

A forgotten tier of local government – the impact of rural district councils on the landscape of early twentieth century Ireland

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The Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898 revolutionised local government in Ireland through the introduction of democratic, representative, local self-government in the form of county councils, urban district councils and rural district councils. While the first two of these formed the basis of Irish local government in the Free State, rural district councils were abolished within three years of Irish independence, in 1925. Subsequently, these rural authorities have been almost entirely written out of Irish historiography, despite the transformation they enacted across the landscape between 1899 and 1925. This paper seeks to remedy this absence by providing an overview of the operation of this short-lived tier of local government and evaluating its impact on the landscape of early twentieth century Ireland.

Keywords: Rural district councils, local government, democracy, Irish landscape, historical geography

Introduction

The abolition of town councils in 2014 brought to an end a system of low-tier local government that had existed in Ireland since 1899. The commentary generated by this legislation brought the role of local government in Irish society to the fore, with many decrying the increase in state centralisation and the loss of local autonomy and democracy (see as representative examples Reilly 2012, Quinlan 2013, Quinlivan 2013, Meehan 2014 cited *Bray People* 2014). Absent from these debates, however, was any engagement with the inherent imbalance in a local government system which offered local government for urban areas without any similar provision for rural areas. The lapse of almost ninety years since the abolition of the then complementary rural local government system, rural district councils, in 1925, ensured that the very existence of such bodies had all but been forgotten. This amnesia is also evident in Irish historiography, where even in the most detailed local government studies mentions of rural district councils are cursory in the main (works by McDowell 1964, Chubb 1982, Roche 1982, Crossman 1994, Daly 2001, Ferriter 2001, and Callanan and Keogan 2003 are among the most comprehensive), simply stating that these bodies were created

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under the Local Government (Ireland) Act, 1898 (61&62 Vict. c.37) and abolished in 1925 (No.5, 1925). Where any consideration is given to their actual operation it is mostly based on the mistaken belief that they were merely a locally-based extension of the county council.

Historical geographers have been equally lax in considering the role of local government in landscape change across Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Studies have focussed predominantly on the 'main' agents of landscape transformation: the landed gentry, the church and the state. The dearth of studies examining the role of local government in Irish landscape change is perhaps indicative of the perception of local government in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ireland as supervised and directly controlled by either the landed class or the state. This assumption leaves little room for the consideration of agency on the part of local representatives and their constituents or the local variations which arose as local government was opened to representatives and constituents of an entirely different demographic composition in the period after the Local Government (Ireland) Act, 1898. It has been left to either topic-specific or locally-based studies to provide some of the most detailed analysis of the operation of rural district councils in Ireland in this period. Of particular note are works by Murphy (1999) on the North Tipperary Rural Districts (hereafter RDs); Cullen (2001) on rural Dublin; Silverman and Gulliver's (2006) study of Thomastown, Co. Kilkenny; and most recently the publication by McWalter (2014) of a guide to the extant rural district council archives of County Galway.

It could be suggested that the ability to ignore the very existence of these rural local authorities is indicative of their relative importance and significance, but to do so would be to entirely underestimate an efficient and effective form of local service provision, which revolutionised the physical as well as political landscapes of Ireland between 1899 and 1925. This paper attempts to rectify this absence by offering an overview of the operation of rural district councils and an evaluation of their role as agents of landscape change in the early twentieth century. In any study of local authorities it is critically important to examine not just the enacting legislation, but also the implementation of the legislation by the local authorities on the ground. As a result the sources utilised in this study range from the macro- to the micro-level and include parliamentary papers and extant archives of the rural district councils. In order to offer a sufficiently grounded and detailed analysis, two counties were selected as case studies, Donegal and Meath. While this decision was somewhat driven by extant sources, the two counties selected offer a broad range of topographical settings as well as a diversity of socio-economic, political, religious and cultural conditions. Donegal located in the far north-west of Ireland offers the potential of a case study area which encompasses a wide diversity of human landscapes from the isolated, poverty stricken, western seaboard to the fertile lands confiscated during the Ulster Plantation in the hinterland of Derry City. Meath is widely recognised as having some of the best agricultural land in Ireland, but it too has topographic variations as the fertile, rolling plains of the Dublin hinterland give way gradually to poorer land towards the Ulster border.

Meath has experienced a long and varied settlement history through the influence of the River Boyne and proximity to Dublin ensuring a culturally diverse and largely market oriented population. Exploratory research was also undertaken in Antrim, Galway, Cork and Kerry to ensure that other potential geographic variations were identified and incorporated into the study. This paper begins with an outline of the state of local government prior to 1898, before examining the revolutionary nature of the new local authorities established and the duties which they performed in three key areas. It will conclude by considering the impact that these authorities had on the Irish landscape over a relatively short period.

An overview of nineteenth century Irish local government

Prior to the Local Government (Ireland) Act, 1898, local government in Ireland was characterised by an assortment of local authorities operating over a range of territories, at a variety of scales with differential levels of central state control. The extent to which these bodies were representative of local populations tended to bear a direct negative correlation to the length of their existence. However, in tandem with an increase in state centralisation and legislative innovation throughout the nineteenth century, local government was gradually reviewed and reformed in order to develop a system that was more representative and effective and which eventually replaced landlords as the main agent of local landscape change.

By the 1890s, the tangle of local authorities could broadly be divided into three main groups: municipal government, grand juries and boards of guardians. The first two of these had long histories and were widely recognised both locally and nationally as being outdated, corrupt, sectarian and largely inefficient (Crossman 1994, p. 4, Callanan 2003, p. 6). Municipal authorities operated solely in urban areas and were responsible for the provision of necessary town services. However, by the early nineteenth century, the role of municipal corporations had retracted to the point where members ‘flagrantly neglect[ed] town services’ in favour of concentrating ‘on the important political function of returning members of the right persuasion to parliament’ and furthering unionist political dominance (Haslam 2003, p. 18). In order to ensure the functioning of basic town services, the Lighting of Towns Act, 1828 (9 Geo. IV. C.82) was introduced allowing for the election of town commissioners, who would primarily provide lighting in the towns, but also provide water supplies, manage the removal of sewerage, repair roads, prohibit nuisances, and provide for the cleansing and watching of the town (Meghen 1960, p. 336). While this provided an alternative body for town government and allowed towns to bypass their inactive corporations, it did little to address corruption. It was not until 1840 that the Municipal Corporation (Ireland) Act (3&4 Vict. c.108) dissolved fifty-eight of the remaining sixty-eight town corporations, annulling their charters and replacing them with elected councils (Haslam 2003, p. 19). Further improvements in urban governance were enacted under the Towns Improvement Act of 1854 (17&18 Vict. c.103), but it was only with the setting up of the Local Government Board in 1872 that central state supervision was fully extended to municipal government in Ireland (Potter

2011). Thereafter, the administration of local functions became markedly more efficient. The role of urban local government was expanded under the Public Health (Ireland) Act of 1874 (37&38 Vict. c.93), which provided for the creation of urban sanitary districts in towns with a population of over six thousand, while smaller towns could request similar sanitary powers. This new legislation paved the way for dedicated environmental and infrastructural improvements and was extended further in 1878 (Meghen 1960, p. 338, 41&42 Vict. c.52).

