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# Shaky foundations: Romantic nationalism and the development of the 'Irish model' of Neolithic settlement

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With the rise of populism and nativism in modern politics, our attention is increasingly drawn to what distinguishes *Us* from *Them*. It is frequently argued that not since the 1930s has international politics been so divisive (e.g. Niklasson and Hølleland 2018; Hogan *et al.* 2015). It is no coincidence that the modern discipline of archaeology emerged in the febrile atmosphere of the interwar years in Europe, as nation-states looked to the distant past for the essence of distinctive cultural identities. Much remains to be done if archaeology is to unpick this legacy (Brück and Nilsson Stutz 2016).

A case in point is the interpretation of evidence for settlement at the time of the first farming communities in Ireland and Britain. Though historically scarce, considerable evidence came to light in Ireland during the second half of the 20th century, and into the new millennium. Around 90 rectangular timber Neolithic houses have been identified in Ireland to date (Smyth 2014). The consensus that has developed in the interpretation of these structures follows the 'classic model' of dispersed, permanent, timber farmsteads that has its roots in the 1930s (Cooney 2000, 68), part of a 'sacred canon of Irish archaeology', which we are 'inclined to defend as Holy Writ' (Woodman 2000, 2–3). McLaughlin *et al.* (2016, 121), identify the continuing influence of the 'Irish model' on the interpretation of Neolithic rectangular timber structures.

The Irish model is often contrasted with that of southern Britain, where, given the general absence for substantial Neolithic 'houses', a less fixed settlement pattern has often been suggested. While more Neolithic timber structures interpreted as houses have come to light in Britain in recent years (see Barclay and Harris 2017), Britain (and most other European countries) have a significant corpus of Neolithic timber structures that are classified as non-megalithic monuments – a classification that, according to Kinnes (1992), archaeologists working in Ireland have generally failed to 'seek or accept'.

Kinnes (1992, 26–7) went on to say that it would be surprising if Ireland were the only megalithic province in Europe to lack a non-megalithic component, arguing there was a 'a clear need for reappraisal and a re-articulation of established traditions'. Other archaeologists developed Kinnes' argument (e.g. ApSimon 1997; Darvill 2011; O'Sullivan 2011), but the consensus remains that the majority of rectangular timber structures in Ireland are 'decidedly domestic', part of the 'settlement signature' of Neolithic Ireland (Smyth 2006, 240; 2011, 28; see also e.g. Cooney *et al.* 2011, 599).

In what follows, the three principal sites that underpin the Irish model are examined in the context of the development of the modern discipline in Ireland, and its divergence from British archaeology in the 1920s and 1930s. While the British and Irish evidence is frequently considered together in British syntheses, the Irish evidence has often been interpreted from a different (more ethnographic, less outward looking) perspective. This has served to reinforce the idea that Ireland and Britain followed different paths to Neolithisation, despite the ample evidence of cultural interactions during the Early Neolithic, particularly in the 'Irish Sea zone' (Lynch 1990; Waddell 1992).

Of course, British interpretations are not free from cultural bias, and it has been suggested that a colonial approach has in some cases led researchers to apply the 'Wessex model' of the southern English Neolithic uncritically to Ireland and Britain as a whole (Cooney 1997; Barclay 2001).

#### THE SYMBOLISM OF THE IRISH COTTAGE

At the time of the formation of the Irish Free State, small-scale mixed farmers embodied the values of the nation, representing the 'critical nation-forming class' (Larkin 1975, 1245; Garvin and Hess 2009, 21). Éamon de Valera knew his constituency well. The rural communities of Ireland's western seaboard, furthest from the malign influence of Britain (e.g. Richards 2009, 28), lived among some of the best-preserved ancient monuments in Europe. They represented the 'timeless' continuity of Irish rural life and become emblematic of Ireland's cultural independence from Britain. This was famously expressed in de Valera's 1943 radio address to the nation:

The Ireland that we dreamed of would be...a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry...whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that men should live.

