NO FIXED CONCLUSION

Constructing the Stories of Uninhabited Stone Cottages on the Rural West Coast of Ireland

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NO FIXED CONCLUSION

Once the sleeve is broken, the documents are unbound. Apart from the first section (which is marked as such), the other sixteen sections are intended to be read in an unsystematic order. You are free to layer and relayer as you deem fit. The way you reorder the essays will change the narrative of the information.

Piece together and pull apart.

History, memory and story will become indiscernible.

There is no fixed conclusion. Any one of these essays could be the final passage you read.

Do not fret when the documents become disentangled; this is a necessary process to disentangle the narrative. The writing must be approached like memory: changeable, labile, unfixed. The story of the uninhabited homes in the rural West Coast of Ireland is permutable.

Adopting the position of the archivist, my design research initially questioned the documentation, construction and representation of the histories of the uninhabited stone cottages that populate the rural West Coast of Ireland. The research method has been one of disorientation. Fragments of archival material, oral histories and narrativised retellings of facts have presented themselves in a non-chronological order. A story consists of both fact and memory, though it is sometimes difficult to untangle which is which.

Inspired by Georges Perec's *Species of Spaces* (1999), my initial experimentation focused on recording ageing through the lenses of place, memory and writing. Using an archival box as the container for the exploration, the reader was encouraged to interpret the story of one particular abandoned home in Easkey — referred to as The Stone Cottage for the purpose of this research — through a process of layering and positioning unbound historical documents. Arguably, the logic behind the line of enquiry was more developed than the practical outcome, and the repository, in which the papers were held, required further refinement to enable several accounts to be constructed from its contents.

The project responds to the contextual backdrop of the 1922 fire that destroyed the Public Record Office of Ireland. It decimated thousands of documents, leaving only fragments of surviving written history (The National Archives of Ireland, 2022). With historical documentation eradicated and the unoccupied stone cottages degrading, the stories of these homes are surely threatened as well. *Even if the buildings cannot be preserved, can the memories associated with these stone cottages avoid a similar fate of degradation?*

Triangulating with *Census Gleanings Map* (2022) prompted a purposeful reengagement with the process of designing of a singular composition capable of accommodating multiple concurrent narratives. Instead of fixating on recording and archiving fact, my enquiry was repositioned to explore the critical question: *Can memory be used to fill in the gaps in Irish written history?*

There are seventeen distinct essays in this dissertation. Each essay represents 10,000 documents originally destroyed in the fire and subsequently reconstructed by The Virtual Record Treasury of Ireland (2022), together accounting for the 170,000 reinstated records.

The reader must disentangle their own narrative from the information, much as I have done. This dissertation emulates the non-linear function and temporality of story. Drawing inspiration from B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969), the writing

is arranged into short passages, catalogued by theme, which can be reordered in any given permutation. The contents of the essays sit in tension: some deal with written history, fact and detail, while others comprise of meandering thoughts reflecting on moments spent with the community in Easkey. Mirroring the process of my investigation, each essay operates autonomously, but the entire story is only revealed when the fragments are layered, ordered and positioned in relation to one another. Here, in the layering of knowledge, new meaning can be found. The ephemeral relationships between each text become tangible: sit in the discomfort of things coming in and out of focus.

No definitive conclusion has been reached in the work. Rather than reaching a conclusion, each reader interprets the story as the context, narrative and position change. Place, memory and writing remain impermanent, existing instead in the oral histories and uninhabited buildings that populate the rural West Coast of Ireland. The stories of the stone cottages will continue to evolve; their histories remain unfixed. *Consequently, the work frames a critical question: How can an archival framework appropriately record the simultaneity of fact and memory?*

This construction of the dissertation is just one of many potential permutations.

(FIRST)

FIRE

The significance of the 1922 fire that razed the Public Record Office of Ireland transcends the mere story of the building; the event was instrumental in shaping the historiography of Ireland.

'*In April 1922, anti-Treaty forces occupied Dublin's Four Courts buildings, where the Public Record Office of Ireland was located. The occupying forces established their munitions factory and store in the Record Treasury building.*

On June 30th 1922, an explosion in an adjacent building at the Four Courts started a fire which spread to the Record Treasury central archive storage, where the munitions were being manufactured. The fire destroyed so much of the building that only the outer wall remained standing.

