

Ethnography

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Ire in Ireland

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Fulingeann fuil fuil I ngorta
ach Ni fhuilingeann fuil fuil a dortadh

[A man can tolerate his own blood starving to death, but he won't tolerate his blood attacked by a stranger] (local proverb)

'A Hundred Thousand Welcomes' (Board Failte, *Irish Tourist Board*)

ABSTRACT ■ When *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland* was published some 20 years ago, it was promptly made a classic of psychological and medical anthropology by academics in the United States and simultaneously broadly and heatedly criticized in the Irish press as an egregious violation of community and cultural privacy, a debate that has blown hot and cold over the intervening decades. Following a recent return to 'Ballybran' in the summer of 1999 which ended in her expulsion from the village, Nancy Scheper-Hughes recounts her attempts to reconcile her responsibility to honest ethnography with respect for the people who once shared their homes and their secrets with her, thereby offering candid and vivid reflections on balancing the ethics and the micropolitics of anthropological work.

KEY WORDS ■ anger and loss, culture, ethics and politics of fieldwork, madness, revisiting the field

'Well, I am sorry to tell you, Nancy, but you are not welcome. No you are not. Have they let you a place to stay down in the village?' I was standing awkwardly in the once familiar doorway of 'Martin's' sturdy country house in a ruggedly beautiful mountain hamlet of An Clochan, a bachelor's outpost of some nine or ten vestigial farm households. Once, we had been good neighbors. During the summer of 1974, Martin had warded off the suspicions and dire warnings of his wary older sisters and had befriended us so far as to feel out my political sympathies toward various activities of the local IRA in which he and his extended family were involved. 'Ah, I should have listened to Aine', Martin said.

Over the past quarter of a century, some memories in An Clochan were engraved in stone like the family names of the Moriartys and the O'Neills carved over the smallest village shops in West Kerry signifying that *this* public house, *this* name, *this* family are forever. And what was remembered in this instance was a slight (in village terms, a slander) committed by me against the good name of the community. Ever the proud nationalist, Martin warned me to stay clear of village institutions: 'You'll not be expecting any mail while you are here', he said rather ominously.

Martin still cut a dashing, if compact, figure, now sporting a pair of gold wire-rimmed designer eye glasses and dressed on that afternoon in an impeccably starched white shirt. A shiny new sedan was parked outside his door. Martin's bachelor household, shared on the odd weekend with an older sister who works in the city, had clearly prospered over the past 2 decades. But all traces of active engagement with the land are gone. There was no sign of the haying that should have been going on during those precious few warm and sunny days in mid-June. No symmetrical mound of soft, boggy turf stood in front of the farm house. A quick side-long glance to the right showed the barn standing empty and swept clean. Above all, the neat row of newly laundered clothing strung across the outdoor line included no work-a-day overalls or denim shirts. What was once an active and viable farm had become a gentlemanly country home, a far cry from the days of Martin's youth when his beloved 'Da', the patriarch of a large household, rose early on winter mornings and went down to the sea to gather crannach, dilisk, carageen and other native edible seaweeds, half-freezing in his shirt-tails and warming himself by beating his sturdy arms across his chest. This, mind you, accomplished before the *real* work day of the farm had begun.

When Martin was still a very young man an older and more robust brother was sent off to America to make room for Martin, one of the younger and more vulnerable sons, to take up the family farm. Although primogeniture was then still customary, the father-patriarch had the freedom to choose his primary heir among his sons, according to his perceptions of his sons' skills, personalities, aptitudes and needs, as well as his and his wife's needs as they grew older. And the Da had settled upon Martin. But

during the man's life-time, farming ceased being an enviable way of life and sibling jealousy had turned to sympathy toward those who were left behind to till the small 'rock farms' of An Clochan. And Martin's diasporic siblings had fared exceedingly well, numbering among them college teachers and clergy.¹

Aine, the older sister, scowling while drying a plate and peering over Martin's shoulder, came out of the back of the house to give me a scolding: 'Who made you such an authority? You weren't such a grand person when you and your family came to live in our bungalow. You could hardly control your own children. Why don't you go home and write about your own troubles. God knows, you've got plenty of them, with school children shooting each other and US planes bombing hospitals in Kosovo. Why pick on us?'

Martin interjected: 'Admit it. You wrote a book to please yourself at our expense. *You ran us down, girl, you ran us down.* You call what you do a science?' And before I could deny that I did, he continued, 'A science, to be sure, the science of scandals. We warn our village children before they go off to the university in Cork or Dublin to beware books about Ireland written by strangers.' Seeing that his words had found their mark and tears were coursing freely down my cheeks, Martin softened his stance a bit, but not his sister who roundly rejected my apologies: 'You say you are sorry, but we don't believe it. Those are crocodile tears! You are just crying for yourself.'

Breaking the mood, Martin turned to my adult son, Nate, who was busy trying to hide himself in a thick hedge near the barn. Martin's words were soft and courtly: 'You are a fine looking lad to be sure, Nate, and I'm sorry to be talking to your mother like this in your presence.' Then, he returned his gaze to me: 'Sure, nobody's perfect, nobody's a saint. We all have our weaknesses. But you never wrote about our strengths. You never said what a beautiful and a safe place our village is. You never wrote about the vast sweep of the eye that the village offers over the sea and up to Conor Pass. You said nothing about our fine musicians and poets, and our step dancers who move through the air with the grace of a silk thread. And we are not such a backwater today. There are many educated people among us. You wrote about our troubles, all right, but not about our strengths. What about the friendliness of neighbors? What about our love for Mother Ireland and our proud work of defending it?' When I protested that I could not have written about those radical activities for fear of reprisals from outside against the village, Martin replied: 'Ah, you were only protecting yourself.' 'Is there *anything* I can do?' I asked. 'You should have thought about that before. Look, girl, the fact is that *ya just didn't give us credit.*'

Homecoming

Twenty-five years had elapsed since a young and somewhat brash anthropologist and her off-beat, counter-cultural family – shaggy-haired, gentle ‘hippie’ husband and their three rambunctious babies and toddlers – stumbled somewhat dazed and almost by default into the relatively isolated, rugged mountain community of ‘Ballybran’ just over the spectacularly beautiful Conor Pass through the Slieve Mish mountains past the Maharees and nestled on the shores of Brandon Bay, a cul de sac on the eastern end of the Dingle Peninsula in West Kerry.