In the decades leading to independence, writers and artists had elevated the rural homestead to the status of national icon, bearing the 'cultural weight' of the ideal Ireland (Nash 1993; Cosgrove 1995). In the spirit of romantic primitivism, the rural landscapes that were evoked were 'emptied' of any indications of hardship (Cusack 2001, 227). No artist contributed more to the symbolism of the Irish homestead than Paul Henry, who along with Jack B. Yeats, formed the Society of Dublin painters in 1920 (Duffy 1997, 67). Henry's simplified, stylised west of Ireland landscapes came to represent the *real* Ireland, such that he was 'almost the official artist of the Free State' (Brown 1985, 76; Sheehy 1980, 180; see Fig. 12.1, below). In *Saorstát Éireann* (Hobson 1932) – the official guide to the Free State – Henry's paintings featured not in the section of contemporary art, but instead as candid representations of Irish rural life (Reid 2007, 937). The *Saorstát Éireann* handbook features 10 illustrations of thatched cottages, along with liberal images of ancient artefacts (Cusack 2001).

Adolf Mahr, the Austrian archaeologist who combined his position as head of the National Museum of Ireland (NMI) with that of leader of the country's branch of the Nazi party, wrote the section on Irish archaeology. He set out his view that megalithic monuments were introduced to Scandinavia (where he believed farming in Europe began) from Spain via the staging post of Ireland (Mahr 1932, 212). Mahr saw the small-scale farming communities of Ireland's Atlantic seaboard the 'most important continuum by which



Fig. 12.1: Paul Henry (1876–1958), *A Connemara Village*, 1930–1933. Oil on wood panel, 76.2 × 91.4 cm, NGL.4734. National Gallery of Ireland Collection. Photo © National Gallery of Ireland.

archaeological past and the present society are connected in an unbroken succession' (quoted in Wallace 2007, 198).

The peasant house had become a central fixture of openair folk museums in Scandinavia, Germany and Central Europe in the early 20th century (Stoklund 1999). It was a means by which the urban middle classes could experience the material culture of traditional farmers, and the essence of the authentic *Völk* (Nic Craith 2008). At the invitation of the Irish Folklore Commission, founded by de Valera's government, with Mahr a Board member – a 'Swedish Folk Culture Mission' carried out a survey of Irish rural houses in the mid-1930s (O'Dowd 2012; Carew 2018).

Mahr accumulated a substantial folklife collection at the NMI, elements of which he began to display alongside archaeological material. President Éamon de Valera opened the 1937 exhibition on the Irish farmhouse at the NMI, which had been organised by Mahr to celebrate the work of the Swedish mission. In the summer of that year, the exhibition travelled to Edinburgh, where it was displayed at the Congress of the International Association of European Ethnology and Folklore. The Irish delegates described the theme as

‘the Irish farmhouse, and the cultural landscape and the rural life which formed its ethnological background’ (O’Dowd 2012). The rural cottage was the metaphor that enabled farming life in modern Ireland to be projected back into the mists of antiquity. What was lacking was an ancient archaeological example of an Irish house which was comparable to the cottages observed by the Swedish mission in the west of Ireland. The task of finding such evidence would fall to Mahr’s successors.

Mahr left Ireland in the spring of 1939, having secured eight weeks’ leave from the NMI to attend the International Congress of Archaeology in Berlin, and to attend pre-arranged meetings with fellow Nazis at the Nuremberg Rally (Mullins 2007, 90–1). He did not return to Ireland. Mahr was arrested for war crimes and imprisoned by British soldiers in Germany in 1946.

Nevertheless, Mahr ensured his archaeological legacy in Ireland by establishing the NMI, *not* the universities, as the ‘academy of the future’, (O’Sullivan 2009; Carew 2018, 34). The leading archaeologists of the next generation mentored by Mahr included Joseph Raftery, future Director of the NMI, whose son, Barry, later become Professor of Celtic Archaeology at UCD. Barry Raftery’s predecessor at UCD was Rúaidhrí de Valera (son of Éamon) who also spent time at the museum under Mahr (Mullins 2007, 66). Likewise, Michael Duignan, who became professor of archaeology at University College Galway (now NUI Galway), and later registrar and deputy president of the university. Mahr’s most influential protégé, however, was Seán Ó Ríordáin, who would become professor of archaeology at University College Cork, before replacing RAS Macalister in the Chair at UCD.