While these various forms of town government operated solely in the urban areas of the country, there co-existed grand juries which ruled over counties at large. Like the counties, these grand juries had been in existence from Norman times and exercised the fiscal, administrative and legal duties of a local authority and a local court. Unlike the municipal authorities, grand juries were not a permanent body as they held only biannual meetings. In advance of every such meeting the County Sheriff selected twenty-three of the largest landowners in the county who were also magistrates or justices of the peace. As such there was no elected element to the grand juries and their composition varied depending on the availability of magistrates resident in the county at a given time (Crossman 1994, p. 27). As representatives of the protestant, landlord class and, in the absence of a national supervisory body to oversee their decision making and spending, allegations of corruption and inefficiency were rife. The administrative duties of the grand jury were wide ranging and included the construction and repair of local infrastructure such as roads, bridges, footpaths, piers and harbours and the erection of milestones. They were also responsible for the upkeep of deserted children, and partly financed the local dispensary system. In terms of landscape transformation, perhaps their most important role is one for which they have been given little recognition – the implementation of the institutionalisation of the Irish landscape in the nineteenth century. They were involved in the construction, maintenance and financial support of county infirmaries, lunatic asylums, schools, courthouses, bridewells and county gaols. While the state was responsible for the instigation of this significant development it was the grand juries that actualised this transformation on the ground.

In spite of this success, and the reforming initiatives introduced throughout the nineteenth century, the grand juries continued to be viewed as inefficient bastions of landlord power, lacking the trust of both local populations and the state. In this context it is unsurprising that when the government decided to introduce a poor law for Ireland they bypassed the grand juries and set about introducing a new, untarnished local authority to the Irish political landscape. The administration of the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act, 1838 (1&2 Vict. c.56) created a network of new local authorities known as boards of guardians which operated within an entirely new administrative territorial framework – the poor law union. Each poor law union was composed of a number of new entities known as electoral divisions which in turn were formed from the combination of a number of townlands. A central market town was selected to be the focus of the poor law union and the location for the union workhouse. Working on the assumption that market towns in Ireland

were rarely more than twenty miles apart, the optimum area for each union was based on a ten mile radius from the selected market town (Sixth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners 1840). Unfortunately however, this did not hold true in the West where the initial unions were unworkably large, necessitating further sub-division during the Great Famine. In dispensing with traditional administrative territories and adopting a new rationally-based local government territorial network, the state set the tone for the operation of the poor law system. Strict centralised state control and supervision were introduced in the form of the Poor Law Commission. All board of guardian activities were monitored by this body and any legislative breaches swiftly acted upon. The membership criteria for the boards of guardians also marked a major alteration in terms of local authority composition. Three-quarters (although this was later reduced to half) of the boards' membership was democratically elected by the ratepayers of the union – those in possession of a property valued at over £4 – opening up local administration to (albeit partial) local democracy for the first time. However, as a concession to the landlord class who were compelled to pay the rates on all properties which fell under the £4 valuation, vote accumulation was permitted. This entitled landlords to accumulate votes for each of the properties on which they paid rates (Feingold 1984, Crossman 1994). In this way, the poorest sections of the population were excluded from voting, while the landlords were given stronger influence over the boards. In spite of this weighting the boards of guardians offered the first opportunity for the catholic, non-landlord, middle classes to participate in local government.

While the boards of guardians were initially created solely for the administration of poor relief, the combination of central state control with more representative local democracy ensured that these bodies became the favoured option for the state when new local legislative functions were introduced. As MacDonagh (1989, p. 180) points out the 'former recipients of fresh functions, the grand juries and the magistracy, made no further advances after 1837...[and] within a generation a mass of legislation...had fallen to some degree or other, to the guardians to administer'. Thus, in addition to adding to the institutional landscape through the building of workhouses, under the Medical Charities Act of 1851 (14&15 Vict. c.68) the boards of guardians became responsible for developing a network of medical related facilities including the provision and administration of dispensaries (a role directly removed from the grand juries) and fever hospitals. The guardians became responsible for the control of burial grounds in 1856 and in 1863 they were granted the power to register births and deaths (19&20 Vict. c.98; 26&27 Vict. c.11). The reconstitution of the Irish Poor Law Commission as the Local Government Board in 1872 recognised the changing nature and increasing duties of the guardians and marked a departure point for a further increase in the boards' local government roles. Throughout the remainder of the century, the boards accrued a wide range of functions relating to all aspects of Irish life. Under the Public Health Act of 1874 the boards were constituted as rural sanitary authorities and were given responsibility for the notification and prevention of

infectious and contagious diseases, in both animals and humans. They were later given responsibility for the building of labourers' cottages; the supply of seed; the prevention and removal of nuisances; and in 1896 they were even given responsibility for making legislation in relation to the speed and design of motor cars (McDowell 1964, p. 189).

Unfortunately for the boards of guardians and the local populations, this unprecedented increase in responsibility alongside the boards' primary role as poor relief administrators proved overwhelming. In spite of the opportunity presented by these legislative innovations, many boards were simply unable to implement the new functions, while others merely selected what they felt were most appropriate for their local areas or would incur the lowest administrative and financial burdens. By the late nineteenth century, it was clear that the tangled web of inter-related and overlapping local authorities were insufficient for the task at hand. The improvements which had been implemented fell far short of the total reform that was necessary in order to provide a fully functioning form of local government for Ireland. The political climate had also changed drastically in the post-famine period in particular with the growth of an organised and united nationalist movement, which demanded parity of treatment for all citizens of Ireland through increased democracy. In addition, a gap in local leadership had emerged with the steady erosion of the role of the landlord in Irish society through the land acts and the aforementioned local government reforms. As part of its constructive unionism policy, better known as 'killing home rule by kindness', the Conservative government tackled these thorny issues of local power, democracy and administration through the introduction of the revolutionary Local Government (Ireland) Act in 1898. As Chief Secretary, Gerald Balfour stated:

'I think that everybody is conscious that the existing system has become inadequate – it is no longer in the spirit of the age, and it cannot be very much longer maintained ... Personally, I believe that the reform of Local Government in Ireland is not only inevitable it is in itself desirable' (Parliamentary Debates 4th Series, 21 Feb 1898, p. 1227).

