

# FROM MARGINALITY TO RESURGENCE:

The case of the Irish Islands

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## Abstract

The islands off the coast of Ireland declined after the Irish famine of the 1840s. The number inhabited and the size of the population on those that remain populated both fell dramatically, faring worse collectively than the Irish mainland to which they were marginal in every sense. The reasons for this decline are examined. In the early 20th Century there are some signs of resurgence. The article considers that this might be put down to the efforts of islanders themselves, coupled with state and European Union support. There is an interest in and regard for the islands associated with their being seen as repositories of Irish culture and heritage. This has had positive benefits regarding the attitude of the state agencies and also for tourism, which is an important factor in many contemporary island economies. In fact, some of the resurgence as measured by population totals can be put down to people having holiday cottages on the islands rather than an increase in the size of traditional communities.

## Keywords

Islands, Ireland, population, tourism, culture

## Away with that camera

Off Ireland, the world's twentieth largest island, lie several hundred small islands, especially around the west coast (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> The author has been researching these islands since the early 1980s and in 1984 visited one, the name of which will not be mentioned for reasons that will become obvious. The journey was difficult, requiring a long wait at a mainland quay for a small, rather battered, launch to appear for the journey out to the island. The island was rundown, with poor infrastructure, a declining population and a general air of dereliction. A photograph was taken of rickety wooden sheep pens to symbolise the state of affairs. In 2007 the author revisited, on his bicycle, carried aboard a proper ferry. The island, whilst not transformed totally, had certainly been the recipient of much investment. Again, the sheep pens were symbolic for now they were now metal and in good condition. Another photograph was required to capture this change, and, unlike in 1984, it would be an action shot for in the pens working with the sheep was an elderly farmer, his back to the road. Braking quietly, the author photographed the scene. The noise of the camera disturbed the farmer, who was furious at being photographed carrying out his work without having granted

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permission. “Away with that camera”, was the gist of the message transmitted. The story is retold, even though it demonstrates unethical conduct by the author, again because of the symbolism of the situation. The farmer’s island had been changed and for the better, his new pens witnessed that. However, the engine driving that change was not fuelled by the farmer’s efforts alone - a traditional enterprise such as keeping sheep on an Irish offshore island remains challenging - rather by what the author’s camera represented, namely the engagement of the islands in recent years with the outside world through tourism and a newly minted regard for them by people who do not have to make a living from the local resources.



Figure 1 – Ireland and its main offshore islands

The contribution of tourism to the islands is obvious; visitors support the ferries (and the three airstrips to the Aran Islands, County Galway) and play a part in the insular economies by paying for accommodation or, if not staying, they at least buy refreshment, goods and services onshore or take a trip round (Figure 2). The role of

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the ‘regard’ is less straightforward as will be seen, but can have direct impacts and contribute to population growth on some of the islands after over a century of decline as both outsiders and returned migrants invest in island property and, occasionally, businesses. These trends have helped some of the Irish islands to move “from marginality to resurgence” to use the title of the conference at Macquarie University at which a PowerPoint version of this paper was presented as a keynote address<sup>2</sup>.



Figure 2 – Tourists take a trip around Inisheer, County Galway

### Marginality

Ireland as a whole has had an unusual population history in the last couple of centuries and consideration of any aspect of its social or economic history over time must take cognizance of that. Prior to the 1840s the still largely rural, peasant society was growing quickly. Pockets of industrial development, especially in the northeast around Belfast, contributed to the overall growth, but were unusual. Most people on the island of Ireland, then part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, lived on (and from) the land. The potato was key here. Productive and nutritious, it supported the bulk of the population. Then in the 1840s Ireland was devastated by a blight, *Phytophthora infestans*, which caused failure of the potato crop over large areas. Relief measures were inadequate and the result was an increased death rate: malnourished people usually succumbing to disease - ‘famine fevers’ - rather than dying directly of starvation. The birth rate fell and these elements of natural population change were accompanied by a massive pulse of emigration as Irish people fled the poverty at home to the promises of the new world, especially, but not exclusively, to North America (Mokyr, 1985; Kennedy et al, 2000). The total population having been counted at 8,175,233 in 1841 fell to 6,552,115 by 1851 and continued to fall for over a century, as emigration became an established life cycle stage for many Irish people. Ireland’s lowest population was recorded in the 1961 censuses at 4,243,983 (2,818,341 in the Republic of Ireland and 1,425,642 in Northern Ireland, the island having been

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partitioned in 1921 when 26 of 32 counties left the UK to become an independent state). The total population of the island is now growing strongly but is still well below the 1841 total.