Ó Ríordáin took the lead in the search for archaeological evidence of the antiquity of Irish settlement traditions while still at the NMI. His first candidate for a prehistoric Irish home-stead was discovered during excavations at the site of a cluster of conjoined ringforts (medi-*eval* settlement enclosures) at Cush, Co. Limerick. The excavations revealed several Bronze Age urn burials in the interior of a ringfort which also incorporated a souterrain. Despite being unable to present supporting stratigraphical evidence, Ó Ríordáin was convinced the urn burials represented the final use of the site. Given that the urns were Bronze Age, this conflation led to a belief among some archaeologists that the origins of Irish ringforts and souterrains were to be found in the Bronze Age (Waddell 2005, 210, see Ó Ríordáin 1942, 2).

At Lough Gur, also in Co. Limerick, Ó Ríordáin went on to direct the first large-scale programme of archaeological excavations in the newly independent Ireland (Waddell 2005). Here, between 1936 and 1954, he discovered what he believed to be Ireland’s first Neolithic rectangular house, one of the few known in Europe at the time, providing what he felt was evidence of contact with Germany and Scandinavia during the Neolithic (Ó Ríordáin 1954; 305–6). Ó Ríordáin’s work at Lough Gur established the paradigm of Irish settlement archaeology: dispersed farmsteads, comparable to modern rural Irish cottages (Ó Ríordáin 1979, 4; see below).

#### ANACHRONOUS ICONS OF NEOLITHIC SETTLEMENT

The chronology which Ó Ríordáin developed for Lough Gur, placing the rectangular ‘house’ known as Site A at the start of the Neolithic, relied on a pottery sequence that saw flat-bottomed ‘Class II’ pottery as contemporary with (earlier Neolithic) carinated bowl pottery (Cleary 1993). Ó Ríordáin reported ‘Class II’ pottery at the ‘lowest levels’ of his

excavations, and thus ‘belonging to the earliest occupation of the site’, the Early Neolithic (1954). Doubts concerning Ó Ríordáin’s attribution of Class II pottery to the Early Neolithic first emerged in the 1950s (E. Evans 1953). Sheridan (1995, 15) argued that ‘shallowness of the deposits and the shortcomings of the excavator’s recording system’ at Lough Gur meant new evidence was required before any ‘house’ structure at the site could be considered Neolithic. Cleary and others (1993; 1995; Cleary *et al.* 2003) have demonstrated that the ‘Class II’ pottery from Lough Gur is in fact diagnostic of the later Bronze Age (see also Sheridan 1995, 17). The radiocarbon dating of structural remains accords with this determination (Cleary 1995; Cleary *et al.* 2003).

It is a measure of Ó Ríordáin’s success in establishing Lough Gur as the template for future understanding of Irish *Neolithic* settlement that the evidence that Site A was misdated has had a limited impact on the consensus narrative among archaeologists in Ireland (e.g. Cooney 2000; 2007; Grogan 2002; McSparron 2008). A recent major review of Neolithic settlement in Ireland noted that most of the settlement remains at Lough Gur have been re-dated to the Bronze Age, but maintained that Sites A and B ‘are still considered to be Early Neolithic, mainly because of the similarity in shape to the early rectangular houses from elsewhere in Ireland and the Continent (Smyth 2014, 74). Based on ‘little more than educated guesswork’, the Site A rectangular ‘house’ has been linked to a nearby Neolithic burial, and thus assumed to date to the mid-fourth millennium BC (Smyth 2014, 78–9).