It was late spring 1974 and we had reached the end of the line, figuratively *and* literally. We had spent several weeks in a rented car canvassing villages in West Kerry and West Cork in search of an Irish-speaking (though bilingual) community kind enough to accept our presence for a year of live-in fieldwork. We would begin our tentative inquiries about securing housing with the local post mistress or the resident curate or parish priest only to be told that people living in this or that community would not much fancy being observed by a live-in stranger. Ethnographic fieldwork was still a new and alien concept for a country people known both for their spectacular hospitality and for their fierce family loyalty and privacy. Tourists who came and went for the brief salmon-fishing season on the Dingle Peninsula were one thing, and bothersome enough in their own way, but a resident writer-anthropologist was something else again. In a country dedicated both to the banning of books *and* to revering the written word, any writer learns to tread lightly and to have a quick exit plan.

On arriving for the first time in ‘Ballybran’ I introduced myself and my family to the young curate of the spectacularly beautiful ‘half-parish’ with some trepidation. My official documents failed to dazzle this down-to-earth curate. What *did* make a difference were letters from our local university chaplain vouching that Michael and I were ‘good enough’ Catholics, if perhaps a bit wayward in our post-Vatican II enthusiasms for the transformation of Mother Church, and an almost illegible note from an older friend and informal mentor, the late Canon Law scholar, David Daube, stating that we were trustworthy and decent people. And so, ironically, with the sponsorship and blessing of the same Irish Catholic Church that I would take to task in the pages of my book, we settled into Ballybran a few weeks before the feast of Corpus Christi in June 1974 and we stayed until late spring the following year.

A fine touch of Irish madness

I arrived in Ballybran with a starting set of altogether alien and ‘outsider’ questions. Why did the Irish claim the highest rates of hospitalized mental illness in the world? Why was schizophrenia the primary diagnosis used in mental hospitals there? I believed that by studying ‘madness’ I could learn something about the nature of Irish society and culture as a whole. Deeply influenced by the early writings of Michel Foucault, I believed that a society revealed itself most in the phenomena it excludes, rejects and confines. Irish madness, I hypothesized, could be seen as a projection of specifically Irish conflicts and themes.

What was going on in remote, supposedly bucolic, western Ireland that was over-producing so many young psychiatric cases? Who were the likely candidates for mental hospital? What were the events that lead up to a psychiatric crisis? Did the Irish actually have *more* mental illness than elsewhere, or were they simply more likely to label a village non-conformist as mad? Was the straight and narrow of Irish country life so rigid that it lead to a straight jacket for some? What was going on in Irish farm families, and in the public spaces of village life, schools, pubs and church?

The book that emerged, *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland* (1979), was a blend of old and new approaches: child rearing and adult personality, TAT tests, and reflexive/interpretive



Figure 1 ‘Saints and Scholars’ outside Ballybran, 1977. Photo reproduced by kind permission of Carol B. Stack.

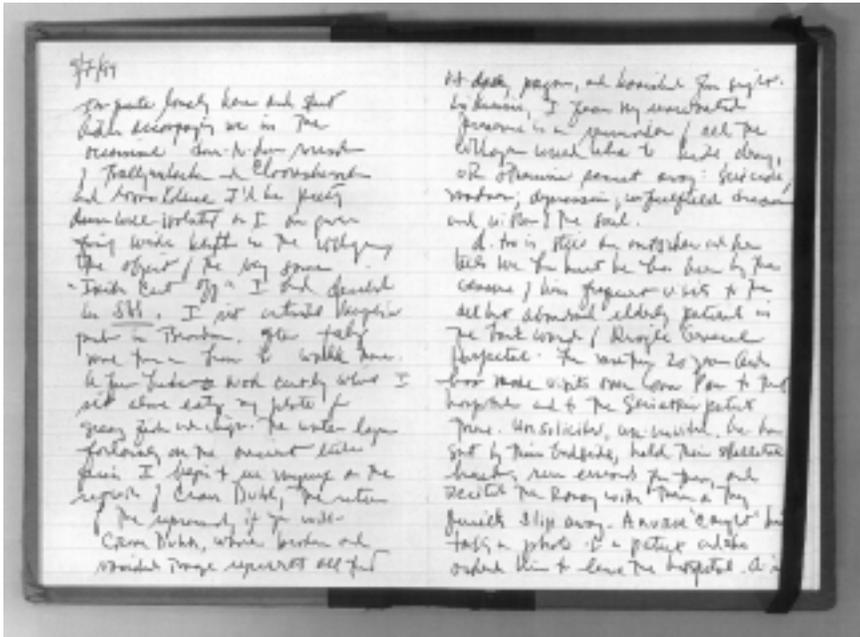


Figure 2 A page from my infamous 'Irish Journal' which played a role in my undoing in An Clochan in 1999

anthropology. Theoretically eclectic, it applied insights from Freud, Erikson, Durkheim, Gregory Bateson, R.D. Laing, and Michel Foucault to a tiny population of Irish-speaking farmers, shepherds and fishermen. Using the heterodox field methods of a qualitative and interpretive ethnographer, I amassed a great deal of circumstantial evidence supporting the pathogenicity of certain aspects of rural Irish social relations, especially those between the sexes and between parents and children. Rural Ireland, I concluded, was a place where it was difficult to be 'sane' and where 'normal' villagers could appear more 'deviant' than those institutionalized in the County Kerry mental hospital.

Madness was, I argued, a social script and there were appropriate and inappropriate ways of 'going' and 'being' mad in rural Ireland. Extreme eccentricity was allowable, even coddled, if it could pass as harmless 'foolery' or if it came wrapped in the mantle of Irish spirituality. 'Mihal, bless him, hasn't been quite right since the death of his mother, but what harm if he sits up all night in the barn singing to the cows?' Mihal would never see the walls of St. Finian's madhouse. But there would be no excuses made for Seamus, the reluctant 44-year-old bachelor who expressed *his* frustration at a parish dance by leaping to the stage and drunkenly exposing himself to a crowd of village girls. He, of course, was quite mad.

Central to my thesis was the image of a dying and anomic rural Ireland resulting from the cumulative effects of British colonization, the Great Famine (1845–9), and various 20th-century development and ‘modernization’ schemes that tied the economy of rural western Ireland to Great Britain and then, with Ireland’s belated entry into the European Community in 1973, to western Europe, as a whole. Throughout the process, the final vestiges of a subsistence-based peasant economy were destroyed to make way for capitalist modes and relations of production. The symptoms of malaise that I was observing in the mid-1970s were many: population decline in the coastal western villages resulting from out-migration and permanent celibacy; widespread welfare dependency of young, displaced farmers, shepherds and fishermen; depression, alcoholism and episodes of madness pushing up the Irish psychiatric hospitalization rates into first place worldwide.