Within a matter of days, the staff of the Public Record Office began the momentous task of retrieving the records from the rubble' (The National Archives of Ireland, 2022).

In the ashes of the Public Record Office of Ireland, a government-controlled body that once symbolised order and system, lay the fragments of a history thrown into disarray. Despite efforts to salvage surviving documents, it quickly became apparent that the fire had caused profound fractures in Ireland's written history. My design research is positioned within the historical conditions of the 1922 fire, seeking to respond to the gaps in the existing archives.

DISORIENTATION

We hurtled down the country lanes, me in the passenger seat, her driving. A place I thought I knew so well. Lanes once steeped in memories, now a network of places I did not recognise.

The local historian, the woman best equipped to answer my incessant questions, showed me the old smithy in Rathlee, recounted stories of depopulation, and the occupants, or previous occupants, of every home we passed. The land is so curiously populated, every home laid out the same: two rooms and a kitchen.

It has changed since I was last here. Maybe contingency is felt more deeply when you are a community exposed to the elements.

PERPETUATION

My intention for this work is to commemorate, archive and perpetuate the memories of abandoned homesteads along the rural West Coast of Ireland, many of which are not currently documented in written form, ensuring that their stories are preserved for generations to come.

PLACE, MEMORY, WRITING

'*What I hope for from it, in effect, is nothing other than the record of a threefold experience of ageing: of the places themselves, of my memories, and of my writing*' (Perec, 1999).

In *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (1999), Georges Perec explores the architectural and spatial constraints that form The Street through his methods of observation, enabling him to 'decipher the city'. The act of deciphering suggests that observation must be used as a tool to decode a predetermined understanding of space. Within the context of my work, the term disentangling is more appropriate than deciphering, as it indicates interpretation and allows subjectivity to influence the documentation of space. With this in mind, my early studio enquiry responded to *The Street* through the making prompt: circulate, distribute, or publish the reference—or some translation of it—via a different platform or economy (Perec, 1999).

Perec (1999) views the relationship between place, memory and writing as an effective method of recording the experience of ageing. These three terms have guided and punctuated my body of work. This is most apparent in the creation of *The Palimpsest Archive*, an archival box housing the unbound history of The Stone Cottage. When the box is opened, the records are catalogued and held together by place, memory and writing. Through the process of participation, the documents become disentangled, and the distinctions between place, memory and writing become indiscernible.

Later, Perec's *The Street* (1999), was revisited to guide the sequence, tempo and form of my video essay about *The Palimpsest Archive* (Perec, 1999).

The text excerpt is divided into five distinct subchapters. The first and second subchapters follow a traditional prose structure, characterised by justified text, long sentences and descriptive language. This structure was reflected in my video essay through the extensive description of the process of documenting The Stone Cottage. The third and fourth subchapters of *The Street* adopt a faster, more staccato pace, as Perec (1999) describes the '*Practical exercises*' used to decipher the city. This change in tempo is mirrored in both the narration and visuals of my video essay as both become increasing layered. A chorus of Irish voices explores the use of the archive and its wider purpose in the reconstruction of history across the West Coast of Ireland. The archive is put into use, and the documents, and therefore the histories they contain, become disentangled. Perec's (1999) fifth and final subchapter returns to the prose structure, and the pace slows once again. This deceleration mirrors the end of the participatory archival process, where one narrative has been distilled from the layers of historical documents.

Following Perec's (1999) method to record ageing, place, memory and writing consistently influenced all aspects of my work. This extensive engagement with *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* has provided pertinent insight into how a single reference can be applied across a range of processes, media and outcomes (Perec, 1999). My work translates, adapts and reinterprets Perec's (1999) methods, shifting from an act of deciphering to one of disentangling the history of The Stone Cottage.

