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052102014X - The Personality of Ireland: Habitat, Heritage and History

E. Estyn Evans

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I

Habitat, heritage and history

an anthropogeographic view

I have been given the opportunity and the privilege of presenting to historians, and particularly to Irish historians, some thoughts on – and some illustrations of – the relationships between geography and history. I am well aware that my brand of anthropogeography, which is that of H.J. Fleure and Carl O. Sauer, is currently out of fashion, and that a preoccupation with relevance and prediction, and recently with perception and the behavioural environment, has led to a drift away from a genetic approach to human geography, and from historical explanation. Most of my geographical colleagues would say that the pressing problems of the modern world are more than enough to occupy them, and that history can be trusted to look after the past. Leaving aside the difficulty of deciding when the present becomes the past, and leaving aside also the question whether, in modern Western society, history need be a guide to action, study of the past cannot but give perspective, and the wider and deeper the perspective the better our understanding of the present. My concern is with environment as a factor in human history, and although I might have wished that someone better versed in recent methodological developments had been chosen to present the claims of my subject to historical scholars, it must be admitted that the current passion for enumeration tends to restrict the interests of the younger generation to a short time span. Quantification, because of an inevitable lack of data, can give only a limited understanding of the past, nor can it be applied to some of the most precious ingredients of civilisation.

Looking at one of the most heroic attempts to reach what I take to be the ultimate goal of history – that is, universal human history – even a young geographer could find abundant material to patch some of the environmental holes in the majestic canvas of Toynbee's work, *A Study of History*. His most perceptive geographical critic, O.H.K. Spate, regards Toynbee's understanding and handling of geography as the weakest part of his study. The anthropologist, too, takes exception to his arbitrary selection of twenty-one societies, past and present, as exemplars of civilisation, leaving out of the reckoning, as the concern of anthropologists, 'over 650' other human societies. Toynbee apparently took his figure of 650 from Professor Hobhouse, although Professor Leyburn had estimated the number of world societies at over 12,000. This is anyhow a false dichotomy. Even supposing that the anthropologist is concerned only with primitive societies, where are we to draw the line? Most modern

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societies have a 'primitive' as well as a 'civilised' side, and heritage, or unrecorded history, is an essential part of all cultures. Moreover, by treating his twenty-one civilisations as isolates, Toynbee minimises the significance of diffusion.

In dismissing environmental determinism, only to substitute his own brand, which Spate sums up as 'the determinism of relatively unfavourable environments', Toynbee makes easy game of such recent advocates of climatic control as Ellsworth Huntington. But he turns more readily to the ancient world – for theories of environmental causation have a respectable classical ancestry – and many of the views he so readily demolishes are taken from Greek and Roman writers. This is an extreme illustration of a risk all would-be synthesisers face: the reliance on out-moded and often secondary authority when working in fields other than their own. But they must also face prejudice in venturing to tread on territory which carries the property mark of other academic disciplines. Toynbee was attacked by the learned on almost all sides, and his experience suggests that – if I may malappropriate a No Trespass notice I once saw in an American wood-lot – 'Survivors will be persecuted'. Another fate may await lesser mortals who dare to trespass, and that is to be watched by those on the other side of the fence with an air of detachment and indifference.

The theme I have chosen, however, calls for many border forays or rather let me say for trans-border co-operation. I am pleading the cause of a trilogy of regional studies, of habitat, heritage and history: that is of geography, anthropology (in its widest sense, including the behavioural sciences, as well as prehistory) and recorded history (including social and economic history). I take the view that all these subjects can be regarded as parts of human history, as various approaches to the study of the evolution of man and society on this earth. Of course they all have their own objectives, and I am suggesting that they should interpenetrate rather than amalgamate. Even assuming that it were practicable to make a combined subject for educational purposes, on the model of some approaches to undergraduate studies in the humanities, I believe more would be lost than gained if academics were to be drawn away from their specialist fields, but they should be aware of what is going on beyond the fence: it is at the fences, along the borders, that discoveries are likely to be made. In such broad fields of study, wrote Julian Huxley, discussing not the past but the future of man, 'we must envisage networks of co-operative investigation . . . the social sciences as a whole cannot escape the pressure towards integration',¹ and he makes a plea for a common terminology and an end to technical jargon. Certainly some of the mistrust and misunderstanding of the other fellow's subject arises from the fashion of using terms which bring obfuscation rather than clarification. One suspects that these specialist vocabularies are sometimes designed to win