Beneath the quaint thatched roofs and between the thick, clay walls of the rural farm households what was going on was an extraordinary emotional drama of labeling and denial that allowed some Irish county children (especially daughters and first-born sons) to achieve full adult status, education and eventual emancipation from the family, while consigning other children (especially latter-born sons) to the status of the ‘leftover’, worthless and pathetic *‘aindeiseoir’* of the family. Every rural family seemed to have its high-achieving first-born pet sons and its under-achieving, last-born backward and painfully shy bachelors and its hopeless and stigmatized black sheep. Parental aspirations for achievement and status rested with the first-born, and everything was sacrificed to improve his life chances. In the ‘old days’ when farming was still a valued and productive way of life, he would have inherited the farm. But with Ireland’s entry into the European Economic Community, the prized first-born was being reared for export, for emigration.

The rural Irish parents were faced with a new problem: how to keep back at least one son for the farm and to care for them in their old age. The task involves a certain amount of psychological violence: a cutting down to size and a crippling of the aspirations of the designated farm heir. In collaboration with village teachers, shopkeepers and the parish priest, farm parents tended to create a ‘sacrificial child’, oddly enough not in the form of the disinherited and dispossessed child, but in the more lethal and ambiguous form of the farm heir. From the time of his birth the heir is labeled ‘the left over’, ‘the last of the litter’, ‘the scraping of the pot’, ‘the runt’, ‘the old cow’s calf’, a child who could never survive beyond the tolerant and familial confines of the village. ‘Blessed are the meek’, it is written, ‘for they shall inherit the earth’ . . . and with it (I wanted to add) a life of involuntary celibacy, poverty, obedience and self-negating service to the old ones.

Through shaming and ridicule the farm heir eventually grows to fit his

reduced role and life chances, and he comes to think of himself as only good enough for the farm and for the village, places generally thought of as not very good at all. Often enough the boy is able to make the necessary accommodations to his role. I have always been struck, even early in my anthropological career, by the enormous resilience and elasticity of the human spirit despite the violence that culture and society so often visit upon it. And there *were*, at least in the case of rural Ireland, some compensations and rewards: the boy who stays behind is praised as the dutiful, loyal, 'saint' of a son.

Some farm heirs never adjusted to the demands made of them and they aged poorly becoming angry, isolated, bitter individuals, cut off from the flow of human life. Some become the depressed and alcoholic bachelor farmers who populate the several pubs that cater to a population of just 400 and some villagers. Others become eccentric hermits, and still others who deviated too far from the straight and narrow of village life become psychiatric patients at St. Finian's Mental Hospital in Killarney. Many of these men were preoccupied with paranoid fears of bodily encroachment or obsessed with unfulfilled sexual and generative needs and fantasies.

Why didn't they escape? Some would have if they could, but too often they conceded to the prevailing view of themselves as incomplete men, lacking something, a bit too soft. To his face I've heard it said of a dedicated stay-at-home son: 'Sure our Paddy is a big old slob of a man, soft and sentimental, full of *dutcas*' (i.e. referring to warm, almost maternal, fellow feeling) while the man in question would nod his head in agreement. Hence, the rural Irish 'double bind' – two contradictory injunctions – on the one hand: 'You're worthless, you can't live beyond the farm; sure, if you had any guts you would have been out of here years ago', and, on the other: 'We need you – you're all we have; how could you even think of leaving your poor old Da? You're the last hope we have!' A third injunction prevented any escape from the horns of the dilemma: Stay, but you are forever a boy-o; leave, but you are guilty of filial disloyalty. A powerful ideology in the form of a puritanical and authoritarian version of Catholicism bolstered the symbolic violence contained in the exploitative social and family systems.

I had reinterpreted Gregory Bateson's (Bateson et al., 1963) double-bind hypothesis of schizophrenia within a larger social context to show that not only individual families, but entire communities can participate in patterns of distorted communication that can harm the individual while rescuing the social system. Scapegoating, collusions, family myths, and 'bad faith relations' are found not only in dis-eased or 'weak' families but in vulnerable communities as well. Social and economic situations can be double-binding, so that hard pressed farm families are forced to engage in unfair tactics for self-preservation at the expense of the designated child, and the whole community can come to accept and reinforce such distorted 'family myths'. It was not my intention to 'blame' village parents, but rather to shed light on

an aspect of the rural Irish collective unconscious so that, once recognized, the emancipation and liberation of the generative scapegoat – the ‘good, stay-at-home’ son – might be possible.

The ‘native’ reaction: ethnography on the couch

Ironically, no sooner was I notified in early 1980 that I was to receive the Margaret Mead Award from the Society for Applied Anthropology, honoring a book that ‘communicated anthropological ideas and concepts to a broadly concerned public’, than *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics* became embroiled in a large and lively trans-Atlantic controversy. The first critics of the book suggested that ‘Ballybran’ did not exist at all, and that it represents a ‘composite’, made up of bits and pieces of dozens of rural communities, both real and imagined. But in the fall of 1980 a columnist from the *Irish Times*, Michael Viney, headed out along the Dingle Peninsula, peddling his 10-speed mountain bicycle, buffeted by awesome gale winds and pelting sheets of rain in search of what he later described in one of his columns as the ‘mythical valley of Ballybran’.

After a few false starts and cases of mistaken identity, Viney (1980) rejoiced on finally reaching his desired goal as he slipped inside the snug materiality of Peg’s Pub. ‘Yes’, said the publican identifying herself, ‘I was one [in the book] who didn’t believe in sociological statistics!’ ‘Mrs Scheper-Hughes had sat here often’, Viney mused with a pint of Guinness in his hand, ‘as I was doing now, with the rain hosing down from the mountains beyond the open door.’ In a subsequent column (1983), Viney pictured himself as he thought the anthropologist might have seen him:

Sometimes – cycling over the hill to the post office, past the rusty, crumpled bracken and the lichen-crusting walls – I look down at the little houses (which are for my writerly purposes crouched in Atlantic mist) and wonder what the anthropologist would make of our community (or indeed, of *me*, a squinting, unkempt figure in black oilskins and dripping cap, alienated, irretrievably from his own urban peer group, the epitome of *anomie* on wheels). Would she decide that our remote half-parish . . . have a whole new perspective on [its] right or ability to exist?’