ORAL HISTORIES

Storytelling is irrefutably engrained in Irish tradition, culture and history. In *Folklife Magazine* (2025), Addie Folie succinctly writes that:

'*Long have Irish myths and legends been carried by storytellers. The perseverance of the Irish people in maintaining their language, history, and values created a world of oral tradition filled with both mythical adventures and practical wisdom. Past listeners eagerly awaited an escape into the world of a folktale, a welcome distraction from the chores of farm life or the lingering darkness of winter nights.*'

This tradition of storytelling informs how history has typically been documented, with accounts existing in folklore and rambling tales rather than in archival boxes and census returns. In *The Possession of His Every Neighbour* (2024), Tomás Mac Conmara explains that 'oral history, or more broadly the collection of memory, is a key dimension of local historical research'. By operating at a local level, primary research can document personal stories through oral recordings.

In A Handbook of Irish Folklore (1942), Ó Súilleabháin notes: 'the good collector then should be an opportunist, ready to take advantage of every chance to reap his or her harvest of lore.'

Throughout my research, I found an overarching resistance to documenting history through writing, with participants typically opting to narrate their accounts instead. To avoid flattening the intonation of participants' voices and losing the sense of storytelling, I began recording conversations alongside the tangible record of the written responses.

RAMBLING HOUSE

I was only expecting it to be her. We had fixed a time over text: immense anticipation until we met again. As I was ushered in, the hum of chatter filled the hallway, saturating every corner of her home. The kitchen was full, warmed both by the hearth and by her friends.

I couldn't help but notice the tension on my arrival. The talk hushed and the questioning began. "Who are you? What brings you to Easkey? Who's your family?". Animosity diffused only by the reassurance of my cousin's partner's family name.

Cheeks flushed, kettle on the boil, we spoke for hours, recounting stories of times almost forgotten. The day the bull chased Mary around the field, the little shop in Finned Bridge, and accounts of people I had never heard of, as if I should have known them like a sister.

As I sat in a state of reverie, I remembered she had once told me about the local tradition of the Rambling House. The community would gather in house for an evening of storytelling, folklore, and shanties. Looking into the fire, I imagined that, maybe, this is what she had meant...

OVERLAYING FACT AND MEMORY

'*A new framework for old data: Making details gleaned from the lost censuses accessible to local researchers requires careful planning. How to attach every found name to its correct address and for the relevant census year? An entirely new framework was needed. So, a major part of our research involves creating a robust structure, showing provinces, counties, baronies, statutory parishes, and townlands for the entire island of Ireland, which can accommodate thousands of names across multiple censuses.*' (Virtual Treasury Record of Ireland, 2022).

Abstract
Set against the backdrop of the 1922 fire that destroyed the Public Record Office of Ireland, The Virtual Treasury Record of Ireland curated *Census Gleanings Map* (2022), an interactive repository of surviving and reconstructed data. Many artefacts, censuses, and genealogical documents were destroyed in the fire, leaving only fragments of Irish history behind. Underpinned by the same historiographical context, my design research utilises a similar method of mapping history against place. Instead of fixating on recording and archiving fact, my enquiry explores the critical question: *Can memory be used to fill in the gaps in Irish written history?*

An archive grounded in fact
Upon entering *Census Gleanings Map*, the user is invited to navigate a map, revealing data restored from the 1821 Census of Ireland, pinned to its relative location. The digital platform's framework allows researchers to easily negotiate the content of the archive through visual interactive cues.

As a historical database, *Census Gleanings Map* has a commitment to impartiality, accuracy, and fact. The Virtual Treasury Record of Ireland enact their responsibility to objectivity through meticulous engagement with International Standard for Archival Description (ISAD[G]), as laid out by The International Council of Archives (1994). Their position is made explicit through the careful cross-analysis with Herbert Wood's *A guide to the records deposited in the Public Record Office of Ireland* (1919), corroborating the factuality of the reconstructed records with the pre-1922 repository. There is no dimension of fabrication within the archive, only an aspiration to restore with accuracy.

The Virtual Treasury Record of Ireland (2022) articulate their position in relation to the context of the fire through a 'conceptual distinction between the 'Inventory of Loss' (referring to the contents of the Public Record Office of Ireland, destroyed in 1922) and the 'Inventory of Survival' (referring to any archival or other historical record which can serve as a replacement or para-replacement for the destroyed records).' Arguably, the territories with no data are equally as informative as the

locations with surviving documentation. *Census Gleanings Map* (2022) acts as both a reconstruction of lost records, and a historiographical testimony of the dissemination and destruction of Ireland's written history.