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academic respectability rather than to facilitate communication. I shall shun them.

By habitat I mean the total physical environment, and by history the written record of the past. I would define heritage in broad terms as the unwritten segment of human history, comprising man's physical, mental, social and cultural inheritance from a prehistoric past, his oral traditions, beliefs, languages, arts and crafts. It seems to me that there is no ideological gap between anthropology and conventional history in so far as they are concerned with the human experience. Lévi-Strauss regards them as 'indissociables'. Many anthropologists, however, have been hostile to history, partly no doubt because of the extravagances committed by the so-called historical school of anthropology. The functional anthropologists in particular have been critical of historical reconstructions and conjectural history. Since anyhow British anthropology has been primarily concerned with 'primitives' and British academic history with the peoples of Britain and Europe there has been little common ground. Anthropologists, however, are increasingly busying themselves with European communities and with the peasant peoples whose 'little tradition' persists alongside the 'great tradition' of the élites which has provided the stuff of recorded history. Moreover, the collection of popular traditions, oral literature and folk customs which was part of the Romantic movement has been transformed and systematised under the inspiration of Scandinavian scholars into the academic discipline of ethnology or folklife, enriching and illuminating the content of recorded history. The folk movement, too, is part of history in another sense, for it inspired nationalist revivals in many European countries, not least in Ireland through the Anglo-Irish literary movement and the Gaelic League. Already in late eighteenth-century Belfast, the United Irishmen, mainly Presbyterians, were steeped in Irish tradition, folk music and antiquarianism; and 'the idea of an "Irish nation", indifferent to religious rivalries, rooted in history . . . takes its rise in the Belfast of the late eighteenth century'.² But while folklife as an academic discipline has long been recognised in Scandinavian countries, Ireland has had to wait until 1971 to see the first Department of Folklore established, in University College, Dublin.

Prehistoric studies won academic status much earlier, even in Ireland, having passed from the Romantic phase of antiquarian exploration to the stage of scientific classification and excavation in the course of last century, primarily in Denmark and England. The prehistoric time-scale overlaps with the historic, for the mass of the world's population has remained non-literate down to recent times. Many academic historians, however, still attach little importance to archaeological evidence, even when it relates to historic periods, and accord to it at best a subsidiary role, ignoring or disbelieving the view expressed so long ago as 1881 by J.R. Green: 'archaeological researches yield evidence even more trustworthy than that

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of written chronicle, while the ground itself . . . is the fullest and the most certain of documents'.³

Green, we may notice, found geography an equally indispensable aid to history and felt that, to give an adequate account of Anglo-Saxon settlement, he was obliged to consider and map the distribution of marsh and woodland in lowland England. His views on the relevance and usefulness of these sources were exceptional. Into the present century, wrote R.G. Collingwood, 'it was felt that unwritten sources of history could give valid results only on a very small scale and when they were used as an auxiliary arm to "written sources"; and only about low matters like industry and commerce, into which an historian with the instincts of a gentleman would not enquire'.⁴ In Ireland, according to George Petrie, there had once been even more prejudice: not only the antiquities but also the history of the country previous to the Anglo-Norman invasion 'were considered to be involved in obscurity and darkness such as no sane mind would venture to penetrate'.⁵ In recent years, with the refinements of palaeobotanical techniques and radio-carbon dating (C14, which historians have been known to take as a reference to the fourteenth century), prehistory has acquired a chronological scale of considerable depth and accuracy to guide and inspire excavation; and the reconstruction of many aspects of the economy, material culture, art, settlement forms and burial rituals of successive periods is now a commonplace of excavation reports. If archaeology can make no claim to obtain information on human thought and emotions, save inferentially, herein, for some enthusiasts, lies its advantage over written history. When conventional history takes over, the prehistorian Harold Peake used to say, the story gets blurred by the prejudices of men who write it.