The Local Government (Ireland) Act, 1898

'An Act for amending the Law relating to Local Government in Ireland, and for the other purposes connected therewith' was signed into law on 12 August 1898 (Local Government (Ireland) Act, 1898 (61&62 Vict. c.37)). When examined as a whole, the provisions enacted in this legislation represented the single biggest innovation in the British administration of Irish local government. It is, however, important to note that many of the new aspects simply brought Irish local government onto a par with the reformed system of local government that had been operating in England, Scotland and Wales since 1888 and 1894 respectively (51&52 Vict. c. 41; 56&57 Vict. c. 73). The 1898 act built on the initial groundwork laid down by the creation of the partially democratic boards of guardians. In so doing, it produced

an almost entirely democratic, representative form of self-government at a local level based on the principle of universal suffrage. The act established a two tier-system of local government setting up county councils, which would operate at a county level, and urban district and rural district councils, which would operate at a much more local level. The district councils were composed of two directly elected representatives from each electoral division, although divisions which contained all or a part of a town received an extra allocation. The rate base was altered to remove the £4 property valuation limit making all occupiers ratepayers and the cumulative voting system was removed. In this way, all occupiers became eligible to vote and to stand for election, thereby officially opening Irish local government to every Irish occupier regardless of class, creed, gender or political persuasion. Gender discrimination in terms of local representatives was also partially removed as women became entitled to stand for election to the district councils, although it was 1911 before they were permitted to stand for election to county or borough councils through the Local Authorities (Ireland) (Qualification of Women) Act (1&2 Geo. V c.35).

There were, however, circumscriptions included in the legislation to mediate what were considered to be the potential worst excesses of local authorities composed entirely of inexperienced, uneducated and nationalist representatives. Significantly, the only group entirely prohibited from local authority membership was the clergy; a decision which reflected a long standing government policy to attempt to prevent religious involvement in Irish local politics (see Crampsie 2014 for a discussion of the success of this aspect of the legislation). In addition, for the first three years of their operation, each rural district council was required to co-opt three members who had previously acted as ex-officio guardians. If the rural district council failed to appoint the relevant number, then the county council would appoint the guardians on the rural district council's behalf. The county councils were also required to include three ex-officio members, in this instance from the grand jury. This provision ensured that the new bodies would benefit from previous experience, but was also undoubtedly included to help the landed classes adjust to their loss of power and position in society. The Local Government Board which had operated so successfully as the supervisory authority over the boards of guardians was given the responsibility of establishing and overseeing the functioning of these new authorities to ensure the uniform enactment of the legislation across Ireland.

The 1898 act also marked a slight about-turn in terms of the territorial network it imposed. While legislative innovations throughout the nineteenth century had moved away from the traditional Irish administrative units towards a more rational division of the country, the Local Government (Ireland) Act firmly repositioned the county as the central unit of local government. The county councils which were created assumed the fiscal and local administrative responsibilities of the grand juries and covered the same territorial entity. The rural district councils took over responsibility for all the non-curative healthcare functions previously held by the boards of guardians and as a result, these new bodies were charged with areas

coterminous with poor law unions. However, there was one important exception; in instances where a poor law union crossed a county boundary the poor law union was split for district council purposes, thereby ensuring the primacy of the county in the reformed local government territorial network. This return to the county as the key unit of local government necessitated the substantial reorganisation of unions which traversed county boundaries in order to ensure that each new rural district was a viable size to operate as a local authority.

This process created a range of rural districts named after the original poor law union with the numbers 1, 2 and 3 appended. The portion which contained the market town on which the poor law union was based, and therefore situated within the initial county boundary became the No.1 district (although in practice this appendage was rarely used), while the next largest became the No.2 district and if required, the smallest portion became the No.3 district. In this way two of the rural districts in County Donegal are denoted by number. Strabane No.2 RD and Londonderry No.2 RD were the respective portions of Strabane and Londonderry Unions within the county boundaries of Donegal (Figure 1).

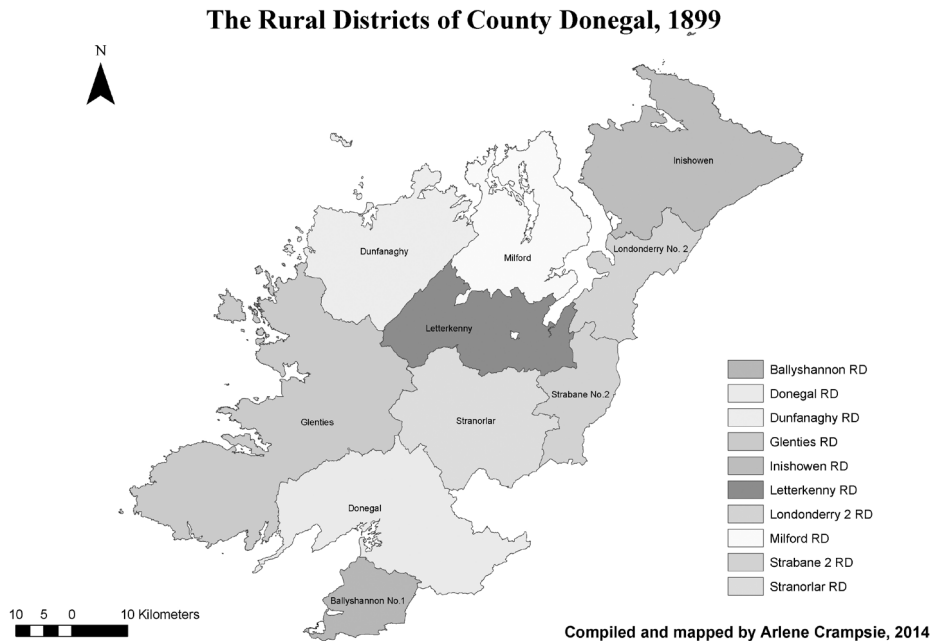


Figure 1: The rural district council areas of County Donegal on their establishment in 1899.

In Meath, the portions of Ardee and Drogheda Unions that crossed the county divide from Louth into Meath became No.2 rural districts and the portion of Edenderry Union within County Meath became Edenderry No.3 RD (Figure 2).

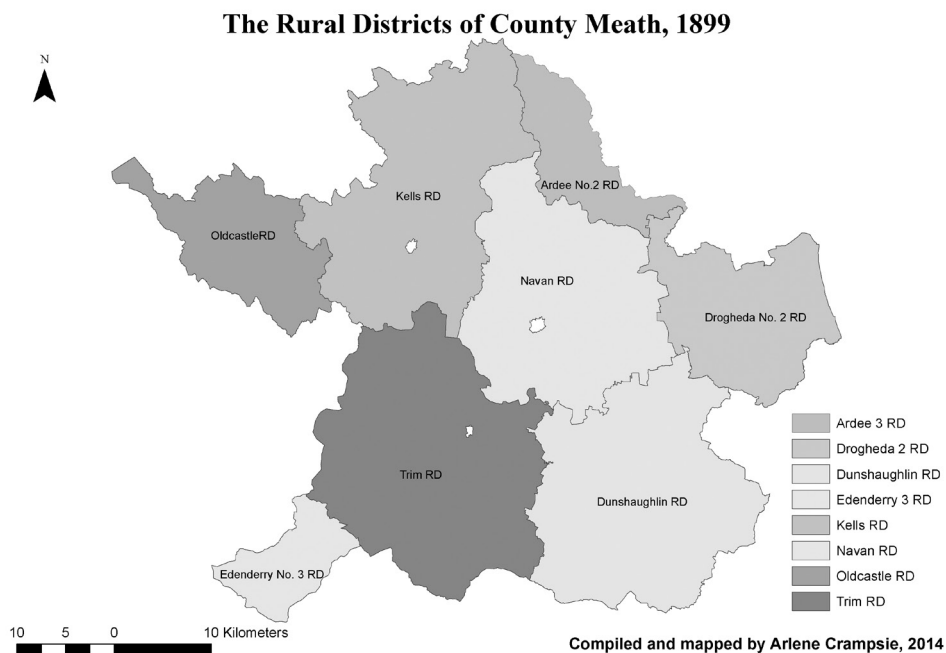


Figure 2: The rural district council areas of County Meath on their establishment in 1899.