Memory as a parameter

Grounded in the same context and desire to archive Irish history, the friction between *Census Gleanings Map* and my own work is borne from our differing positions in relation to the parameters of archiving. Less enamoured with fact, I began to collect memories.

My initial intention was to restore knowledge about the uninhabited stone cottages that populate the rural West Coast of Ireland, driven by a concern that the memories associated with these homes were degrading, along with the buildings. Through engagement with the community in Easkey, County Sligo, memories of these unoccupied homes were gathered through an act of participatory archiving.

Positions in tension

In both bodies of work, the collected data is inextricably tethered to the place from which it was gathered. My research currently focuses on Easkey but serves as a gesture towards a greater effort to collect, catalogue and perpetuate memories of uninhabited buildings across the entirety of Ireland. Clearly, there is a limit to the scale of my work due to its analogue nature and my capacity to workshop the archival kits with members of the community. My research conducted thus far is merely the first fragment towards the creation of a cohesive map of memories, with the intention to slowly grow to the government-wide scale of *Census Gleanings Map* (2022).

The historical records which populate *Census Gleanings Map* have been immortalised through their digitisation. The catalogued information is fixed and static, mimicking history itself. This is, perhaps, the antithesis of my work. The assembled knowledge of the derelict homesteads collected in my research is fluid, permutable and labile, often rooted in emotion as the participator recounts memories from years gone by.

By alleviating the impulse to record fact, the research is free to explore individual perception. Memory is neither accurate nor inaccurate; merely a reconstruction of lived events, warped by one's own experience. In *BBC Science Focus*, cognitive neuroscientist Dr Christian Jarrett (2026) astutely writes: 'each time you invoke a memory, you're not simply taking a file out of an archive, you're writing and editing that file anew – potentially incorporating new information or beliefs – and

then it gets stored again. It becomes a memory of a memory, if you will.' Despite the dimension of subjectivity, recollection can store just as much, if not more, information as fact. Emotion, position and understanding are all woven into memory, creating a richer account of a place or moment.

Concurrent viewing

With written documentation eradicated, and unoccupied buildings derelict and degrading, the best chance of preserving the lost history is by archiving the stories that once filled the rooms. I propose that *Census Gleanings Map* and my own project are most productive when viewed concurrently. By overlaying fact with memory, a more cohesive map of Irish history is revealed. The fragments of memory collected through my studio work build upon, and fill in the gaps, in the foundation of knowledge stored within the *Census Gleanings Map*.

The initial intention of my design research was to start a broader conversation about the future of the uninhabited homesteads in the West Coast of Ireland through the restoration of memory associated with place. Triangulating with *Census Gleanings Map* encouraged a critical reflection about my position within the territory of existing historical documents, and the purpose of my archival efforts. Celebrating the duality of fact and memory, my studio practice will begin to address the question: *Is the perpetuation of memory a legitimate form of archiving? And how can you create an archival framework that appropriately records the simultaneousness of fact and memory?*

PALIMPSEST

Palimpsest is defined as:

1. 'a very old text or document in which writing has been removed and covered or replaced by new writing';
2. 'something, such as a work of art, that has many levels of meaning, types of style, etc. that build on each other' ('Palimpsest', 1998).

The term palimpsest has since been applied to an architectural context in contemporary discourse. In *Arquitectura Viva* (2022), a palimpsest is described as 'evanescent traces, from the diachronic superpositions of buildings or streets to the faded remains of a sign or writing on a party wall, (that) tell stories about the lifestyles and concerns of past dwellers'.

Palimpsest was employed as both a subject matter and a methodology to uncover the layers of history embedded within the fabric of The Stone Cottage during the early stages of the work. This was realised through the design and fabrication of *The Palimpsest Archive*, in which fragments of unbound historical documents could be layered and positioned to reveal a comprehensive account of the history of The Stone Cottage. This archival effort relied on a dataset: a catalogue of bibliographic sources that weave together a complex tapestry of the history of the West Coast of Ireland, viewed through the lens of one particular derelict cottage. Each fragment of archival material is incomplete in isolation, only revealing its full historical significance when read in conjunction.