Geography has now won almost universal recognition in the universities, though characteristically Ireland came late in the field, and if its methodology is constantly changing, its broad concern – the areal differentiation of the world and its peoples – has been a matter of enquiry and speculation since classical Greek times. Its immemorial symbol is the map, but although geographers like to have their fingers on the map and their feet on the ground, they cannot but be aware of philosophical aspects of their subject, of the mystery as well as the reality of man's place in nature. Geography was described by the pioneer American conservationist, G.P. Marsh, as both a poetry and a philosophy. Anthropology has not yet found a place in the universities of the Irish Republic, but after long advocacy of their kinship with geography, both anthropology and archaeology have chairs at Queen's University, Belfast. It is part of my purpose to show how history can profitably co-operate with these sister subjects in regional research. We who practise these relatively new academic disciplines should remind ourselves that historians, economists and other social scientists have also had to fight for the general admission of their subjects into British

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universities, and that less than fifty years have passed since Professor Tout could claim that the battle for the recognition of history was as good as won.

The serious professional study of Irish history, one of its practitioners has recently said, is barely a generation old, and much of its scholarly output relates to the activities of politicians, many of them English. Until recent times, indeed, writers of what was termed 'Irish history' seem to have been preoccupied with the morbid phenomena of British rule in their country: '1169 and all that' done into academic prose. I have found this kind of history confusing and repellent, a record of violence and corruption if sometimes of heroism and vision, and it is an irrelevancy that some of the personalities involved, we are told, hated the corruption they were forced to practise. I have wondered whether Lord Acton could have had this sort of Irish history in mind when he said, as has been reported, that he was turned to gloom by the contemplation of the affairs of men. But I am not a trained historian. I took a course of history at the University College of Wales nearly half a century ago, but found it so myopic in its insular view of the world – even though the course was regarded as an enlightened innovation, however inappropriate in a Welsh College, called Colonial History – that it was a relief to turn to geography and to be plunged forthwith, by H.J. Fleure, into the loess and the cultures of north China in the company of Ferdinand von Richthofen. Academic history, it seems, was slow to break away from the view of Bishop Stubbs that history meant the history of the British parliament and constitution. No doubt there are some Englishmen who would defend this definition, but Professor Gordon Childe, an Australian, was reacting strongly against such an interpretation, as well as against the theological model of history, when he brought his book *What Happened in History* (1942) to an abrupt end with the spread of Christianity in the ancient Mediterranean world. One could wish that he had given us a new Childe's History of England.⁶

No prehistorian did more in his time than Childe to extend the scope of history, to make it the history of man on earth, the scientific study of all sources of information on the human past. A prehistorian and a geographer, H.J.E. Peake and H.J. Fleure, made a similar approach in *The Corridors of Time* (1927–56), and Professor Grahame Clark has been for many years a leading exponent of world prehistory. Because of the limitations of the evidence, those prehistorians who have looked for uniformities – they hesitate to call them laws – have tended to lean towards environmental or cultural determinism. Deprived of any knowledge of the creative spirit of prehistoric personalities, they have not subscribed to the Great Man theory of history, and have been more concerned with processes than events. On the whole, the conceptual framework of archaeologists has been technological or ecological, though few go so far