Where the portion of a union outside of a county boundary was too small to operate as a stand-alone district, the Local Government Board altered pre-existing union or county boundaries to include the remaining portion. In this process, orders were issued to make sixteen alterations to union boundaries (affecting twenty-four unions) and six alterations to county boundaries (affecting seven counties). This was not an issue in Donegal, but in Meath some modification was necessitated. Only one of the electoral divisions of Celbridge Union, Rodanstown Electoral Division (ED), was within the county boundary of Meath and, as such, was too small to function by itself. It was removed from Celbridge Union to Dunshaughlin Union, while Dunshaughlin lost one of its original electoral divisions, Garristown, which was situated within the Dublin county boundary. The other union to feel the effects of this policy was Kells Union where Mullagh ED was transferred to Bailieboro Union, in County Cavan (27th Annual Report of the Local Government Board 1899, pp 187-229). The urban district councils created under this act operated in all towns previously designated as urban sanitary authorities. Towns which had not been made sanitary authorities due to their small size, but which had been governed by town commissioners were given over to the charge of the rural district council unless they applied for and were granted urban district council status.

In order to reflect the democratic and participatory spirit of this new era of local government, the composition of the boards of guardians was also altered.

From 1899 onwards the councillors elected to each rural district council within the poor law union area would also act as guardians. Strict instructions were provided in relation to the separation of the duties of both bodies to prevent the overlap in membership resulting in the confusion of duties. Each body had its own meeting times, separate minute books and clearly demarcated functions. The boards retained control over the administration of the poor law and all local curative healthcare functions that they had accrued since 1838, but from the 15 April 1899 all other aspects of local administration were transferred to the rural district councils. This completed the final removal of the landed class as privileged power holders in Irish society and marked the beginning of self-government for the Irish population, even if it was confined to matters directly relevant to local level administration.

Transforming Irish Landscapes

On establishment, rural district councils assumed control of a range of local functions, the most significant of which related to public health and sanitation and the provision of social housing through the Labourers' Acts. The councils also assumed responsibility for a diverse array of other functions, including the administration of malicious injuries legislation and liaising with local communities to provide public lighting, public libraries and money order and telegraph services. As the tier of local administration directly above the district councils, the county council is often credited with directing the operation of the district councils; however, a detailed examination of the system's functioning quickly dispels this notion. While the county councils did operate as the sole rating authority for the county and therefore had control over the financial resources made available to the district councils, they had little say in the day to day administration of district council functions. The operation of each rural district council was funded through a combination of the rates levied off each district (sanctioned by the county council), loans which could be drawn down from the government and repaid over time through the rates, and the agricultural rating grant. In shifting the burden of the rates from the landlords to the occupiers it was recognised that the poorest sections of society would simply be unable to meet their share of the rate demand, therefore the agricultural rating grant was essentially a government grant designed to compensate localities for the removal of the £4 property valuation qualification. The only significant function which crossed the boundary between district and county was infrastructural maintenance and development. In this case the role of the county council at district level was confined to setting the annual expenditure budget, certifying contractors' payments and convening the quarterly meetings at which infrastructure was discussed. Even at this point the rural district councils had the option to appeal to the Local Government Board if the county council's decision was considered unsatisfactory. The rural district councils were also given powers to liaise with national authorities such as the Congested Districts Board and the Commissioners of Education; they frequently also donned the self-adopted mantle of local advocates to the state. There is still much work to be undertaken

on these individual aspects of the operation of the rural district councils, but the remainder of this paper will focus on those aspects of the councils' service provision which directly enacted changes in the Irish landscape.

Of the functions outlined above, the administration of public health and sanitation, the provision of social housing and the development and maintenance of transport infrastructure heralded the most significant alterations in local landscapes. While not on the scale of landlord demesnes, estate towns or the development of institutional rings and quarters in Irish towns, these functions did result in important if subtle transformations in ordinary and everyday landscapes. The new councillors elected as a result of the legislative changes were representatives of small geographic areas, from electorates composed of their own neighbours and often kinsfolk. This ensured that local interests were carefully considered and where possible acted on at council level. Repeat electoral success was predicated on the extent to which the councillors achieved the efficient administration of local services, while simultaneously balancing local improvement requests with the vital issue of maintaining low rates. Thus, although the Local Government Board maintained strict supervision and the councils operated within the legislative framework laid down by the act, local variations arose as a result of local priorities and the desires of local populations.

Public Health and Sanitation

From the point of view of the state, the efficient administration of public health and sanitation legislation was the key function of the new rural district councils. Throughout the later part of the nineteenth century the Victorian preoccupation with improving health and sanitation standards spread across the United Kingdom to Ireland as the state attempted to improve the health of the population. As noted above, initial legislation was presented to the boards of guardians to administer, but due to the overburdened nature of the boards, few widespread, tangible improvements were enacted before the establishment of the rural district councils. The creation of the rural district councils provided a body dedicated to the administration of public health and sanitation. One of the first duties of the councils was to assemble a team of sanitary administrators, including an executive sanitary officer (usually the clerk of the council); a medical officer of health, who was a qualified medical professional; and a number of sanitary sub-officers (SSOs), depending on the size of the district. The national extent of the rural district council network with these dedicated teams of officials ensured that public health and sanitation was brought to the forefront of local administration in a sustained way that revolutionised local landscapes. The eradication of disease was viewed as key to the creation of a healthy population, a situation which could only be achieved through the improvement of living standards, the provision of clean, unpolluted water and the proper disposal of sewage.

The first of these aims was potentially the most difficult to achieve. For the first time, it required the extension and acceptance of state power, albeit in the form of the new local authorities, at the level of the individual and the private

home. The task was twofold, involving the education of the population in good sanitary practices at the same time as removing all ‘nuisances’ from both inside and outside dwelling houses. The rural district councils’ SSOs were charged with making monthly inspections of each and every dwelling within the district. They examined each premises in terms of its infrastructural condition, the size and cleanliness of the living accommodation and the cleanliness, number and type of inhabitants. Any sanitary defects were reported to the local medical officers, who determined the action necessitated and the length of time the occupier was given to comply. The SSO was then responsible for overseeing the proper and timely implementation of these orders.