A FRAMEWORK FOR COLLECTING MEMORY

Many abandoned homes along the rural West Coast of Ireland are in such a state of disrepair that they can no longer be visited, while others have completely deteriorated, leaving little evidence of their existence. Even if a place can no longer be physically revisited, an old memory can be reactivated through sensory cues. This draws on therapeutic visualisation, a technique in which sensory details are layered to reconstruct a scene in the mind (Harvard Health Publishing, 2021). To facilitate the collection of memories, a robust framework was required to guide participants through the process.

Whilst visiting the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life in County Mayo, I discovered a *Memory Book Record Sheet* (2013), which encouraged visitors to record stories or memories that were prompted by the exhibition. Participants were guided through this process using targeted questions, including: 'Did any of the objects or exhibits remind you of a particular person, place or time?' And, 'have you ever used any of the objects that you have seen on exhibition?' (2013).

Responses collected between 2013 and 2018 were compiled into *Happy Days and Hard Times: Memories Inspired by the Museum of Country Life*, edited by Joanne Hamilton (2018). This process of archiving through memory collection prompted the question: *How can a set of questions sensitively and systematically reactivate a memory?*

This line of enquiry was synthesised through my design and fabrication of an archival kit: a framework for collecting memories. The preamble to the archival kit introduced participants to the motivations behind my research and contextualised the work through my own relationship with the West Coast of Ireland:

'*Many of my earliest memories are tethered to the West Coast of Ireland. Having spent my formative years visiting family in County Mayo, it is a place I associate with home.*

Since I can remember, I have been fascinated with the uninhabited homes that populate the road from Enniscrone to Easkey. As I grew older, I started to notice the pattern of unoccupied buildings extended beyond this one road. The landscape of the West Coast is inundated with these stone cottages. I have spent many years imagining the stories seeped into the walls, saturating every corner of these abandoned homesteads.

I would like to collect a memory about your home.'

As the archival kit was intended to be workshopped with members of the community, my position shifted from archivist to enumerator. The kit comprised two distinct sections, separated by sleeves. The first contained documents for participants to keep, while the second contained documents to be returned to the

enumerator.

The first sleeve contained two photographs of abandoned homesteads, printed onto polyester film. Each kit contained a different selection of photographs taken in or around Easkey, County Sligo. The visual quality of the printing enabled the images to be overlaid, with the bottom image only becoming visible when held up to the light. The physical form of these photographs reflected the layers of history embedded within the ruinous architecture of the unoccupied buildings.

The second document within the first sleeve provided instructions on how participants should navigate the archival kit. Taken from the *1911 Census Form A (Page 2)* (The National Archives of Ireland, 1911), this record opens with the following snippet of text: 'Note. - This Abstract has been carefully filled by the Enumerator, and is to be viewed before the File of the several Forms for the persons enumerated in the Townland or Street which it relates'.

The second sleeve established a framework through which I could explore my new role as enumerator. *House and Memory Return*, which borrowed visual and rhetorical language from the *1911 Census House and Building Return* (The National Archives of Ireland, 1911), provided the infrastructure to evoke and document memories of a selected abandoned building through a series of guided questions and prompts:

Date on which House and Memory Return was collected.
Please mark the Location of House or Building with an X on the map (of Easkey).
Is House Inhabited? — Yes or No, as the case may be
How many rooms were there?
State the exact Number of Windows in the Front of the House.
Draw the floor-plan layout of the house.
How many distinct Families were there in the House?
How many Rooms were occupied by each Family?
Name of the Person you associate most with each room.
Select and describe one of these rooms in as much detail as you can.
Can you tell me one memory about that room?
Return the the floor-plan layout. Mark with an X the location of your associated memory.
When did you live there?
When did you leave there?
Why did you leave?
Do you remember the last time you slept there? If so, please describe your memory.
When you left for the final time, did you lock the door?
Was anything left behind?
Do you return often?'

CENSUS COLLECTION IN IRELAND

Prior to the 1926 census, conducted under the newly established Irish Free State, national enumerations in Ireland were carried out under British rule. As the governing power, Britain conducted these censuses as part of its wider imperial and administrative framework.

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (2006), in the chapter 'Census, Map, Museum', critically investigates the ways in which the 'colonial state imagined its dominion'. The overarching themes of the chapter examine the methods of control employed by the colonial state to define and legitimise its authority through three key categories: 1. 'The nature of the human beings it ruled', 2. 'The geography of its domain', and 3. 'The legitimacy of its ancestry' (Anderson, 2006).