Cush and Lough Gur demonstrate the potential for misinterpretation where excavations are undertaken with strongly held preconceptions. Similarly, the dating of the Céide Fields, the other foundational exemplar of the Irish settlement paradigm (Smyth 2006; *cf.* Cooney 1997), may owe much to conflated stratigraphies and the weight of disciplinary tradition. (See Whitefield 2017; 2015, Chapter 3, for detailed critique).

Early surveys on Céide Hill indicated the discovery of a ‘Celtic’ field system of the type found in many parts of Europe (Caulfield 1974; 2014, 41). The excavation of a Neolithic court tomb on the hill during the 1960s revealed that a section of a stone boundary was constructed on top of the court tomb’s covering cairn (Herity 1971, 262; Warren *et al.* 2009, 5; Caulfield 2014, 28). It followed that the boundary post-dated the monument, perhaps by millennia in the view of two of the excavation directors (Ó Nualláin 1979, 7; Caulfield 2011, 19; 2014, 28). The other excavation director, however, took the view that peat covered field boundaries might offer a means of redressing the imbalance in evidence between monuments and settlement evidence from the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age.

By the late 1970s, the Céide Fields had been attributed to the Neolithic, and described as the oldest field system in Europe (Caulfield 1978). Given the relative lateness of Ireland’s Neolithisation, it has been assumed that the fields were laid out by ‘immigrant farmers with an already established [N]eolithic economy’ (Caulfield 1983, 205). There is, however, overwhelming evidence which continues to accumulate (e.g. Nielsen *et al.* 2017) demonstrating that ‘Celtic’ field systems across Europe are a phenomenon beginning in the Middle Bronze Age (mid-second century BC), and continuing to be constructed into the early centuries AD (Whitefield 2017). Indeed, there is no reliable evidence for field systems of any kind, anywhere in Europe (or the rest of the world) during the fourth millennium BC.

The evidence from the limited archaeological excavations at the Céide Fields supports a Late Bronze Age/Iron Age (first millennium BC) date. A pollen core extracted from the downslope edge of a field wall – the only source of radiocarbon dates in direct association with a field wall on Céide Hill – returned three later Bronze Age/Iron Age dates (Molloy

and O'Connell 1995, table 2; Cooney *et al.* 2011, table 12.6). According to the analysts, the core provided 'particularly strong' evidence for sustained cultivation in the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age (Molloy and O'Connell 1995). Infill material from apparent plough-marks in the subsoil beneath the peat similarly returned a Late Bronze Age/Iron Age radiocarbon date (Molloy and O'Connell 1995). The plough marks run parallel with the southwest–northeast alignment along the long axial field walls, in keeping with the interpretation that this feature of many 'Celtic' field systems allowed a plough-team an uninterrupted progression (Harding 2000; Johnston 2013).

But in the absence of evidence for arable farming at Céide Fields during the hypothesised Neolithic occupation, the assumption was that the land must have been cleared to create open pasture (*e.g.* Caulfield 1978; 2014; Cooney *et al.* 2011). As Cooney *et al.* (2011, 625) acknowledge, there is no practical reason why the management of herds should require the complex of stone boundaries (see also Caulfield 2013, 98–9). Open woodlands, heaths and wetlands are perfectly suitable for cattle and other grazing animals (Molloy and O'Connell 2016; Bickle and Whittle 2013). Exposed sections of the boundaries are broad, low spreads of stone (Molloy and O'Connell 1995, 222). It is accepted that they were never effective stock barriers (Caulfield 1983, 200). Neither are there structural indications, in the form of droveways or stock-handling facilities, nor even gateways between the fields. There is no direct evidence for pastoral farming, and even if the boundaries were somehow augmented to control animals, the question remains: *why?* Cooney *et al.* (2011, 625) speculate that the boundaries may have represented 'a distinctive way of signing the land, an expression of regional identity or identities, a means of aligning people with the substance of the earth and its mythic properties, and a medium through which community could be assembled and tied to place'. An alternative interpretation is that the field boundaries are linear clearance cairns, clearing the way for the plough-team.