It is against this background that the situation in the islands must be measured. If the offshore islands were subject to marginality this would imply that they would have fared worse than the mainland and thus their population totals should have declined even more precipitously. From this point the paper will focus on the Republic of Ireland (the 26 counties) and not Northern Ireland. This is because of data inconsistencies, censuses being taken at different dates and different frequencies in recent decades in the two polities. Northern Ireland anyway has few offshore islands: the Copeland Islands, County Down long depopulated, Rathlin, County Antrim with about 100 people and a handful living on islands, many of them bridged, in the almost totally enclosed Strangford Lough. The analysis also excludes some insular pieces of land never regarded as true offshore islands in Ireland, such as Great Island in Cork Harbour, which has the substantial port of Cobh (formerly Queenstown) and is about as insular as Manhattan. Another island excluded here is Haulbowline, County Cork, which is a navy base (analysis of island population trends should not be affected by the number of seamen in the Irish navy). A prison island (Spike, County Cork) and those occupied just by lighthouse keepers (Krauskopf, 2001) and/or coastguards are also excluded. The remaining islands are compared to the situation in what is (or became) the Republic of Ireland in Table 1:

Year	Inhabited islands	Island population	% annual change	Ireland's* population	% annual change
1841	176	35,362		6,528,913	
1851	182	27,693	-2.17	5,111,550	-2.17
1901	119	24,553	-0.27	3,221,823	-0.74
1961	89	13,922	-0.72	2,818,341	-0.25
2002	57	8758	-0.90	3,917,203	+0.68
2006	62	8807	+0.14	4,239,848	+1.90

\*The 26 counties that are or became the Republic of Ireland

Table 1 - Island and Ireland's population, selected years 1841-2006

It is clear that the islands' population decline was more benign than that of the 26 counties in the 19th Century perhaps given their access to the resources of the sea, although there was a precipitate fall in the number of inhabited islands as the smaller and most marginal were deserted. In the 20th Century when subsistence primary production from sea or land fell away as a way of life, the islands fared relatively worse than for the Republic of Ireland as a whole. The decline became steeper throughout the century and the lowest total occurred in 2002, four decades later than the lowest total for the nation. There was a differentiation between islands in that those that were linked to the mainland fared better than true, unlinked islands. The author has written in detail on this elsewhere and there is no need to repeat the work here (Royle, 2007). All that is necessary is to confirm that in a situation of national decline, the islands fared worse than the mainland, the lowest total compared to 1841 being 24.77% in 2002 compared to the national minimum, which was 43.17% in 1961. At the last, 2006, census the islands' total was only marginally greater at 24.9% of 1841 but the Republic

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of Ireland had then recovered to 64.93% of the 26 county 1841 total. For the islands growth has only been experienced between the 2002 and 2006 censuses and it may be too soon to claim this as an established trend. The islands were, indeed, marginal.

Why did the islands decline? A range of reasons might be advanced, but many could be gathered into two bundles relating to social and economic pressures. Most island people had to make their living from local resources and islands usually offered fewer opportunities than large ecumenes elsewhere, especially the actual or, just as importantly, perceived plenty of the new world. Island life, though often rich in cultural terms was restrictive socially, with little privacy and, in the limiting case, few marriage partners. This could be seen in the Copeland Islands when at the 1911 census none of the 14 adults from 18-30 were married presumably because all 25 people on the island shared just two surnames and all would have been interrelated (Royle, 1994). A similar situation must have applied in other small islands elsewhere.