Anderson's (2006) primary conclusion is that the colonial state applied a 'totalising classification grid' to all facets of life under its control. The act of categorising maintained control over the region, as their rule was bounded and determinate. Anything that did not adhere to this classification grid was considered *other*—a category used to contain 'all real-life anomalies' (Anderson, 2006).

When applying this argument to the history of Irish census collection, it becomes apparent that British enumeration was shaped by the political and administrative priorities of the colonial state, rather than operating as an entirely neutral process. Despite contemporary efforts to reconstruct Ireland's lost written records, these reinstated documents cannot provide a complete account of the nation's history. The 'anomalies' that did not adhere to the colonisers' classification grid, potentially including deviations from established societal norms, may have been excluded, obscured or underrepresented within Ireland's written history (Anderson, 2006). This highlights the importance of preserving personal memories as a means of beginning to illuminate the gaps within Ireland's historical census records.

A CULTURE OF ABANDONMENT

'*The Irish landscape is seeded with ruins, multifarious remnants of the disappeared:*
the contours of ring forts and the angular thrust of the dolmen;
the stubs of round towers and shattered castles or abbeys;
the burnt-out shells of great houses and coastguard barracks.
One could even say it is a landscape peculiarly composed of ruins ...' (Lloyd, 2008).

The Central Statistics Office (2022) recorded 163,433 vacant properties across the Republic of Ireland in the 2022 census. IrelandInsights (2022), a digital platform that visually represents census data, mapped the distribution of these properties across the country. The data revealed that vacancy rates were significantly higher in the northwest of Ireland than in other parts of the country. In Easkey West, the electoral division in which my project is situated, 13.6% of dwellings were unoccupied, 5.9 percentage points above the national average (IrelandInsights, 2022).

Famine, labour shortages and mass emigration have displaced Irish people from their homes since the sixteenth century. The traditional way of life along the West Coast, historically dependent on farming and fishing, sadly added to this phenomenon, as residents were exposed to the economic and social hardships of rural life. Furthermore, direct boat routes from Sligo Port to New York facilitated emigration, with many people leaving for America in pursuit of a better life (County Sligo Heritage and Genealogy Centre, 2018). The convergence of these factors contributed to the proliferation of uninhabited buildings along the West Coast and established a culture of abandonment that remains embedded within the area's social fabric.

This unusual custom was documented by artist David Creedon in his photographic series, *Ghosts of the Faithful Departed* (2021). Creedon captures the transient nature of abandonment in Ireland through his photographs of derelict dwellings. The visual qualities of his work reflect the ephemerality of his subject, whilst simultaneously revealing the historical hardships of rural life in Ireland. The causes of abandonment remain implicit throughout his work, suggested through his sensitivity towards the homes, their belongings and the stories they hold. Emboldened by Creedon's delicate approach, I adopted a similar sense of respect in my own photographic documentation of uninhabited homes.

DEGRADATION

Image manipulation was utilised as a critical tool to explore the tension between the degradation of the image and the physical deterioration of the building. Seven photographs of The Stone Cottage were iteratively degraded through a structured process of manipulation, with each image scanned and reprinted at every stage. The resolution gradually deteriorated, while the colours of the stone structure morphed into a textured landscape. This process mirrors the condition of the derelict homesteads of the West Coast of Ireland, which are subject to the effects of contingency and are slowly returning to the land.

CONCURRENCE IN WRITING

Throughout my enquiry, there has been a persistent desire to return to the question: *How can the form of writing enable multiple narratives to exist concurrently within a single text?* This notion was explored through the rendering of my video essay transcript, my layered publication recounting two distinct dialogues, and the development of this dissertation's structure.

Initially inspired by Jeremy Till's *Contingency* (2009), my visual experimentation with the written word explored how multiple narratives might be represented, using layered translucent paper to rhetorically evoke the concurrence of two separate stories. Till (2009) writes in two distinct tones of voice, differentiated through the use of contrasting typefaces: a serif typeface is employed for traditional academic writing, whilst a sans-serif typeface is used for informal dialogue. Similarly, Jacques Derrida explores the visual arrangement of concurrent texts in *Glas* (1974), where multiple narratives coexist within a single text, distinguished by their spatial arrangement. This subtle manipulation of typography is a powerful graphic device for communicating several parallel narratives.