Caulfield (1974) explained: 'Unlike the tombs or well-known prehistoric objects which can readily be identified as ancient, these walls are given an antiquity solely because of their position below the bog'. Caulfield *et al.* (1998) set out to try to age a vast area of bog covering much of north County Mayo by obtaining radiocarbon dates from pine stumps/trunks that had been preserved in peat. A total of 44 samples were identified across hundreds of square kilometres of bogland, having been exposed by natural erosion or the hand-cutting of turf for fuel. Just three of the samples came from Céide Hill (Caulfield *et al.* 1998, 630; see Whitefield 2017, fig. 12.1). The uncalibrated radiocarbon dates for the preserved timbers clustered around the Neolithic-Chalcolithic transition, leading Caulfield *et al.* (1998, 639) to conclude: 'Much of Céide Fields and other Neolithic pre-bog field systems in North Mayo were abandoned and already covered by shallow peat by 4500 BP.'

There is no doubt that localised pockets of peat bog began to accumulate in north Mayo during the Neolithic, and that in some cases *Pinus sylvestris* (Scots pine) trees – which can grow on peat – were preserved in the waterlogged peat. But these events are separate, both in time and space, from stone boundaries. The pine samples were not selected on the basis of their archaeological significance and, are for the most part at a considerable remove from any known stone boundaries. Indeed, very little is known about the sampled pines, as precise details – photographs, drawings, measurements, circumstances of recovery, context, whether waterlogged or desiccated, inferred stratigraphic relationship, soil conditions, slope, topography: no such information was recorded. What does seem clear is that

the sampled timbers were generally large (trees with more than 100 rings) (O’Connell and Molloy 2001, 102). It follows that they were preserved in relatively deep pockets of peat.

Caulfield *et al.*’s (1998) methodology assumes a more-or-less synchronous ‘fossilisation’ of large tracts of north Mayo in blanket peat during the Neolithic (*e.g.* Caulfield 1978, 142–3; 1983, 195–6; 2014, 34). But there was no ‘Pompeii-style’ event in Neolithic north Mayo (O’Brien 2009, 6). Blanket bogs comprise a complex of different mire types. The ‘blanketing’ of the landscape, which disguises the complexity of the underlying topography, is the final stage of a process can be drawn out over millennia (*e.g.* Charman 2002, 81–3; Lawson *et al.* 2007, 26). The accumulation and survival of blanket peat is highly variable, in accordance with myriad factors including slope, aspect, microtopography, hydrology, underlying soil, vegetation, exposure to weathering, and the actions of animals and people (*e.g.* Edwards and Hirons 1982; Evans and Warburton 2007).

The Céide Fields are situated on the lower and middle slopes of Céide Hill. Water running over and through the peat renders it inherently unstable (Edwards and Hirons 1982; M. Evans and Warburton 2007). The intense hydrology at the interface between the peat and the mineral soil is a major contributory factor to the gradual gliding of the entire peat mass downslope (Moore and Bellamy 1974, 40–41). Mass movements such as peat slides and bog bursts are well attested to in the locality (*e.g.* Kneafsey 1995; Guttman-Bond *et al.* 2016). As Edwards and Hirons (1982) caution, estimations of the age of blanket peats based on extrapolating data from a small number of atypically deep deposits is inherently unreliable. The initialisation of pockets of peat growth during the later Neolithic is entirely compatible with the major *extension* of peat growth taking place in the first millennium BC (Chambers 1982, 38). Warren *et al.* (2011, 139) acknowledge that, ‘... in several places within [the main Céide Fields] system archaeological dates are now showing that the landscape was free of bog into at least the Bronze Age, if not the Iron Age’. As at Lough Gur, strongly held prior expectations appear to have led to the conflation of archaeological evidence from difference periods.

While none of the dating evidence from the Céide Fields is entirely satisfactory, a late-second/early first millennium BC date for the establishment of the field system seems the logical working hypothesis.