Both the scholarly and the popular Irish and Irish-American communities were up in arms. The approach I was developing – a form of cultural critique – was seen as ‘biased’ and ethnocentric. Admittedly, my approach deviated from the usual anthropological manners which determined that we describe only what was ‘good’ and ‘right’ about a given society and culture. One was *not* to use anthropology in order to diagnose the ailing parts of the social body as a cultural pathologist of sorts. Why, I was asked, did my

description of unhappy and conflict-ridden rural life depart so radically from Conrad Arensberg's (1937) classic and almost loving portrait of *The Irish Countryman*? In part, perhaps, because my ethnography was told, not from the perspective of the old men seated comfortably at the pub and at the hub of Irish country life, but from the perspective of their thwarted middle-aged sons. These were the 'young lads' and boy-os who would have to wait until their 50s, if lucky, to come of age and into their own, and even then they would have to wait, hand and foot, on the old ones who had retired to the 'west room' of the household and who, unlike their fathers before them, would most likely never marry, given the demographic imbalance [village girls had long since begun to desert the village lured by the promise of relative freedom that out-migration represented] or have a family and therefore a power base of their own.

Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics offered a counter-hegemonic view of Irish country life, but one that struck some sensibilities as 'anti-Irish', 'anti-Catholic', or 'anti-clerical'.² In her incisive review of my book for the progressive Catholic journal, *Commonweal*, Sidney Callahan (1979: 311) charged me with religious bias suggesting that I was 'strangely insensitive to the religious idealism of the people' and that 'my hostility to the sexual repressiveness of Irish Jansenism, a hostility always to be encouraged [presumably by secular humanists such as myself], had made [me] tone deaf in [my] interpretation of religious phenomena.' Where I had seen needless self-sacrifice, Callahan questioned whether some 'repressions weren't worth the price' and she suggested that 'wit, learning, music, the work ethic, and altruistic sacrifice for family and high ideals' might also flourish in Ireland exactly because sex, aggression, and individualism were so severely curtailed. If the rural Irish values of self-discipline and mortification of the flesh contribute to the isolation, celibacy, depression, madness and alcoholism of bachelor farmers, they might also account for the extremely low incidence in the Republic of Ireland of physical assault, rape, adultery and divorce.

Another Irish-American critic, Eileen Kane (1982), described *Saints* as 'unethical' in its violation of the 'privacy' of the community and its right to maintain its 'community secrets'. These refer to the 'best-kept and worst kept secrets' (Bourdieu, 1977: 173), the ones that everyone in the community must keep in order to ensure the complicity of all in the collective forms of bad faith that make social life possible, such as, in this instance, the symbolic violence against the farm heir masquerading as concern and generosity toward the poor, inept last born sons of the village. In my various responses I denied that anthropologists had a responsibility to honor *community* secrets, especially those protecting what Sartre (1956) meant by 'bad faith' relations.

In *From Anxiety to Method*, George Devereux (1977) observed that in the field, as on the couch, the dynamics of transference and counter-transference

can shape the ethnographer's perceptions and the resulting analysis. Indeed, the field can loom as a large Rorschach test for the naive anthropologist. Lacking sufficient critical distance and reflexive insight, the result can be distortion in the form of glaring omissions, editing, ambiguous descriptions and so forth. Ethnographers may use the field to work out their own neurotic conflicts and anxieties about attachment, power, authority, sanity, gender or sexuality. Here, confrontation and projection, rather than avoidance and denial, can lead to distortion in the form of a highly subjective interpretation that does violence to the natives' own understanding of the meaning of their culture and social relations.

From time to time, Devereux cautioned, the ethnographer should pause to analyse the nature of the object relations in the field and at home throughout the process of data analysis and writing. The goal of such ethnological self-analysis was to expose and to strip away the layers of subjectivity and bias that get in the way and distort the perception of an objective ethnographic reality. To the end Devereux remained an empiricist dedicated to a belief in the perfectibility of objective anthropological facts, data and interpretation.

In the aftermath of the Irish controversy, I found Devereux's solution less than satisfying. For, as I saw it, the real dilemma and contradiction was this: How can we know what we know other than by filtering experience through the highly subjective categories of thinking and feeling that represent our own particular ways of being – such as the American Catholic-school-trained, rebellious though still ambivalently Catholic, post-Freudian, neo-Marxist, feminist woman I was in my initial encounter with the villagers of Ballybran.

Both the danger *and the value* of anthropology lie in the clash and collision of cultures and interpretations as the anthropologist meets her subjects in a spirit of open engagement, frankness and receptivity. There was, I concluded, no 'politically correct' way of doing anthropology. Anthropology is by nature intrusive and it entails a certain amount of symbolic and interpretive violence to the 'native' peoples' own intuitive, though still partial, understanding of their part of the world. The question then becomes an ethical one: What are the proper relations between the anthropologist and her subjects? To whom does she owe her loyalties, and how can these be met in the course of ethnographic field work and writing, especially within the problematic domain of psychological and psychiatric anthropology where the focus on disease and distress, difference and marginality, over-determine a critical view.

Getting over: crediting An Clochan

Over the past 2 decades, 'Ballybran' has been host to a small but steady stream of anthropologists and sociologists from Europe and North America – little red paperback of *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics* in hand – searching among the dispersed mountain hamlets for some of the key protagonists of the book. And so, the drama of hide-and-seek played between villagers and their various defenders, unabashed curiosity seekers and global interlocutors continues to this day.

Today, of course, neither 'Ballybran', anthropology, nor the ethnographer are what they were in the mid-1970s. The Ballybran that I describe here is barely recognizable. The last of the real thatched farm houses have been razed and modern suburban ranch style homes have appeared in their place. The only 'thatched cottage' in evidence is Nellie Brick's former tea-rashers-butter-and-bread shop now being renovated as a snug and romantic pub for the pleasure of tourists. The interior is rustic English countryside and the thatch has been imported from Poland. But the thatchers, at least, are from Killarney even if they learned their 'traditional' trade courtesy of a development grant from the European Union. Still, the thatch smells as sweet and inviting as ever, and some kind soul had thought to stick a cardboard sign on a window sill indicating 'Nellie's window', the vantage point from which the wonderful old wag had once kept tabs on the village world.