While the number of fourth class houses (mud cabins) had been declining in Ireland since the Great Famine, 9,873 remained extant in 1901 (Census of Ireland general report 1901). In these, overcrowding, poor ventilation and poor sanitation were perennial problems, while the practice of animals sharing the family dwelling was almost ubiquitous in poorer areas. At one of the early meetings of Glenties Rural District Council (RDC) the medical officer reported a sick occupier who was sharing his home with a ‘cow, donkey, calf and fowl’ (Donegal County Archives Service (hereafter DCA), Glenties RDC Minutes 10 June 1899, RDC/4/1/1). In 1900, it was reported that fifty per cent of all occupiers in Dunfanaghy RD engaged in this activity (DCA, Dunfanaghy RDC Minutes 6 Oct 1900, RDC/3/1/1). The district councils targeted these occupiers at an early stage, issuing them with notice to stop the practice and suggesting that suitable alternative accommodation should be provided for the evicted animals. In Glenties RD this measure met with considerable success initially with the SSO reporting as early as July 1899 that there appeared ‘to be a gradual improvement in the sanitary condition of this vast district as the small occupiers are building “byres” for their cattle apart from their dwellings’ (DCA, Glenties RDC Minutes 8 July 1899, RDC/4/1/1). Not all occupiers were as keen to undertake costly improvement works that ended long-held customs which offered the benefits of stock security and added warmth to people’s homes. However, through a combination of education, negotiation and eventually the threat of legal action, occupiers began to comply. By the onset of World War One, reports of these practices across the districts had all but disappeared and in their stead came accounts of the sanitary conditions of the byres and cowsheds which had been constructed in the intervening period.

Victorian environmental improving zeal ensured that the frequently-lamented manure heap which was commonly found outside the main cottage door or against the gable wall was another target for the new rural district councils. As a form of free fertiliser the manure from these heaps was invaluable. However, the stench arising from them on warm summer days was unbearable, while in wet weather run-off commonly bled in through porous cottage walls or followed the slope of the land downhill to enter at the front door of the cottage or an adjoining premises. The obvious health implications attached to such occurrences, combined with concerns over potential structural damage to already fragile cottages, led to occupiers being instructed to have the heaps either removed entirely or moved to a

more suitable location. Other external environmental nuisances also fell under the remit of the rural district councils. The councils were responsible for remedying problems caused by individuals leaving dead animal carcasses along the districts' roads. In most rural districts, reports reached the councils from the sanitary officers describing bodies of horses, donkeys or dogs discovered decomposing along the roadside, having been left by owners who had no money or desire to dispose of them themselves. In coastal areas, the councils were forced to find sanitary ways to dispose of rotten fish left to decompose at piers and harbours, which produced vile odours and posed serious health risks. Their remit also extended to the disposal of rubbish washed in from the sea, in particular during storms, which included the dead bodies of sharks, whales and even sometimes humans (see for example DCA, Dunfanaghy RDC Minutes 9 Dec 1916, RDC/3/1/12 and Kerry Local History and Archives Department, Caherciveen RDC Minutes 28 July 1915, RDC/48/A/6).

Human waste was considered no less problematic. From the outset the sanitary officials of the rural district councils took steps to stop the widespread practice of disposing slops onto roads and into streams, rivers and the sea as it was recognised that it presented a significant public health risk. In Kells RD serious concerns were expressed over the fact that the female national school teacher in Nobber was 'obliged to discharge all her slops onto the public street' (Meath County Library and Archive (hereafter MCA), Kells RDC Minutes 30 Sept 1899, K/1/1). Occupiers were issued with notices to stop traditional sewage disposal practices and landlords were ordered to provide sanitation facilities. Due to the generally dispersed nature of rural settlement, this involved the installation of privies and water closets on individual premises. In the towns and villages which fell under the remit of the rural district councils, however, a more concerted, wholesale approach was necessitated through the creation of an entirely new sanitary infrastructure. Buer (1926, cited Osborne 1996, p. 115) noted 'instead of commemorating themselves with great cathedrals, the Victorians built magnificent drains' a fact which is certainly evidenced in the subterranean landscape created by the rural district councils through the installation of pipes and drains for sanitation systems. That such provision was viewed as timely and necessary is evidenced by the action of a number of ratepayers in areas where the relevant council was slow to undertake these works. An inhabitant of Ratoath threatened to take proceedings against Dunshaughlin RDC if the council did not 'do their duty' in preventing the sewage from Dunshaughlin flowing into and polluting a stream on his land (MCA, Dunshaughlin RDC Minutes 18 April 1905, DU/1/8), while the perceived inaction of Trim RDC in relation to sewage in Athboy led one inhabitant to seek help directly from the Local Government Board stating that 'deaths' and 'great sickness' were caused in his house as a result of the council's failure to remedy the nuisance (MCA, Trim RDC Minutes 10 March 1900, TR/1/1). Such determined expressions of opinions on the part of the public highlight not only their desire for improved sanitary conditions, but also a growing public understanding of the dangers resulting from the improper disposal of sewage.



Figure 3: An early twentieth century water pump restored to its former glory in the centre of Virginia, Co. Cavan. Pumps similar to this appeared across the country in the early twentieth century as rural district councils sought to provide a clean water supply for local populations. (Photo: Arlene Crampsie, Oct 2008).

The improvement of the country's water supply further expanded the network of pipes and drains. Existing water supplies from wells and springs were improved and added to as new pumps were installed and piped water supply schemes were developed in more densely settled areas. Indeed many of the modern day water supply reservoirs were selected and developed in the period between 1899 and 1925. In Donegal, Letterkenny town is still supplied from Lough Salt, a reservoir which was developed for public water supply through the combined efforts of Letterkenny Urban District Council, Letterkenny RDC and Milford RDC in which the reservoir was located (DCA, Letterkenny RDC Minutes 1911, RDC/6/1/9). These changes in water supply created new interactions between the population and their local landscapes. Pumps were generally provided where there was a sufficient population to use the facility and clear directions were given as to what areas each pump was designed to serve (Figure 3). Thus Kells RDC took the decision to provide a pump at Chapel Hill, Cruicetown for the inhabitants of the townlands of Cruicetown and Rahood, while it was suggested that residents in Ardlonan and Thomastown should be provided with a pump in Ardlonan townland. While there was little to stop people availing of the pumps in other townlands, this clear division of territory would naturally have had an impact on people's daily routines and personal interactions. A shift in water supply from the polluted pre-existing well in Cruicetown, situated in marshy lowland and 'about 80 perches distant from the nearest houses', to the new pump at Chapel Hill would have caused the local population to alter existing walking routes, while enabling interactions with people from Rahood on a daily basis (MCA, Kells RDC Minutes 29 July 1899, K/1/1). In Creeslough village in Dunfanaghy RD, an old right of

way was reopened in order to facilitate access to the pump from the village (DCA, Dunfanaghy RDC Minutes 12 Aug 1905, RDC/3/1/17). Evidence of anti-social interaction at these new locations is provided through the discussions of Trim RDC concerning a pump which was broken by children throwing stones into the pump stick (MCA, Trim RDC Minutes 23 June 1917, TR/1/19).

