shared resources that could be pooled inter-departmentally? This will require meaningful conversations by disciplinary leaders and perhaps the establishment of an official forum where dialogue regularly happens. One excellent model appears to be the Irish Geomorphology Group, established in Spring 2013 to develop a sense of community among those who identify as ‘geomorphologists’ in Ireland. To date, the group has hosted a number of meetings at CIG events and elsewhere, workshops for graduate students and developed collaborative research

proposals. This type of dynamism is driving exciting cross-institutional and cross-border network development.

Finally, we face a significant balancing act. How can we better align our growing international profile with the development of a more coherent and actively engaged geographical community within Ireland? To build a supportive *community of scholars* that is theoretically engaged, empirically relevant and speaks to as broad an audience as possible is the major challenge to 2025 for our discipline.

Acknowledgements: The original idea for this article arose from the Mapping Geography in Ireland Special Publication of the Geographical Society of Ireland (GSI). I wish to acknowledge the financial support of the GSI for that project. With thanks to Jonathan Cherry, Frances Fahy, Mary Gilmartin and Jonathan Turner for their very helpful comments on a previous draft. Any opinions expressed here are those of the author.

References

- Gilmartin, M., 2004. 'Geography in Ireland in transition – some comments', *Irish Geography*, 37(2), 121–44.
- Kitchin, R., 2004. 'Geography in Ireland in transition', *Irish Geography*, 37(1), 15–9.
- Kitchin, R., Linehan, D., O'Callaghan, C. and Lawton, P., 2013. 'Public geographies through social media', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 3(1), 56–72.
- Moore-Cherry, N., 2012. *Mapping Geography in Ireland*. Special Publication 13. Dublin: Geographical Society of Ireland.
- QAA, 2014. *Subject Benchmark Statement Geography: Draft for consultation*. Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency. June 2014.

Table 1 Disciplinary profile

Area	UCD	SPD	TCD	NUIG	NUIM	UCC	MIC, UL	QUB	UU	Other
Climate	Gerald Mills	David Smyth	Robin Edwards Gayle McGlynn	Kieran Hickey Aaron Potito Audrey Morley	Steve McCarron Rowan Fealy Conor Murphy Tom Matthews	Una NiChaoimh Max Kozachenko		Helen Roe Alastair Ruffell Donal Mullen		
Economic Geography and Regional Dev	Dieter Kogler	Almar Barry Gerry O'Reilly	Padraig Carmody Martin Sokol	Pat Collins	Chris van Egeraat	Don Lyons Barry Brunt	Des McCafferty Brendan O'Keefe	Niall Majury Ian Shuttleworth Satish Kumar	Martin Eaton	
Geoinformatics				Chaosheng Zhang	Ronan Foley Jan Rigby	Darius Bartlett Fiona Cawkwell		Jennifer McKinley	Paul McKenzie Paul Dunlop Sally Cook	
Political geography, Geopolitics and Development	Alun Jones Julien Mercille Christine Bonnin	Gerry O'Reilly	Padraig Carmody	John Morrissey	Adrian Kavanagh Alistair Fraser	Piaras MacEinri	Brendan O'Keefe	Merav Amir		
Geographic Education	Niamh Moore	Susan Hegarty Ruth McManus Susan Pike*		Kathy Reilly Valerie Ledwith	Shelagh Waddington		Anne Dolan *		Max Hope	Richard Greenwood (Stramillis) Tracey McKay (SM) ** Anthony Grant (SM)**

* Geographers working in Education faculties

** SM: St Mary's University College, Belfast

Table 1 (continued) Disciplinary profile

Area	UCD	SPD	TCD	NUIG	NUJM	UCC	MIC, UL	QUB	UU	Other
Environment, Ecology and Sustainability		Susan Hegarty	Anna Davies	Frances Fahy	Betina Steffiani	Eileen O'Rourke Colin Sage	Catherine Dalton Angela Hayes		Max Hope	Margaret O'Riordan (GMIT)
Rural	Alun Jones			Therese Conway Marie Mahon Maura Farrell John McDonagh	Alistair Fraser	Ray O'Connor	Brendan O'Keefe	Steve Royle		Margaret O'Riordan (GMIT)
Geomorphology and Quaternary Science	Jonathan Turner Colman Gallagher	Susan Hegarty	Pete Coxon Mike Quigley Carlos Rocha Mary Bourke	Kevin Lynch Eugene Farrell	Ro Charlton Rowan Fealy Paul Gibson		Angela Hayes	Jennifer McKinley Patricia Warke Alastair Ruffell Iestyn Barr	Peter Wilson Paul Dunlop	
Urban	Veronica Crossa Niamh Moore-Cherry Joe Brady	Ruth McManus	Andrew MacLaran	Valerie Ledwith Ulf Strohmayr Philip Lawton	Sinead Kelly Cian O'Callaghan	Therese Kenna Brendan O'Sullivan	Des McCafferty	Steve Royle		

Table 1 (continued) Disciplinary profile

Area	UCD	SPD	TCD	NUJG	NUJM	UCC	MIC, UL	QUB	UU	Other
Cultural / Social		Jonathan Cherry Almar Barry		Valerie Ledwith Marie Mahon Kathy Reilly Philip Lawton	Mark Boyle Rob Kitchin Mary Gilmartin Karen Till	John Crowley Piaras MacEoinri Denis Linehan Ray O'Connor		Nuala Johnson David Livingstone Ian Shuttleworth Satish Kumar Merav Amir Stefanie Doeblner? Olover Dunnett James Robinson	Sara McDowell	Kevin Griffin (DIT) Tracey McKa (St Mary's) Anthony Grant (St Mary's)
Health and Medical				Marie Mahon	Ronan Foley Jan Rigby Dennis Pringle					
Historical	Joe Brady Arlene Crampsie	Jonathan Cherry Ruth McManus	Mark Hennessy	Ulf Strohmayr John Morrissey	Gery Kearns	David Butler	Helene Bradley	Diarmid Finnegan James Robinson Keith Lilley Nuala Johnston David Livingstone Steve Royle Paul Ell Oliver Dunnett		Mark McCarthy (GMIT)