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as to claim that these factors controlled institutions and beliefs. Childe's near-Marxist insistence on the significance of technological and economic change contrasts with the comparative neglect of material culture in many anthropological studies of modern primitives. Thus Evans-Pritchard, in his celebrated work on the Nuer, deals fully with social life and political institutions but remarks that he is 'neither desirous nor capable of describing technological procedures'.⁷ Those anthropologists, however, who see material culture and technology as an objective test of the degree of civilisation, linked with mental aptitudes and social development, point out moreover that language must have referred to concrete things before it could be extended into the realms of ideas and ethics. Improved technology and associated ideas must enlarge vocabulary and lead to linguistic modification. Language change in prehistoric times, which seems to have been not infrequent before languages became firmly enshrined in religious phrases and tied to localities among sedentary communities, would probably have been facilitated and speeded by technological innovation. This has a possible bearing, as we shall point out, on the vexed question of the spread of the Celtic tongue in Ireland.

Here I would put in a plea for the inclusion in our general academic system of training in the use of manual and visual skills. An obsession with book-learning has tended to divorce education from reality and led teachers to disregard or even despise the educational content of the cultural environment; and nowhere is this more evident than in scholastic Ireland. It is true that school education has come to include instruction in the experimental verification of scientific method, but field observation is relatively undeveloped as a tool for cultivating an awareness of the cultural heritage. A practical knowledge of simple technology would not only provide young people with a creative environmental link, but give them also a sympathetic understanding of the human past and of the 'primitive' folk of the contemporary world. I have always found it an advantage, in studying rural life in Ireland, to participate in any agricultural or craft process I wished to understand and describe, and it will be remembered that the French agrarian historian, Marc Bloch, wrote his classic books as a farmer who could plough, who knew the feel of the land and the smell of hay and manure. He was able to look beyond the legal and institutional framework of agrarian systems, interpreting them on the ground and in the intimacy of small regions. In much the same way I have tried to read the rural landscape and have come to see it as the key to the continuity of Irish history.

It is on climatological grounds that environmental determinism has been most strongly argued by geographers and others. Scandinavian archaeologists in particular have been wedded to the idea of climatic change as a potent factor in human destiny, and their pioneer palaeo-

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botanical researches, relating vegetational and cultural change to climatic deterioration, seemed to confirm, for example, the native legends of *Fimbulwinter*. There seem to be instances, in critically marginal climatic environments such as Greenland, where climatic oscillations and their vegetational responses have had dramatic consequences, but as we shall see, some prehistoric vegetational changes as revealed by pollen studies can plausibly be interpreted in terms of man's interference with the balance of vegetation. The influence of climate on man and his societies has been a matter for speculation since classical times, and interest in the topic has by no means been confined to geographers. One recalls the famous dictum of Montesquieu: 'the empire of the climate is the first, the most powerful, of all empires'. It was the thesis of Ellsworth Huntington that great civilisations have been located in regions enjoying climates which he thought favourable; and he made climatic oscillation the prime mover of nomads in his imaginative work, *The Pulse of Asia*, (1907). But there is no end to climatic correlations. Of the many inane examples given by various authors I need cite only the uncomfortable conclusion of S.F. Markham, that 'up to the 15th century, every Jew of importance was born on or near the 70°(F) isotherm'.⁸ Single-factor causation is rarely proved, and climate, however dramatically it may display its forces, is but one element of the total environment of man. To isolate it is not only, in the words of Vidal de la Blache, 'morceler ce que la nature rassemble', but also to ignore the cultural heritage of the society it is supposed to control.