Through the successful administration of these functions, the rural district councils enacted major environmental improvements across the island. The population was educated in relation to personal sanitary practices, sewerage infrastructure was introduced, nuisances were removed from inside and outside houses and the new network of pumps and pipes ensured that the mass of the population had access to a convenient, clean, water supply. Houses which were unfit for habitation were condemned and, as will be discussed below, plans were put in place to rehouse those living in the worst conditions. Animals were removed from dwellings and rehomed in newly built byres. When combined with the rural district councils' other roles in relation to the prevention of the spread of infectious diseases – the inspection and regulation of food supplies, the removal of sick patients from their homes to infirmaries, the disinfection of the clothes and dwellings of the sick – it is clear that the public health and sanitation functions administered by the councils not only transformed the physical landscape but also transformed the health and well-being of the Irish population. Pringle (2012, p. 534) commended the role played by 'public health interventions, such as water purification, more effective sewerage disposal and legislation to safeguard food hygiene' in reducing 'people's exposure to the causative agents of many infectious diseases'. The results of these efforts are evidenced both through the significant increases in life expectancy from the 1880s identified by Pringle and the major decreases in infectious disease outbreaks outlined in the annual reports of the Local Government Board and credited to the efforts of the rural district councils. To cite one example, the number of scarlet fever cases in Ireland dropped from around 11,000 in 1878 to just 4,000 in 1920 (48th Annual Report of the Local Government Board 1920, p. 39).

Building Labourers' Cottages

Perhaps the aspect of rural district council activity which had the most significant landscape impact, however, was the provision of social housing through the Labourers' Cottages Acts. Initially introduced in 1883, the Labourers (Ireland) Act (46&47 Vict. c.60) provided for the first state-funded rural public housing scheme in Ireland. As with public health and sanitation legislation, responsibility for providing labourers' cottages was assigned in the first instance to the boards of guardians. The boards were responsible for developing and implementing housing schemes which were financed through a state loan to be repaid over time by local rates. In spite of the unwieldy legislation and early procedural difficulties, the boards of guardians met with a good deal of success. Helped by legislative improvements in 1885, 1886, 1891 and 1892 (48&49 Vict. c. 77; 49&50 Vict. c. 59; 54&55 Vict. c. 71; 55 Vict c.7), the guardians succeeded in gaining authorisation

for 16,056 cottages nationally between 1883 and 1898, when social housing functions were transferred to the rural district councils (27th Annual Report of the Local Government Board 1899, pp 64-65; see Crossman 2006, pp 144-182 for a detailed account of the work of the guardians in this period). This figure was, however, far outstripped by the 38,004 cottages authorised for the rural district councils between 1898 and 1920. By 1920, some 47,966 were completed, two thirds of which were constructed by the rural district councils (48th Annual Report of the Local Government Board 1920, p. 76). Fraser (1996, p. 35) attributed the increased rate of building under the rural district councils to the inclusion of labourers in the franchise, noting that ‘by giving labourers the vote it forced rural authorities to pay greater attention to the demand for Labourers Act dwellings’. While this certainly focussed local authorities’ attentions, their new zeal was also facilitated by a significant legislative alteration under the Labourers (Ireland) Act, 1906, which extended the definition of an agricultural labourer, simplified procedures and expanded available funds, extending the benefits of the acts to an ever widening population (6 Edw. VII c. 37). The joint efforts of the guardians and councillors in implementing this policy had a significant impact on Ireland’s housing stock as labourers’ cottages accounted for 10% of all dwellings in the country by 1922 (Fahey 2001, p. 123), almost totally replacing the once common mud cabins of the poorest classes.

Aalen’s (1986, p. 303) suggestion that labourers’ cottages did not markedly change rural settlement patterns significantly underestimates the effect of the rapid and widespread introduction of these new housing types on contemporary rural landscapes. It also fails to consider the fact that, with the notable exception of national school buildings, these cottages represented the first tangible incursion of state activity into rural and personal landscapes, marking an important shift in state policy to a new expanded role beyond infrastructural and institutional provision. Not that these new landscapes developed equally across the island. The cottages were clustered in locations with significant labourer populations and also in locations where local rates were capable of supporting the necessary loan repayments. As a result Leinster and Munster accounted for about three quarters of the total, with Ulster and Connacht a distant third and fourth. In fact only 2,500 cottages were built in Connacht, although additional housing was provided there by the Congested Districts Board (Aalen 1986, p. 303). Where these cottages were constructed they were instantly identifiable as state housing, despite the fact that standardised plans were not provided until 1906. The specifications for the cottages ensured that even where the outward appearance resembled vernacular architecture, the layout, building materials and provision of a compulsory external water closet at least ten feet from the dwelling identified these cottages as a specific, new addition to the landscape. With the development of model plans for one- and two-storey single or terraced cottages from 1906 onwards (6 Edw. VII c. 37) this housing type became all the more recognisable (Figure 4).



Figure 4: These extant two-storey, terraced labourers' cottages situated in Stranorlar RD, Co. Donegal were based on the standard Model Plan G. (Photo: Frances Crampsie, Oct 2007).

In particular, the construction of two-storey and terraced dwellings for labourers was quite a novelty in rural Ireland where one off, single-storey accommodation was the norm for the poorer classes.

The legislation stated that where possible cottages should be sited on dry south or south-east facing slopes and that the finished surface of the ground floors should be at least nine inches above ground level. Under no circumstances was the floor level to be lower than that of the adjoining road and the ground surface surrounding the house was to slope away from the house itself (DCA, Specification for the Erection of Labourers' Cottages Undated, LABS/334). Thus, while the councillors who were deputed to select sites for the new cottages were directed to choose sites as close to the original residence of the labourers' as possible, the topography of the local area often limited their possibilities. In addition, the sites selected had to have sufficient land attached to supply each cottage with a portion of ground to cultivate a crop or graze a cow or a number of sheep. Initially this was to be a half acre plot; however, this was increased to an acre after 1892, further reducing the options available to the site committees. Once a suitable site was selected the relevant landowner was approached and an attempt was made to purchase the site at a reasonable price to avoid placing an undue burden on the rates. Where landowners did not agree to terms set by the councils, compulsory purchase orders could be placed on the property. This process required the appointment of an independent arbitrator by the Local Government Board, but landowners had the option to appeal this decision to the Privy Council, thereby instigating lengthy court proceedings. Naturally the district councils were keen to avoid this and rarely pursued these appealed sites through the courts (see Crossman 2006, pp 160-162; Crampsie 2008, pp 262-265 for more details on these aspects). Little

wonder then that the councils preferred to build multiple houses on suitable sites that could be purchased by agreement rather than selecting individual sites for each cottage. This tendency to cluster cottages in terraces or at least in close proximity not only resulted in the favouring of roadside locations and the loose groupings of cottages identified by Aalen (1986, p. 303), but also markedly altered field boundaries as once large, open fields were divided and enclosed in individual acre plots (Figure 5).