In contrast, Roland Barthes adopts a different position towards concurrence in writing in *The Death of the Author* (1977). Barthes (1977) argues that the author is merely the steward of pre-existing texts, as writing 'holds together, in a single field, all the traces by which the text is constituted'. If this position is adopted, then surely all writing can be understood as an example of multiple narratives existing concurrently, as fragments of pre-existing texts are woven together to create a textured argument composed of layers of other people's work.

My understanding of concurrence in writing has become clearer through iterative studio experiments exploring how publication form may facilitate the simultaneous reading of multiple texts. The structure of this dissertation represents the synthesis of this experimentation. Inspired by B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969), the work is now centred on permutation, implicitly suggesting the material itself can be arranged to produce different configurations of meaning, rather than guiding the reader through a predetermined sequence of the writing. This dissertation is not simply experimenting with different ways of presenting multiple narratives, it is testing whether the physical and visual organisation of text can fundamentally alter the relationship between author, reader and narrative. By relinquishing control over the reading experience, the writing is free to move like memory: subjective, mutable and personal to each reader.

COLLECTING MEMORY

You had not been back for twenty years. As we sat in the car, pulled up in front of the rusted gate at the threshold of The Stone Cottage, a memory, long forgotten, was brought back to life.

"One night, we were coming home; myself and John. I was only just going out with him at this time. Every night I'd drive us home from the pub, learning to drive. Now none of us drank at the time.

When I would be pulling in here, John would pull the handbrake. But this night, I pulled in and he didn't pull the handbrake, and I went through the gate.

The next morning... we didn't use to live together, but he used to stay in the sitting room because he was fishing with my dad at the time... he gets up in the morning and my father went out.

"What in the feck did you do with my gate?" he says to John.
"You better ask your daughter"."

Armed only with fond memories of your youth, you braced yourself as we stepped out of the car and entered The Stone Cottage.

IN DIALOGUE

Dialoguing offered an opportunity to pause and critically reflect on the purpose of my work.

The first dialogue was conducted with Tina Lavelle, the owner and former occupier of The Stone Cottage, the building at the epicentre of my research. The looseness and informality of my discussion with Tina is reflected in the first-person account of our encounter. This dialogue stirred complex feelings of being an outsider, as Tina recalled stories of the home in which she grew up that were previously unknown to me.

The second dialogue was conducted with Paul Bailey, an Irish graphic designer, researcher and educator. Originally from County Roscommon, Paul shared an understanding of the longstanding traditions of the rural West Coast of Ireland and related personally to the themes emerging from my work. The formality of my conversation with Paul Bailey is reflected in the writing itself, which adopts a more traditional academic style.

It was a late spring evening when I last visited The Stone Cottage. I found myself in Finned Bridge, attempting to unearth the story of why the homestead, with which I had become so enchanted, had fallen into dereliction. The remnants of the walls remained sturdy and grounded, despite the further degradation of their structural integrity since my last visit. When I defocused my eyes, it became almost impossible to distinguish the structure from the surrounding landscape. I feared that the story of The Stone Cottage might be disappearing into the land, along with the building.

The neighbouring farmer offered little insight into who owned The Stone Cottage. They mentioned a woman, "Tina Something-or-other", who lived in Easkey village and might be able to tell me more. In keeping with West Coast tradition, her house had no street name or number, and was described simply as the yellow house past the school.

When I knocked on the door of what I believed to be Tina's current residence, I was met by an old man. I explained where The Stone Cottage was situated, which was met with some confusion, albeit with an unwavering determination to help. We spoke freely about farming culture and local village gossip. Although the conversation further contextualised my understanding of how stories circulate across the West Coast of Ireland, I felt no closer to locating the owner of The Stone Cottage.

The conversation with Paul initially focused on the notion of storytelling, as he introduced *The Dúchas Project* (2012), a repository that catalogues and digitises artefacts of Irish folklore. The societal shift from analogue to digital has heightened

the vulnerability of oral histories, prompting the emergence of projects dedicated to formally document them.