Among those scholars who, lacking a geographical training, came to insist on the significance of general environmental influences on the development of regional cultures I must single out the archaeologist, Sir Cyril Fox, whose monograph *The Personality of Britain* (1932) – probably the best-known work bearing the title I have chosen for these lectures – is sub-titled: 'Its influence on inhabitant and invader in prehistoric and early historic times'. Its influence was certainly marked on a whole generation of archaeologists. Fox made no less than twenty-five 'propositions' relating to environmental influences, but his main thesis was that lowland Britain has been characterised by cultural replacement and unity, highland Britain by cultural absorption and continuity. The division of Britain into highland and lowland zones, along a line running approximately from Teesmouth to Exmouth, had been made earlier by Sir Halford Mackinder, though Fox was apparently unaware of Mackinder's analysis of positional geography. General correlations between archaeological distributions and types of environment had also been made by the German Robert Gradmann, and this line of enquiry was taken up in Britain by H.J. Fleure and O.G.S. Crawford, but as geographers they were more aware of the complexities of man/nature relationships. Fleure, in particular, would add an Atlantic zone and would see the zone of contact between highland and lowland as of critical im-

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portance, instancing the prominence of Salisbury Plain as a meeting place of early cultures. While personality for Fox meant the total physical environment – he did not, for example, isolate a particular element such as climate – his argument is simplified and falsified by the concept of environment as a given phenomenon, waiting, as it were, for its human conquerors or victims. For the human or cultural geographer, environment without man is not environment: both are abstractions unless they are taken together. This is the core of traditional human geography as exposed and expounded by the founder-fathers, Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) and Karl Ritter (1779–1859), and later clarified by the findings of Charles Darwin, whose *Origin of Species* appeared in the year in which both Humboldt and Ritter died.

Taking a broad view of the world and its peoples, it is clear that different varieties of the human race, with different societal forms and goals, are associated with different environments, for example Europe, south-east Asia or tropical Africa. These diversities have given rise to much ingenious speculation from time to time, and some of the world's oldest myths pretend to explain, for instance, why some peoples are light-skinned and others dark-skinned. In Europe, speculation on such problems was particularly active in the Renaissance and in the eighteenth century, stimulated in the first place by the startling revelations of the voyages of discovery and later by the rational questioning of scriptural authority. Consideration of the nature and distribution of these geographical diversities inevitably led to discussion of the time-dimension, and what concerns us here is that it was in Ireland that a precise biblical time-scale was worked out by Archbishop Ussher in 1650. His theochronology, beginning with the creation of the world in 4004 B.C., has had a profound influence on our educational system and may be said to have delayed the full acceptance of a scientific view of the evolution of man and society. It illustrates Ireland's reverence for traditional Christian beliefs – for a view of man as a being outside nature – as well as the ingenuity with which many Irishmen have justified these beliefs.

The conception of the former purity and uniformity, physical and cultural, of created man lies behind persistent theories of an original purity of race or of cultural features such as language. These theories have taken many forms. Hyperdiffusionism, as preached with evangelical fervour by Elliot Smith and W.J. Perry, has been described as a scientific variation on the biblical theme of the scattering from the Tower of Babel, and this version met the international mood of the first half of the nineteenth century. According to Perry, for example, all funerary monuments in stone represent a single cultural influence; and the extreme diffusionist view was that all great discoveries have taken place once and once only. The corollary was that, without diffusion, there must be cultural retrogression. Lord Raglan, an aristocratic advocate of diffusion, sees the

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scholar's rejection of his views as an unwillingness 'to abandon their pretence to a localized omniscience'. He is more to the point when he observes that 'the theory of diffusion is anathema to all nationalists'.⁹ For, though the alternative simplistic theory of cultural growth in parallel, evolving through stages at varying rates but in a fixed unilinear sequence (the so-called comparative or 'psychic unity' theory), is at least as old as Vitruvius, it was encouraged by the growth of nationalism and religious schism in the sixteenth century. National pride in supposedly indigenous culture, however, was strangely at variance with the manifest diffusion of Christianity; and this may be one of the reasons why, in Ireland, the Roman Catholic hierarchy was a reluctant supporter of nationalism.