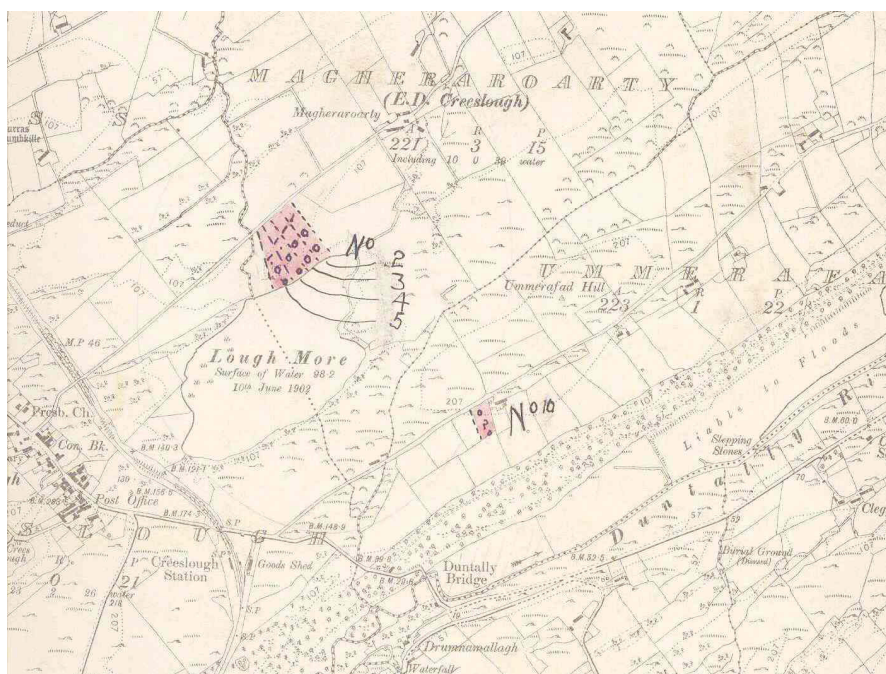


Figure 5: This annotated OS map from Dunfanagh RD, Co. Donegal illustrates both the clustering of labourers' cottages where suitable sites were identified and the impact that this had on local fieldscapes. (Source: Donegal County Archives Service, Ordnance Survey Collection 1909, OS/3/70)

This may have been less dramatic in the small farm landscapes of the west of Ireland, but it wrought noticeable changes in the large farm grazier landscapes of the east.

The introduction of labourers' cottages by both the boards of guardians and the rural district councils was a transformative force on the everyday Irish landscape. Legislative changes and increased financing made it possible for the rural district councils to provide social housing for those most in need in rural areas, continuing the reduction of the population housed in fourth class housing. These hovels were replaced by good quality, sanitary accommodation, which was often the envy of the local small farmer class. In the space of four decades, the 48,000 cottages

provided by these local authorities altered field patterns, introduced new settlement patterns and building types and today remain (even after decades of renovations, additions and alterations) an easily identifiable and significant component of the modern Irish landscape.

Infrastructural Development

In addition to these two main rural district council functions, these low tier councils were also jointly responsible, with the county councils, for infrastructural development and maintenance. Throughout the nineteenth century there was a rapid increase in infrastructural development as the traditional road network was expanded and developments in transportation introduced a network of railway lines and canals to Ireland. With the passing of the Local Government (Ireland) Act, all of the grand juries' functions in this regard were assumed by the new councils. Urban district councils were given full control over roads within their boundaries, while the rural district councils took responsibility for all local infrastructure within their districts under the nominal supervision of the county councils. County councils held direct responsibility for all county-at-large schemes, in particular the network of 'main' or county roads. Interestingly, however, the majority of county councils, with the exceptions of Fermanagh, Galway, Kildare, Kilkenny, Limerick, Mayo, Queen's County, Roscommon, Sligo, Tipperary North Riding, Tipperary South Riding and Tyrone, issued declarations stating that there were no main roads in their counties (Maintenance of Roads in Rural Districts [Ireland] 1901). This was a purely political decision, which went explicitly against the advice of the county surveyors (professionally qualified and certified engineers) and the district councils. The cost of the main road network was to be levied half off the county rates and half off the rates of the district through which they passed. By declaring that the county had no main roads, full expense would rest at the feet of the district councils, allowing the county councillors to maintain low county rates thereby improving their chances of re-election. Regardless of the motivations, however, this decision by the county councils ensured that the majority of the administration of the country's main infrastructural features fell to the hands of the rural district councils. In this role they supervised the improvement of the pre-existing infrastructure and the development of new routes facilitating the increase in motor transport throughout the early twentieth century. In doing so, they improved access to previously isolated parts of the country, enabling local populations to benefit from better access to markets for their goods and increasing tourist traffic, in particular along coastal routes.

The rural district councils' role was both proactive and practical. Councillors routinely divided into sub-committees tasked with travelling to specific sites to examine proposed works or sites thereof in the company of the county surveyor. This ranged from walking the length of proposed extensions to railway lines, to visiting sites where the development or improvement of piers and harbours, bridges, roads and footpaths was under consideration. The councillors engaged with the minutiae of decision making, examining surveyors' reports which contained

details about the proposed extent of works to be undertaken and the materials to be used. For example: 'To re-build the north-east wing wall, and re-build and cope the east parapet of Phoenixtown Bridge, on the road from Slane to Ardee, between Newtown Fortescue and Cheever's Cross; cost not to exceed £8-. (The wing wall fell last winter; the parapet is rotten)' (MCA, Ardee No.2 RDC Minutes 19 May 1899, AR/1/1). The councillors' decision on the approval of these works was final, although in practice they generally acceded to the county surveyor's requests. As modern technological advances such as steam rollers and rock breakers became locally accessible the councillors were charged with weighing the benefits of the initial capital outlay on new machinery against long term labour costs in order to determine the best use of the districts' rates. Where the rates were unable to sustain the outlay, the councillors generally entered into agreements with either the county council or surrounding district councils to jointly purchase new equipment. The application of these new technologies combined with the councillors' detailed local supervision ensured the development of a much improved road network in the early twentieth century.