Downtrodden and disheartened, I returned to the main, and only, street in Easkey village. I picked up a coffee and began talking to the barista. I told her the story of The Stone Cottage, about my research into the ancestral history of the local area, and about the farmer's unhelpful advice concerning the yellow house past the school. When she asked to see a photograph of The Stone Cottage, she casually revealed that it belonged to her grandma.

My faith in the interconnected network of relationships along the West Coast of Ireland had been restored.

Paul went on to discuss the political significance of the Gaelic language. Historically, Gaelic could function as a means of transmitting information discreetly, particularly in encounters with English-speaking authorities who did not understand the language. Nicholas M. Wolf (2014, pp. 39–40) documents nineteenth-century folklore accounts in which Irish was used to conceal conversations and communicate warnings in the presence of English speakers. The language therefore held significance beyond cultural identity, functioning as a means of resistance. Themes of social and political justice are deeply entangled within the Irish storytelling tradition and must therefore be acknowledged as a powerful historical force in its own right.

After exchanging a few brief text messages, we arranged a time to meet at her house. When I arrived, the description of the yellow house past the school became clear. I regretted the doubt I had felt towards the farmer I had first spoken to. I knocked on the door and met Tina.

We sat in her front room and spoke for hours. She wrapped me up in her imagination and took me into her world as she recounted stories of her childhood. The Stone Cottage came alive and, for the first time, I could actually envision it as an inhabited home.

Tina was interested in my research and provided clarity about the timeline of The Stone Cottage. As an outsider, the precise story of the building, its inhabitants and its history had always been shrouded in mystery. The Stone Cottage was built in 1901. The building served both a residential and civic function, operating as the village shop. The room to the right of the main entrance was originally subdivided into two distinct spaces. The front room housed the shop, while the room at the back served as the kitchen. In 1973, Tina's father extended the building, adding two extra rooms and a bathroom. At times, as many as eleven people lived in the small homestead. Tina and her family left the property in 1985.

I thought I knew the building so well, yet as Tina spoke, I realised that I only knew of the place, not the memories that had once made this derelict cottage somebody's home.

Paul highlighted the importance of engaging with the community to gain insight into how storytelling can function as a means of documenting history. The project *Living Together* by Verity-Jane Keefe (2021) was introduced as an example of archival practice that documents history through meaningful community interaction and participation. We discussed the importance of revisiting Easkey regularly, introducing new material during each visit, which could potentially reveal further insights as the narrative of the enquiry evolves.

In recent years, Tina organised multiple Rambling House evenings for the local community, seeking to rekindle Irish traditions of oral storytelling. We discussed the importance of bringing the people of Easkey together, as the practice of storytelling had fundamentally changed following rural electrification in the 1950s. Tina believed that the desire to gather communally had diminished as the hearth was replaced by the radiator, reducing people's reliance on shared spaces for warmth and entertainment.

As I bid farewell to Tina, we promised to stay in touch. She expressed that our conversation had given her a renewed yearning to keep the tradition of the Rambling House alive in Easkey.

BRITISH-IRISH IDENTITY

Throughout this body of work, I began to develop a greater understanding of my position in relation to my practice. My research is situated at the intersection of communication design and architecture. What I had not anticipated, however, was the uncertainty I would experience in relation to my own British-Irish identity. This significantly influenced how I approached and understood my work: neither as an outsider nor as an insider. I have a partial understanding of the culture of the rural West Coast of Ireland, but it is not my own. My Britishness and Irishness exist concurrently within the work. They cannot be separated and must therefore be acknowledged as a layered position.

ATTACHMENT TO PLACE

I cannot fathom leaving my home with all my belongings still inside. A home in eternal rest; only subject to the forces of nature and time.

As an outsider, it is hard to grasp that this is a reality for so many people on the West Coast of Ireland. I could not understand whether this phenomenon stemmed from a lack of attachment to place, an ability to leave and never look back, or, conversely, from such an overwhelmingly unassailable attachment that people could not bear the notion of razing their uninhabited homes.

Whichever it is, this attachment is felt deeply.

Despite my extensive research and time spent with the local community, I fear I am no closer to finding an answer to this question than I was at the beginning. Maybe it will be kept a secret between the people and the land; forever unfathomable to an outsider like me.

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