## DEFINITE HOUSE?

The Céide Fields complex is the archetype of the Irish model of Neolithic settlement. The traditional interpretation, however, conflates the Bronze Age/Iron Age field systems (where the ancestors worked) with a Neolithic court tomb (where the ancestors worshipped), and (absent) houses (where the ancestors lived) (MacConnell 1990; Caulfield 1992, 11). No credible evidence of a Neolithic house has been identified among the Céide Fields. Excavations at a large circular enclosure did produce a small quantity of possible-Neolithic pottery and lithics, but these were in upper ‘debris layers’ of uncertain location (Caulfield *et al.* 2009, 8). Despite the acknowledged absence of evidence for a ‘classic’ Neolithic house (Caulfield and Warren 2011, 72; Caulfield 2014, 29), a ‘typical’ pattern of dispersed settlement is envisaged (*e.g.* Caulfield 1992; 2013; Cooney 1997; 2000; Lucas 2010). The narrative that ties the Céide Fields into the Irish settlement model draws on evidence from



elsewhere in Co. Mayo where the remains of a rectangular timber structure were found beneath an excavated court tomb at Ballyglass (e.g. Cooney 2000; Lucas 2010, 2; Smyth 2013). This 'definite house' (Grogan 2004) was among the first post-Lough Gur Neolithic timber structures to be excavated in Ireland (Ó Nualláin 1972; see Fig. 12.2).

Described by the excavator as 'roughly the same dimensions as the houses of small farmers now living nearby', the Ballyglass rectangular timber structure measures 13 m by 6 m (Ó Nualláin 1979). The principal structural components were discovered beneath the western end of the cairn of the court tomb and, comprise foundation trenches (c.20 cm deep), which incorporated postholes (Ó Nualláin 1972). The line of the cairn follows the western wall trench of the timber structure. The excavator speculated that the earlier structure was 'intentionally demolished to make way for the construction of the tomb' (Ó Nualláin 1972).

Few artefacts can be unequivocally associated with the timber structure because of the 'lack of reliable stratification' (Ó Nualláin 1972, 55). Sherds of Carinated Bowl were recovered from wall trenches and postholes, but this is routinely found in both presumed-domestic and presumed-ceremonial/mortuary contexts. A small number of



*Fig. 12.2: Conjectural reconstruction of the Ballyglass 'house' at the Céide Fields visitor centre, Co. Mayo. The information panel submits: 'The rectangular house with large central room is strikingly similar to the traditional house of the region' (photo: the author).*

lithics were found within the footprint of the structure, while pits in front of the court area of the tomb yielded ‘numerous implements, with concave scrapers predominant’. The excavator proposed that ‘it may well be that these pits should be associated with the occupation of the house rather than the period of tomb construction’ (Ó Nualláin 1972). It is not clear why this should be the case. Lithics would have been required in the construction of the timber structure (whatever its future purpose) but, may equally have had a role in activities associated with the stone monument. Nevertheless, the excavator (Ó Nualláin 1972; 1979) and contemporary syntheses were emphatic: ‘The [Ballyglass] house yielded Primary Neolithic pottery with pointed rims, and a flint assemblage similar to that in the centre Court Cairn above. Though a relatively long span of habitation, say even a century, is implied in the permanence of such a well-built house, there is no need to regard it as other than the house of a family of Neolithic A [Early Neolithic] farmers, the most extensive evidence for which so far is the thirty Court Cairns in the area, show them to have been well-organized stock raisers and agriculturalists’ (Herity and Eogan 1977, 47; see also Ó Ríordáin 1979, 4).

It is not inconceivable that the timber structure at Ballyglass was some form of domestic structure, but certainly no ‘smoking gun’ is in evidence. Against this, the role of the court tomb as a mortuary structure and ceremonial monument is uncontroversial. Setting aside the choice of primary construction materials, there are many parallels between chambered megalithic monuments (such as court tombs and portal tombs) and segmented timber structures, particularly some of the larger, multi-chambered ‘houses’ such as Ballyglass (ApSimon 1997; *cf.* Sheridan 2006). Following Kinnes (1975, 19–21), Powell (2005) suggests that court tombs, particularly the more complex examples such as Ballyglass (which is effectively two conjoined monuments), were ‘modular’, having been modified over many generations (*cf.* Sheridan 2006).