The councils were also enabled to seek external sources of funding and to liaise with other national and private bodies with respect to infrastructural development. Particularly along the western seaboard, grants from the Congested Districts Board were drawn down by the district councils to repair, replace and reform existing transport facilities. This varied from providing funding to replace bridges (see discussion over Meenacladdy Bridge DCA, Dunfanaghy RDC Minutes 1901 – 1906, RDC/3/1/2;3;4;17) to developing new piers and harbours. In Milford RD, the councillors actively campaigned for parliamentary funding to provide a new safe harbour in the district to protect the local herring industry, which was badly hit by the loss of a large number of boats in previous winter storms (DCA Milford RDC Minutes, 9 Jan 1909, RDC/7/1/9). The councils could also facilitate the development of railways and canals in areas where profitability for private companies was unlikely. Where it was felt that new transport linkages would assist in opening areas to markets or to increasing tourist traffic the councils could guarantee that any shortfall in costs would be borne by the ratepayers. While this saw the construction of many new railway extensions in particular, it did engender conflict between the districts which would pay least and benefit most and those who would pay most but gain little. In the latter instance, councillors sought to protect the local ratepayers' interest by actively attempting to block new developments. Thus, in Donegal, Londonderry No.2 RDC attempted to prevent the railway extension between Strabane and Letterkenny as such a development would make the existing Londonderry to Letterkenny line less profitable and place too great a burden on the ratepayers (DCA, Londonderry No.2 RDC Minutes, 11 June 1904, RDC/10/1/1). In Meath, much discussion revolved around the Boyne canal, with Edenderry No.3 RDC strongly protesting at plans by the county council to take over the maintenance of the canal as it would be:

‘a great hardship upon ratepayers in this end of County Meath, who would never derive any benefit no matter how successful the undertaking might be and [we] are of the opinion that if any particular portion of Meath desires facilities for the purpose of benefiting its commerce, the representatives of that portion ought not endeavour to victimise the ratepayers of non-benefiting districts for that purpose’ (MCA, Edenderry No.3 RDC Minutes, 28 April 1914, E/1/7).

Having put forward guarantees to cover shortfalls in these endeavours, the rural district councils assumed a level of interest in the running of the services and threatened the removal of funding if demands were not met. In Donegal, the district councils advised the various railway companies of the need to alter timetables, improve punctuality and on occasion even appealed for special discounted fares to be introduced or extended (see discussion of low fares for harvest men travelling by train to catch the Derry boat for Scotland in DCA, Dunfanaghy RDC Minutes, 6 June 1912, RDC/3/1/9). In these ways the councils managed their responsibilities to local ratepayers, while simultaneously bringing new forms of transport infrastructure to peripheral areas that simply would not have been served by commercial enterprise.

Indeed, local rates were used to support the extension of a range of other services which were perceived to be commercially non-viable along the western seaboard and to other sparsely-populated locations inland. The guarantee to cover shortfalls was of paramount importance to the spread of money order and telegraph offices across the country. In guaranteeing to cover any financial losses the rural district councils facilitated the development of these services in a range of rural and isolated locations on a trial basis. In many areas there proved to be sufficient demand and the councils’ guarantees were eventually dispensed with, allowing normal market conditions to operate. Without this financial backing many of these rural areas would have remained isolated outposts well into the twentieth century. Instead, they were integrated into the world of modern communication flows, which facilitated the ease and speed of communication between the core and the periphery and assisted in the development of local economies. Indeed, these improvements in transport and communication enacted through the early years of the twentieth century played a significant role in ensuring that all areas of the island were drawn into the conflict which ensued during the War of Independence. The Westminster-based government had extended its reach into every corner of Ireland and as a result few areas escaped entirely untouched as the forces of nationalism attempted to oust the British state from the entire country.

The final years

The onset of the War of Independence (1919 – 1921) and its aftermath sounded the death knell for rural district councils. The financial stringencies resulting from World War One had circumscribed the functioning of all local authorities in

particular relating to large scale capital projects. However, for the most part repair and maintenance work and general service provision continued unabated and new improvement schemes were quickly formulated when the war ended. This respite was short-lived as the creation of Dáil Éireann, in 1919, and the subsequent transfer of local authority allegiance from the Local Government Board to the new local government department detached local government from its main revenue stream – British treasury funding. As local authority financing became solely dependent on local rates, the newly-planned improvement schemes for infrastructure, public health and sanitation and housing were abandoned and only the most basic of low level repairs and maintenance works could be countenanced. More significant, however, was a shift in focus by the councillors from local issues to national politics, compounded by the 1920 local elections, which witnessed a Sinn Féin takeover of all rural district councils in areas with a majority nationalist population. In these areas, limited financial resources, insufficient quorums because of councillors on the run and a focus on furthering Irish independence by passing nationalist resolutions ensured that much of the everyday work of the district councils was abandoned. When combined with the destruction of the infrastructure network as a direct result of first the War of Independence and then the Civil War, many of the gains of the previous two decades were reversed. A momentous challenge faced the district councils when peace was finally restored. Despite the fact that most of the sitting councillors in 1923 had been elected for their revolutionary fervour and not their interest in local administration, they nonetheless turned their attention to everyday business and began the task of restoring conditions locally. The continuing economic difficulties which faced the young Irish state hampered such efforts and brought the rural district councils, appealing for increased funding for local administration, into direct conflict with the government. As part of the centralising zeal of the new nation state, the dissenting voices of the rural district councils were removed in 1925, thereby ending a short-lived experiment in local democracy.

Conclusion

Over the two decades of the rural district councils' existence ordinary, everyday Irish landscapes were utterly transformed. Previously common accounts of the squalor of everyday life where 'the man and his wife and children live[d] with the pigs and chickens, the cow and the donkey' and where 'the manure heap and green pool' were so near the front door as to make entering difficult (King 1882, p. 20) were consigned to history as a new modern Irish landscape began to emerge under the careful watch of the rural district councils. Through the administration of public health and sanitation legislation and the provision of social housing these landscapes were replaced with sanitary, well-constructed dwellings with outhouses for animals and privies for human waste. New settlement patterns were introduced to the Irish landscape and existing fieldscapes were altered. Clean water supplies were provided through local pumps, which became focal points for local communities, while an underground network of pipes and drains improved general environmental conditions in towns and villages nationwide.

The development of new transport infrastructures improved local economies and facilitated the transfer of people and ideas from core to periphery at speeds unimaginable a century earlier. Unfortunately, the abolition of the rural district councils in the early years of the Free State, in the immediate aftermath of a period of prolonged financial stringency and political turmoil, ensured that their passing has barely been attended by scholars of the period. Rather than acknowledging the role of local government in the transformation of Irish landscapes, these early twentieth-century alterations have been viewed largely as organically occurring processes, requiring little explanation or examination. Such standpoints neglect to consider the level of effort, time and consideration on the part of the state, the Local Government Board and the rural district councils in effecting these changes. The transformation of rural Ireland was driven by revolutionary legislation, placed in the hands of local people who were offered an opportunity to control their own destiny and that of their localities for the first time. It is clear that for as long as sufficient funding was available they grasped this opportunity and successfully administered complex legislation that resulted in significant improvements in environmental and socio-economic conditions across the island. Perhaps the unintended consequence of this innovative legislation was that by allowing local populations to sample local autonomy, the quest for national autonomy was strengthened. Unfortunately, when independence was eventually achieved it was this most representative and locally based form of local government that was sacrificed in the quest to create a stable, highly centralised, modern state.

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