Still, were I to be writing the book for the first time and with hindsight, of course there are things I would do differently. I would be inclined to avoid the 'cute' and 'conventional' use of pseudonyms. Nor would I attempt to scramble certain identifying features of the individuals portrayed on the naive assumption that these masks and disguises could not be rather easily de-coded by villagers themselves. I have come to see that the time-honored practice of bestowing anonymity on 'our' communities and informants fools few and protects no one – save, perhaps, the anthropologist's own skin. And I fear that the practice makes rogues of us all – too free with our pens, with the government of our tongues, and with our loose translations and interpretations of village life.

Anonymity makes us unmindful that we owe our anthropological subjects the same degree of courtesy, empathy and friendship in writing as we generally extend to them face to face in the field where they are not our 'subjects' but our boon companions without whom we quite literally could not survive. Sacrificing anonymity means we may have to write less poignant, more circumspect ethnographies, a high price for any writer to pay. But our version of the Hippocratic oath – to do no harm, in so far as possible, to our informants – would seem to demand this. Additionally, a hermeneutics of (self-) doubt could temper our brutally frank sketches of other people's lives as we see them, close-up but always from the outside looking in and 'through a glass darkly'.

As for the selectivity of my observations, what I had left out and what I might have said about An Clochan in the mid-1970s was that the village offered an extraordinary glimpse of a closed corporate rural community in which social hierarchy and social difference were successfully curtailed, where ‘putting on airs’ was spurned in the interests of *communitas* and where, despite the general rule of farm family patriarchy, girls were reared to be high achievers, women did *not* have to marry, and single women could raise sheep, drive cows, manage a village pub, run a primary or secondary school, scold the local gombeen man, or boss the local curate till he ‘cried uncle’ and gave in on a particular theological or political point. Rural women could choose to marry young or they could wait and marry late in life and then marry men much younger than themselves. Alternatively, especially in a family of daughters, they could refuse several marriage proposals in order to remain at home and inherit their father’s fields and his favorite pipe or their father’s pub and his celebrated goat-skin drum. Moreover, married women kept their maiden names *and* their pre-marital social and self identities.

Perhaps nowhere else in the world were women so free to walk country roads at night without fear of either physical assault or malicious gossip. Nowhere else have I seen women and men banter with each other in public without every source of humor reduced to a double-entendre. And nowhere else were bachelors and spinsters accepted as normal and unremarkable members of society, able to lead autonomous, if lonely, lives. No eyebrows were raised at the bachelor who not only planted and harvested but also cooked his own spuds, who not only raised his own sheep but was quite capable of knitting his own socks and sweater. How distant this was from Ivan Illich’s (1982: 67) description of the woeful state of bachelors in those parts of traditional Europe more characterized by gender ‘complementarity’:

You could recognize the bachelor from afar by his stench and gloomy looks. . . . Solitary men left no sheets or shirts when they died. . . . A man without a wife, sister, mother, or daughter had no way to make, wash, and mend his clothes; it was impossible for him to keep chickens or to milk a goat.

In An Clochan at the time of my study social life was not confined to couples. Dress for both sexes was casual and the sturdy figure ahead of you on the road wrapped in layers of trousers, woolen vests, long coat and shod in muddy green Wellington boots, and waving a stick, was just as likely to be that of a woman ‘driving’ her small herd of cows. I may have misread important aspects of social life in a community where *gender* and *sibling* bonding was as or more important than the sexual or the erotic bond. If marital relations were problematic it was in part because marriage interrupted and intruded upon other competing and equally valued affections

and loyalties. Surely any anthropologist practicing today would not wish to suggest a hierarchy of appropriate affections such that life-long friendships, brotherly and sisterly in nature, would somehow count for less than conjugal relations.

If psychiatric hospitalization rates were high, rape and sexual assault were unknown at that same time. Theft was so rare that one definition of an eccentric was a person who was overly preoccupied about the safety of his property, while a case of 'paranoid schizophrenia' could be diagnosed on the grounds of having accused one's neighbors of wanting to steal one's sheep or cows or having shifted the stone boundaries that mark off one field from another. And 'Brendan the rapist' who I interviewed at the county mental hospital in Killarney had sinned only in his thoughts and was by his own account a virgin, unlucky in sex. So, as a young married woman in An Clochan, I could hail a ride on the back of Morris's motorbike without any hint of scandal, just as I could sit and talk with the local curate over a mid-morning cup of tea in his living room with the priest still in his pajamas.

House-keeping, gardening and meal-preparation were kept to a minimum, thus freeing both women and men for other voluntary activities and a good deal of leisure time that was spent in fostering friendship and conviviality – for men in one of several village pubs, at local sheep fairs and regional markets, and for women in shops, church and school related activities, and for older women and widows in house calls to friends and far-out kin. There was time out for story-telling and time out for play. There was time to gather around deaths, wakes and funerals – a full day was given over for the funerals of each of the 38 villagers who died during 1974–5. Everyone had radios and some owned televisions, but most people still preferred 'live entertainment' and they gathered frequently, especially during the winter, at pubs, church halls and in each others' homes to entertain themselves with their own music, singing, step-dancing, and poetry recitation. Both young and old, male and female, were encouraged to develop their own repertoire of songs, recitations, or 'steps' which they could be called on to perform at the drop of a hat. Though the shyness and modesty of bachelors could be heart-breaking, the institutionalized pattern of 'coaxing' could bring even the most reluctant fisherman or shepherd to perform his 'party piece' and shine before his peers.

The ethic of modesty and deference assured that no one singer ever stood out or sought undue attention. Meanwhile, the reciprocal call and response mode – 'Sing us a song, Paddy'; 'Oh, I couldn't', etc. – allowed for the limited expression of praise and appreciation which could always destabilize into 'coddling' – 'Sure, he's the best singer in the village'. Together these promoted a strong sense of community solidarity at the expense of the individual, aimed as they were at suppressing any hint of unseemly arrogance or self-importance. In other words, social equality was fostered through the

very same witty games of ‘coddling’, ‘giving the mickey’ and ‘having a crack’ which I had described in *Saints and Scholars* as having a decidedly adverse effect on the more psychologically vulnerable individuals who were less able to evaluate and respond appropriately to the ‘double-binding’ messages they carried. To wit: refuse the praise and you are putting a damper on the high spirits of your companions; accept the praise and you appear the fool for taking it seriously.

Gregory Bateson, who had developed the ‘double bind’ theory of schizophrenia that I used in my book, understood that human communication patterns were extremely complex and that some double-binding injunctions were damaging to certain individuals while some were beneficial, even therapeutic to others. The verbal duels and interactional challenges so characteristic of rural Irish wit may have contributed to the cognitive dissonance suffered by Irish schizophrenics unable to differentiate literal from metaphorical truth. But just as surely these communication patterns contributed to the development of Ireland’s long tradition of saints, poets and scholars as well.