In addition to the division of the internal space, several of the larger ‘house’ examples, including Ballyglass, appear to have been at least partially open at one end, having post holes but no slot trench (see Whitefield 2015, 368–70). Tankardstown ‘House 2’, Co. Limerick, is another large (15 m by 7.5 m) example with three chambers, and ‘two stout corner posts’ that apparently define an open end (Gowen and Tarbett 1988; 1990). Like most other rectangular timber structures in Ireland, Tankardstown ‘House 2’ was largely devoid of artefacts and ecofacts. This contrasts with its near neighbour, Tankardstown ‘House 1’ which, though much smaller and roughly square in shape, yielded a cache of cereal grain. Cereal grain in meaningful quantities (*i.e.* more than low single figures of possible cereal grains) is extremely rare. The discovery at Tankardstown has led to this atypical ‘house’ being substantially over-represented in interpretations of Neolithic timber structures in Ireland (McClatchie *et al.* 2009; Whitehouse *et al.* 2014; Whitefield 2015, chapter 4).

At Dooley’s Cairn, Co. Antrim, where a timber structure (which was burnt down) was incorporated into a later court tomb, the excavator suggested there may have originally been a forecourt, similar to the ‘crescentic facade of upright timber posts’ identified at Lochhill cairn in Kirkcudbrightshire, southwest Scotland (Collins 1976; see also Masters 1973). At Shanballyedmond, Co. Tipperary, the excavation of the court tomb revealed a U-shaped setting of 34 postholes which enclosed the cairn (O’Kelly 1958; 1989, 89–91). In other examples, the use of ‘post and panel’ oak planks and timber posts has parallels in the use of orthostats with drystone walling in court tombs (Sheridan 2006). Unless timber features

have been complemented or replaced by stone features, excavation in Ireland is historically unlikely to have covered a sufficiently extensive area to detect them.

Timber screens are a feature of some of the Scottish Neolithic rectangular timber structures, including Eweford West in East Lothian (MacGregor and McLellan 2008; Thomas 2015, 1083). Some of the larger Irish rectangular structures have curving walls at one end which may have functioned similarly (see Simpson 1996; Smyth 2011). It is interesting to contrast the interpretation of the rectangular timber structure at Cloghers, Co. Kerry, with the ostensibly similar evidence at Eweford West. What is interpreted as a 'possible fence line' at Cloghers linked with domestic/farming activity (Smyth 2006, 241), is remarkably similar to the 'timber screen' at Eweford, which is interpreted as shielding aspects of mortuary practice from view (MacGregor and McLellan 2008, 25). Both fences/screens are *circa* 10 m long, constructed of post and stakes in a trench, and appear to have been burnt down (MacGregor and McLellan 2008; Kiely 2003, 185).

Smyth (2006, 245) identifies the deliberate burning as a 'practice bound up with houses in early Neolithic Ireland'. Many 'linear zone' rectangular timber mortuary structures in Scotland similarly appear to have been deliberately burnt down (see also *e.g.* Barclay *et al.* 2002, 120; Sheridan 2006; 2010). These include those at Eweford West and Pencraig Hill, East Lothian (MacGregor and McLellan 2008). Lochhill and Slewcairn in Kirkcudbrightshire (Masters 1981), and Dalladies, Aberdeenshire (Piggott 1972). At Inchtuthil, Perth and Kinross, the 'ditched enclosure' (foundation trench in Irish model?) contained a 'timber fence' which was 'burnt down and replaced' (Piggott 1972; see Barclay and Maxwell 1991). Again, it is difficult to imagine anything other than a domestic function being assigned to such a structure, had it been excavated in Ireland.

There are ample grounds to consider alternatives to the domestic paradigm in the interpretation of some Neolithic timber structures in Ireland. Wooden components beneath megalithic monuments, including examples at the Boyne Valley, would be a logical place to start (O'Sullivan 2011).