A ferment of ideas on the relationships between environment and customs and morals was stirring in the thought of eighteenth century Europe and some of the concepts then reaching the surface have outlived Darwinism. They have recently been admirably discussed by a geographer in a work sub-titled 'Nature and Culture in Western Thought to 1800'.¹⁰ It may be said that both environmentalism and the fixed stage theory tended to regard environment as a separate static force and to ignore culture contact. While it will be admitted that the environment must have some bearing on human cultures, its physical nature and the resources it provides cannot by themselves explain anything. For the cultural geographer, as I have said, environment taken by itself is an abstraction. Societies are constantly altering their environments. One of the great contributions of scholars such as Childe and Fleure was to see diffusion, not as an occasional inspired happening, but as a universal process bringing change through culture-contact and, so long as there is no great disparity of cultural levels, stimulating innovation through the cross fertilisation of ideas. The geographer and the anthropologist cannot regard invading armies, rulers, statesmen or other Great Men as the chief makers of history, or great literatures as the sole test of culture.

Since many of the world's societies have little or no recorded history, and since, even in Europe, the bulk of the population has found little or no place therein, it follows that, for an understanding of human history in any region, something more than documentary history is required. We must take account, so far as we can discover it, of the unwritten parts of cultural history; and it is the conviction of the human geographer that the land itself is much more than a location for events but is bound up with the nature of those events and with the nature of the society it supports. We come back to habitat, heritage and history. In making this three-way approach to the study of regional personality I am following the example of French historians and geographers. I was introduced to it by H.J. Fleure, a Channel Islander, who published in 1918 an address entitled *The Trilogy of the humanities in education*. It was given, with a characteristic modesty which may be both admired and deplored, to the

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Tredegar and District Co-operative Society.¹¹ In it he pleaded for the study of human experience, chorologically, chronologically and typologically, through the disciplines of place, time and type. 'Geography, history and anthropology', he wrote, 'are a trilogy to be broken only with severe loss of truth'. Extreme environmentalists and hyperdiffusionists have tended to select their examples indiscriminately and to disregard the trilogy. Given these three variables, the search for general laws governing cultural growth is likely to discover only laws which are so general as to be of little value. Fleure thought it more important to try to understand a case deeply than to look for general laws. His broad training in the natural sciences and its application to human history are well illustrated in the ten volumes of *The Corridors of Time*, and in his last work, recently revised, on *The Natural History of Man in Britain*.

The acknowledged French master of a combined human geography and history was P. Vidal de la Blache (1845–1918), Professor of Geography in the University of Paris, and through the teaching of a succession of gifted geographers French historians have generally been fully conscious of environmental relations. As an Irish historian, Professor David Quinn, has said, 'The good old-fashioned historical geography which was drummed into French historians made them realize that oceans and mountains and climates and vegetations were often more significant in laying bases for societal forms and attitudes than political postures or intellectual constructs about hierarchy in human society.'¹² Vidal's *Tableau de la Géographie de la France* (1911) formed the first volume of E. Lavisse's *Histoire de France*. Its first section was entitled 'Personnalité géographique de la France', and it was from the use of the term by Vidal de la Blache that the concept of regional personality became one of the central themes in human geography between about 1920 and 1950, when it went out of favour. One of its most frequent users has been Jean Gottmann, now Professor of Geography in the University of Oxford. Vidal himself had adopted the word as early as 1888, and he appears to have borrowed it from the greatest of French Romantic historians, Jules Michelet, whose *Histoire de France* appeared in 1833. Some writers have preferred the word 'individuality' to 'personality', but I have retained it in homage to my French masters.¹³

French historians such as Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, and their disciple Fernand Braudel have amply demonstrated in their writings the rewards of a broadly geographical approach to history. Febvre pleads for the co-operation of geographers, historians and 'even sociologists' in investigating problems of society and environment.¹⁴ Braudel begins his study of the Mediterranean world in the sixteenth century with a moving panorama of the Great Sea and its space relations. And he must look into the heritage of transhumance, for as he says, 'the history of mountain areas is that they have no history'. For him geography is not so much an introduction