So, while I told the anecdote about the cruel coddling in the pub of a shy bachelor who was teased unmercifully about his inability to speak to me without stammering, I failed to tell the anecdote about the day of our leave-taking from the village when I saw out my front window the very same painfully shy man standing under a tree at the bottom of the little path that led up to our cottage. I wondered what he was doing there, ‘loitering’ for such a long time. I went about my packing and house-cleaning, but each time I passed the window I saw him standing there, so still, hardly changing his posture. Finally, after a few hours, it occurred to me that perhaps he was waiting for me to come down the path on my way to the village after an errand. So, I packed up the babies into strollers and backpacks and we made our way down the path as if on our way to the village post office. As I came close to Paddy, I shyly lifted a finger and crooked my neck at him in the traditional, understated Kerryman greeting at which Paddy came forward and put out his hand which I clasped in both of mine as he said: ‘You’re leaving us. I just wished . . . wanted . . . well . . . God bless you, Mum. And God bless Michael and the wee ones, too.’ In all my many comings and goings as an anthropologist, there was no goodbye that I have held as dear over the many years as this one which had been wrested from the giver with so much difficulty.

The supreme irony is that the anthropologist who has always been in search of a relatively classless, genderless, egalitarian society, had stumbled on to one early in her career without ever recognizing it as such or singing its praises in this regard. This village egalitarianism was expressed as well in the painful decisions that had to be made about inheritance, the argument that was so central to my thesis. While these decisions never came

easily to either generation, parents or children, in the end they were decided with a strong commitment to fairness and with attention to correcting the unwitting losses experienced by one sibling at the hands of the other. Unlike rural English patterns of primogeniture based on a ‘winner takes all’ model, Irish farm families always strived to settle each of their ‘disinherited’ sons and daughters with some kind of life security – whether through carefully sought after connections with potential patrons in commerce and the trades in the next town (see Arensberg, 1937) or through the Catholic Church and its extensive web of educational and social welfare institutions, or through helpful relatives and former neighbors abroad – so that virtually no ‘disinherited’ Irish child was sent out into the world to ‘seek their fortune’ alone as had so many generations of ‘disinherited’ rural English children (see Birdwell-Pheasant, 1998). Consequently, the ‘traveling’ and diasporic Irish, including over the generations a great many from the little parish of An Clochan, have contributed, disproportionately, to the culture and civilization of the larger English-speaking world (see Hout, 1989: chapter 5; Keneally, 1998). For all these reasons and for whatever it could possibly matter now – all credit to An Clochan.

Crediting ethnography

To begin with, I wanted that truth to life to possess a concrete reliability, and I rejoiced most when the poem seemed most direct, an up front representation of the world it stood in for or stood up for or stood its ground against. (Seamus Heaney, 1995:12)

At the heart of the anthropological method is the practice of witnessing, which requires an engaged immersion over time in the lived worlds of our anthropological subjects. Like poetry, ethnography is an act of translation and the kind of ‘truth’ that it produces is necessarily deeply subjective, resulting from the collision between two worlds and two cultures. And so, the question often posed to anthropologist-ethnographers about the dangers of ‘losing one’s objectivity’ in the field is really quite beside the point. Our task requires of us only a highly disciplined subjectivity. There are scientific methods and models appropriate to other ways of doing anthropological research, but ethnography, as I understand it, is not a science.

Very much like the poet who decides to enter another oeuvre for the purpose of translation – Seamus Heaney, for example, describing his entering the poetry of Dante³ – the anthropologist sees something in another world that intrigues them. It can be as simple as ‘Oh, I like that! Let me see if I can’t understand how that particular mode of being and thinking and feeling and sensing the world works, the sense it makes, the logic and the

illogic of it, the pragmatics and the poetics of that other way of life.’ And so we think, ‘Yes, I’ll go there for a while and see if I can’t come back with a narrative, a natural history, a thick description – call it what you will – that will enrich our ways of understanding the world’. Like any other form of ‘translation’ ethnography has a predatory and a writerly motive to it. It is not done ‘for nothing’ in a totally disinterested way. It is *for* something, often it is to help us understand something – whether it is about schizophrenia as a projection of cultural themes or about ways of solving perennial human dilemmas around the reproduction of bodies and families and homes and farms.

In referring to his own long-term project of translating the *Beowulf*, Seamus Heaney (1999) drew on a generative metaphor based on the Viking relationship between England and Ireland, distinguishing between the historical period known as the Viking raids and the period known as the settlement. The raid, he said, is a very good motive for poetic translation. The poet can raid Italian or German poetry and come back with a kind of ‘booty’ called ‘imitations’ of Homer ‘imitations’ or Virgil, for example. Or, alternatively – as Heaney did with the *Beowulf* translation – the poet can approach the translation through ‘settlement’, that is, entering the oeuvre, ‘colonizing’ it, taking it over for one’s artistic purposes. In settling in with the work, you stay with it a long time, identify with it in an imaginative way. You change it and it changes you.

Similarly, there are ‘raiding’ and ‘settlement’ ways of doing the work of anthropological translation, although granted both these metaphors play on our discipline’s worst nightmares. Neither raiders nor settlers have much currency in the parts of the post-colonial world where most of us still work. In our vocabulary, ‘raiding’ is what Margaret Mead sometimes did – going in and after a culture in order to raid an idea, a practice that could be useful to young mothers in Boston or to adolescents in Los Angeles. Another form of raiding is the kind of ‘quick and dirty’ research we sometimes conduct with a specific goal, such as evaluating an AIDS prevention program in Botswana or a child survival program in Northeast Brazil for a governmental or international agency. Quick and dirty – a raid, if you will – but necessary at times and valuable in its own right.

And, then, there is ethnography and participant observation – the settlement metaphor par excellence. Here we enter, settle down, and try to stay for as long as people will tolerate our presence. As ‘travelling people’ we are at the mercy of those who agree to take us in as much as they are at our mercy in the ways we represent them after the living-in and living-with is over. Anthropologists are a restless and nomadic tribe, hunters and gatherers of human values. Often we are motivated by our own sense of estrangement from the society and culture into which we were existentially thrown. I went to rural Ireland, in no small part, in search of better ways to live and

I found these especially among some of the old ones with whom I spent the greater part of my days and long winter evenings in An Clochan and who, perhaps, biased me toward an overly critical view of village life in the mid-1970s.