## CONCLUSION: IMAGINED COMMUNITIES OF NEOLITHIC IRELAND

Archaeology in Ireland, in common with its counterparts in all other countries, has helped shape and, has been shaped by the nation's image of itself (*e.g.* Díaz and Champion 1996). Archaeologists have cultivated the myth of timeless continuity in rural settlement, influencing the wider portrayal of ancient Ireland (Fig. 12.3). Most archaeologists would nevertheless maintain that their interpretations are grounded in scientific neutrality and are value-free (*cf.* Cooney 1995).

Ireland's small community of research archaeologists, faces an overabundance of prehistoric antiquities in need of interpretation. The modern discipline in Ireland diverged from its nearest neighbour at the beginning of the 20th century and followed the ethnographic approach of Germany and Scandinavia. Syntheses of Irish archaeology have tended to be highly convergent (Fontijn and Van Reybrouck 1999), focused on presenting new discoveries within interpretive paradigms that were established in the first half of the twentieth century (Cooney 1995, 269). Most new discoveries are made in the context of development-led excavations. Where these do



Fig. 12.3: Front page of travel supplement to British newspaper The Guardian, 16 March 2019. (Reproduced with kind permission of Guardian News & Media Ltd.)

come to publication, they are likely to be interpreted within disciplinary norms. A reluctance to challenge established archaeological interpretations has been observed in other countries where the influence of German archaeology has been especially strong (e.g. Cornell *et al.* 2008; *cf.* Cooney 1995).

Research by Irish archaeologists has tended to focus on Irish evidence. A sometimes insular approach has led to interpretations which can seem out of step with developments in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. British syntheses typically include Irish evidence, but have limited access to the underlying excavation data, so often incorporate anomalies as indications of regionality. Legitimate concerns about smothering diversity and creating normative accounts can give way to retrospective nationalism (Geary 2002) – losing sight of the fact that, as Macalister (1949, xii) observed: ‘in Ancient Europe there were no “nations”’. What is abundantly clear from the architecture (whether wood or stone), and portable artefacts such as pottery and lithics, is that the Irish Sea connected the communities around its shores during the Early Neolithic, and was likely to have been an important conduit in the Neolithisation of both Ireland and Britain (e.g. Sheridan 2017).

The Céide Fields are not a unique occurrence of a Neolithic ‘Celtic’ field system, laid out more than 2000 years before such field systems appear widely elsewhere in Europe. There is a corollary between the apparent ubiquity of rectangular timber houses in Ireland and the apparent absence of timber funerary structures: some of the buildings that are interpreted as houses may have been mortuary structures. Both the Céide Fields and the corpus of Neolithic rectangular timber ‘houses’ have been interpreted within the paradigm of the Irish model of Neolithic settlement.

‘Terminology’, as Kinnes (1985, 26) pointed out, is often ‘formative to both perception and expectation’. In an influential edited volume on Neolithic timber structures in Ireland, Armit *et al.* (2003, 146) cautioned that: ‘In the view of the obvious differences in both scale and layout of these buildings, it would clearly be simplistic to assume a single or uniform function for Neolithic rectilinear structures. [...] It should probably be expected...that such large and complex buildings will have served a range of functions, and this range of possibilities is beginning to be explored’.

Archaeology’s image of itself as an objective discipline grounded in scientific method is frequently at odds with the image it projects to scholars in related disciplines, where the speculative and politicised nature of some longstanding archaeological narratives is well understood (Cooney 1995). The historian Clare O’Halloran (2007, 188) describes the development of archaeology in Ireland as ‘slow and halting; its progress shaped and, at times, stunted by nationalist ideology and by the cultural legacies of colonialism’. These distorting influences can, nevertheless, allow for simple and attractive narratives that make the distant past seem comfortably familiar. Despite the weight of tradition that underpins it, the Irish model of Neolithic settlement does not constitute an unassailable truth which can be uncritically incorporated into new research. Rather, the Irish model is a hypothesis in need of (rigorous) testing. Any such hypothesis is ‘always tentative, incomplete and open to challenge’ (Smith 2017, 521).

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