Rabbit run: taking leave

The fateful visit with Martin spelled the beginning of the end of my return to An Clochan. By the next day I was beginning to feel the weight of social censure closing in, not so much on me personally, as on those in the village who had taken me in – in the village vernacular who had ‘fed me and kept me’ – or had taken me under their wing. When S., for example, arrived to meet me for breakfast the next morning, she was in a state of considerable agitation. She had not slept well the previous night. ‘I was awakened’, she said, ‘by a terrible nightmare. Oh, it was an awful sensation, as if my house was being invaded by a dark force, an ill-wind, or an alien invader.’ She looked hesitantly to me for a clue to her ominous dream. I replied only that houses were often symbols of the body and of the self and left it at that.

But that night it was my turn to be awakened by a ghostly visitation, a hooded creature who pointed a long skinny finger over and beyond my head and toward the sea. Like Scrooge, I was happy to find myself unchanged in the morning and I suppressed the urge to hug the wooden bedstead promising: ‘I am *not* the woman I was, I am not the woman I was’. But I knew this to be untrue in certain fundamental ways. And I took out my little notebook – the one that would ultimately prove to be my undoing – and jotted down a few ragged thoughts.

Shaken, I continued my daily rounds of the village, by now heavy of heart, and uncertain of step. I waved to a solitary hay-maker, the first one I’d seen in several days. He did not recognize me and he stopped to take a break. Making small talk I asked why the man took such care in making several small little hay cocks rather than larger haystacks. ‘Because the hay is much sweeter this way and it pleases the animals more’, he replied, tipping his cap as I walked along. After the visit with Martin I began to walk the country roads with my head bowed, practicing a government of my eyes so as not to elicit an automatic greeting from those who might later regret it. And I took to announcing myself at the open door of older friends and acquaintances: ‘It’s Crom Dubh, the crooked one, come back to An Clochan.’ Indeed, I *was* beginning to feel very much like Crom Dubh, the pagan force and alter-ego of the village who epitomized everything dark, hidden, secret, and overgrown, tangled among the brambles of the old graveyard – everything that needed to be resisted. My presence was a daily

reminder – ‘salt in the wound’ said one villager – of everything they would like to hide, deny and secret away.

In fact, however, most villagers did not avoid me. Many fell back into the old habit of telling me poignant stories and catching me up on people, events and changes in the parish. At times there seemed to be a pressure, even a hunger to speak. Kathleen shook her head one evening: ‘You are like the village analyst and we are all on the couch. We can’t seem to stop ourselves from talking.’ It made no difference that I was not back looking for secrets, for there was simply no way of escaping them. Since I had no other reason for being in the village except to visit with people, my presence became something of an obstacle, even to myself. In this small world, words were as dangerous as hand grenades or bullets, as much for those who gave as for those who received them.

An older couple took the risk of going about with me in public at considerable social risk to themselves. It was, they said, the Christian thing to do, and never mind what others thought or said. Aiden even appointed himself my colleague in arms and after an afternoon of making house calls together, he commented wearily: ‘Ah, but this fieldwork is tiring’. But as the situation grew more prickly I asked the new priest of An Clochan to help me call a parish meeting so that I could apologize in general terms for any pain I caused the community and so that villagers who wished could collectively express their anger. Then, I hoped, naively perhaps, we could clear the air and move forward. I explained how difficult it was to try to do this work of repentance and explanation door to door. The priest was unsure, however. ‘Will you be up for it?’ he mused. ‘And will *they* be up for it? Is this drawing too much attention to an old hurt? Should you apologize? Would this be good thing?’ The good priest promised to mull it over with a few confidants in the community and he promised to get back in touch with me. ‘But come to Mass this Sunday’, he urged. When, a few days later, I approached the Communion line, Father M. held the Host up high and looked about him reciting my name very loudly, indeed: ‘Nancy, receive the body and blood of Christ’. But after Mass he said that a parish meeting would be too risky and that I should just continue as I was doing, making my rounds, door to door, the best I could. As I walked home alone from Mass I wondered how much longer I should stay.

The ‘drumming’ out of the village, when it came, was swift. There were warning signs a few days before that trouble was brewing. Conversation would suddenly stop when I entered a pub, and I would smile weakly and turn on my heels. During an afternoon drive I was taken past a few sites that had been subject to local harassment, including car and house bombings. No one had ever been hurt in these attacks, but the damage to property was considerable and the message conveyed was clear. The parish was controlled, in part, by threats and intimidation by a small but active group of

local cultural nationalists. Among the kinds of people 'unwanted' in the village were British landowners, suspected homosexuals, purported drug dealers, 'gombeen men' (local petty capitalists who bought up old farms) and me, that new species of traitor and friend, the anthropologist.

My local friends were shaken by the tide of rejection, and they were understandably conflicted by divided loyalties. On the last evening of my stay in An Clochan I returned to my B&B filled with stories to share. It had been a good day and I had managed to make contact with some dear old acquaintances. My flagging spirits were on the rebound. But as I popped my head into the kitchen to tell B. that I'd be down for tea in a few minutes, she turned from the stove with a face that was flushed by more than the gas burners. 'I have some terrible news', she blurted. 'Is something wrong at home?' I asked, clutching at my throat. 'Did something happen to Michael or one of the children?' 'No, no, not that. But, Nancy, you have to leave. Right now. This evening. You can't eat here. You can't sleep here anymore.'

'Did I do something wrong?' I asked. 'Did I offend someone in the village today?' It was evening, I was dog-tired, and my feet were sore. I had no transportation. Was it even possible to call up a taxi from distant Tralee at this hour? 'Is there anyone else who can put you up tonight?', B. asked. 'Let me think', I said stupidly, 'while I go upstairs to pack.' In the little attic room I moved slowly as in a dream, folding my few things into the suitcase pulled out from under the bed. I hadn't eaten since morning and I had missed dinner the evening before. So I was hungry as well as tired. But where could I go? Who would be safe from whatever intimidation B. had gotten? And what was she told? 'Get that woman out of here immediately before someone gets hurt?' I sat on the edge of the narrow bed and jotted down a few thoughts to clear my head. But they were so scrambled I tore out the page, crumpled it into a small wad, and tossed it carelessly into the wastepaper basket.

Outside night was falling. The closest home where I thought I might be able to stay was a mile away and I walked there quickly. My reception was kind but wary, and my new friend let me know, at last, that indeed the community as a whole had closed down where I was concerned. 'It's not fair', he said, 'But I can't not tell you that it hasn't happened. It's really not very good right now for *anyone* to be seen with you.' Nonetheless, he kindly insisted that I spend the night, or even the week, if I wished. He refused, he said, to be intimidated. 'Well, I'll go back and get my bags, but I will only stay until morning. And I'm so sorry for putting you in this situation'. 'It's only a book', he said. 'And people here will tell you on the side that it has made them rethink a thing or two, for example, about how to raise and treat one's children.' And he laughed. 'The young mothers, here, they now go all out of the way to nurse their babies, and they are forever hugging them. Just to show you, I sometimes think.'

By the time I walked back to my 'guest' house to pick up my bags, my older friend and village sponsor was already waiting for me in the parlor.

'Where have you been? We've been worried. We've worked out a solution', he said glumly. 'You can spend your last night here – I'll see to it that no one blames B. – and I'll be back to fetch you first thing in the morning. Be completely ready. I'll carry you as far as Limerick and from there you'll take the bus to Dublin. No, don't argue; I insist. We can at least see you off to the next county. And we can use the extra time to talk.'

The next morning as I crept quietly down the creaking stairs I found a good strong bowl of tea and a plate of toast waiting for me in the 'guest room'. Ah, I thought, it's the *Lon na Bais*, the custom of the last meal that was left out just before an old one dies.⁴ The family of the house had gathered around the long table in the kitchen for a breakfast that was taken in almost monastic silence. I tried to be equally silent in the next room. In taking my leave finally from B. she confronted me with my crime: 'All that time you spent in your room upstairs. You weren't just reading – you were writing! You left a trail in the wastepaper basket. People *said* you were writing. They saw you scribbling into your note book outside the pub in Brandon.' 'I won't deny it', I said. 'But was it such a grave sin? I needed to write my way through my own confusion and loneliness.' Then, B. gave me a quick hug and whispered in my ear, 'I'm so sorry for this. Ignore them. Keep up the good work.'

Then, the *Lon na Bais* ritual continued as my village mentor took me on our final rounds together of the village, this time to feast my eyes for the last time. Like a local funeral procession, he drove me slowly past all the sites that were dearest to me. 'Take a good look', he said. 'There's your Brandon Head. And there's your creamery, what's left of it. And here is your primary school. In a few hours the children will be lining up to march inside. And here's your Peg's pub, your Tailor Dean's house, and your old widow Bridge's cottage overgrown with brambles.' Then, as we turned the final curve past the abandoned little hamlet of Ballydubh, with the village almost out of sight, he forced me to turn around and take in the full sweep of the mountains and the sea. 'And there', he said, 'is your An Clochan. You had best say good-bye, now.'

In the end perhaps we deserve each other – well matched and well met, tougher than nails, both of us. Proud and stubborn, too. *Unrepentant* meets *Unforgiving*. So, in a way villagers were right to say 'We don't believe you are *really* sorry.' In their view this would mean nothing less than a renunciation of self and of my vexed profession, a move I could not take. *Saints* was written from a particular perspective at a particular moment in time and by a particular sort of anthropologist-ethnographer. And time, as they say, is a great healer. There is no such thing as everlasting ire anymore than there is undying love. Anything can change. A sense of proportion and a

sense of humor may eventually replace injured pride. And in the meantime, as the Tailor of Ballybran would have said, 'just leave that there.' The next 25 years may pass even more swiftly than the last. And, God willing, by then *both* Crom Dubh and I will have found a way to return to 'our' village.

Notes

- 1 Michael Hout's (1989) excellent quantitative study of social mobility and industrialization in Ireland between 1959 and 1973 indicated that the 'excess' sons of rural farm families did well and better in the Irish cities to which they migrated than the urban-born children of the Irish working classes.
- 2 The debate swirled around the following: Sidney Callahan, 'An Anthropologist in Ireland', *Commonweal*, 25 May 1979, 310–11; Michael Viney, 'Geared for a Gale', *The Irish Times*, 24 September 1980; Nancy Scheper-Hughes, 'Reply to Viney and to Ballybran', *The Irish Times*, 21 February 1981; Eileen Kane, 'Cui Bono? Do Aon Duine?', *RAIN* 51, August 1982; Nancy Scheper-Hughes, 'Ballybran – Reply to Eileen Kane', *RAIN*, no. 51, August 1982; John Messenger, 'Reply to Kane', *RAIN*, No. 52, October 1982; Eileen Kane, 'Reply to Scheper-Hughes', *RAIN*, no. 52, October 1982; P. Nixon and P. Buckley, 'Reply to Kane', *RAIN*, no. 54, February 1983; Eileen Kane, John Blacking, M. McCann and G. McFarlane, 'Social Anthropology in Ireland – A Response', *RAIN*, No. 54, February 1983; Michael Viney, 'The Yank in the Corner: Why the Ethics of Anthropology are a Concern for Rural Ireland', *The Irish Times*, 6 August 1983; Nancy Scheper-Hughes, 'From Anxiety to Analysis: Rethinking Irish Sexuality and Sex Roles', *Journal of Women's Studies* 10, 1983: 147–60.
- 3 This section was inspired by a discussion between Seamus Heaney and Robert Haas on 'the art of translating poetry' at the University of California, Berkeley, on 9 February 1999.
- 4 According to tradition in West Kerry, the 'old ones' are expected to sense the approach of death, which was often personified as in the saying, 'Death hasn't left Cork on its way to meet me yet!', or 'He has struck me. I feel his blow in my heart.' Many an older village would tell with great satisfaction of the moment his old mother or father took to bed and sent for the priest with the words, 'Today is my dying day' or 'Sure, I won't last the night'. A more discreet way of signaling that death was near was to ask for the final meal, what the old ones called the *Lon na Bais*. 'Auntie' Anne explained it as follows:

One morning, about two weeks after I had returned from America, my father called me to his bedside and he asked me to bring him a

large bowl of tea and two thick slices of fresh baked bread. ‘Father’, says I, ‘you must be mistaken. Our people haven’t used bowls for more than a century. You must mean a large cup of tea.’ ‘It’s a bowl I want’, he replied. I offered him some cognac to ease the pain, but he stopped me saying, ‘No, my daughter, I have no more use for that – I had plenty enough when I was a boy. But today I am going to see my God.’ So I did bring him the tea and the toast and I laid it next to his bed, but he never touched any of it. He just sat up in bed, smiling at it, anxiously waiting. He died that night. . . . Wasn’t that a beautiful death? It was what the old folks called the *Lon na Bais*, the death meal.’

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