A cycle of island decline has been set out to show the downwards spiral in operation (Interdepartmental Co-ordinating Committee on Island Development, 1996; see also Royle, 2007) and island voices can also help us understand motives for emigration (Royle, 1999). Island emigration has been the theme of both novels, eg *Proud Island* (1975) by Peadar O'Donnell (1893-1986) and plays, including the powerful 'The Gentle Island' (1973) by Brian Friel (born 1929). Such fiction can give a representative voice to the mute majority who left no record of their feelings, but in the Irish case we can support an invented account of what people had they have been sufficiently articulate might have said by studying what actual islanders did say. Primary sources of great richness here are the three biographies written in Irish by residents of Great Blasket Island: Tomas O'Crohan (1978/1929) (Tomás Ó Criomhthain, 1856-1937), Maurice O'Sullivan (1953/1933) (Muiris Ó Súilleabháin, 1904-1950) and Peig Sayers (1974/1936) (1873-1958). Described as "peasants, eking out a scanty living" and only "technically literate" their writings have nonetheless been recognised as possessing "Homeric qualities" (Luce, 1969: 151). Sayers, not an islander by birth, but who married into the community and became attached to her home nevertheless was aware of its limitations and stated that "Twould be a bad place that wouldn't be better for you than this dreadful rock" (1974: 186). Quotes from these books and also that by Conchúr Ó Síocháin (1866-1941) who wrote about his home on Clear Island (sometime Cape Clear), County Cork (1975/1940) can be thought of in terms of the usual push and pull factors behind motivations for migration, whilst the social and economic reasons are still evident. "How lonely I am on this island in the ocean"; "I think this is a very confined place with the sea out there to terrorize me" (1974:159) and "There's a great deal of... hardship in the life of a person who lives on an island" (1974: 211) wrote Sayers. Ó Síocháin depicted the poverty of his parents' generation: "No one had the second pair of boots to put on his feet nor the second trousers to cover his bones, and they toiled night and day to meet their small expenses by every means possible. The very ground knows that it was a hard life trying to make a living then" (1975: 23). O'Sullivan was conscious of the pull of the new world: "New Island [America] was before me with its fine streets and great high houses" (1953: 230). Chain migration became established, for example the Blasket people tended to follow each other to Springfield, Massachusetts (Moreton, 2000). Muiris, Peig Sayers' son "had to take the road like the others" (1974: 185), whilst O'Sullivan observed that "all the young people were departing across to America, five or six of them every year" (1953: 230). O'Sullivan himself left the island not for America but to join the guards (the Irish police)

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and returned for a visit after two years away when further emigration had taken place to observe that “the big red patches on the sandhills made by the feet of the boys and girls dancing - there was not a trace of them, no” (1953: 298).

The Blasket boys and girls presumably would have been performing Irish dancing for the islands were repositories of traditional culture. J.V. Luce wrote of Great Blasket’s “*seanchas*, Gaelic oral tradition”, which was particularly strong here (1969: 152). The traditional culture is especially evident from O’Crohan’s book, the earliest of the three, but culture nourished the mind not the body and prosaic matters such as the more ready gaining of sufficient sustenance often overrode attachment to place. Conchúr Ó Síocháin never migrated away from Cape Clear:

*If I were asked tomorrow to leave this wild, harsh place and go to live elsewhere I would have every advantage, convenience and opportunity I could wish for, this is what I would say: although I have lean cheeks and a stooped back from trying to make my living throughout my life in this isolated place, far from market or fair, still I and the patch of land I own are so used to one another that I couldn’t leave it* (1975: 128).

By contrast a migrant from Inishmurray, County Sligo said that, “When I went to America I thought I died and went to heaven”, comparing his occupation there delivering groceries to “the work we did with the searods [a type of seaweed] on the island for practically nothing” (McGowan, 2004: 9).

In some cases the islands were abandoned. Often the people, usually in family groups drifted away until one winter there was nobody there. This can be seen in the classic study of Irish island decline by Aalen and Brody, *Gola: The Life and Last Days of an Island Community* (1969). The seasonal reference is important for the Irish islanders helped to support themselves by summer migration often for harvest work in Scotland - the ‘tattie hokers’ (potato pickers) of Achill Island, County Mayo were well known. One winter migrants did not return and the rest of the families left, abandonment having just happened rather than being planned. On Achillbeg (the name means ‘small Achill’ and the island lies off the coast of the much larger Achill) abandonment came about in 1965, just months after the authorities had invested in an electricity supply and had carried out pier improvements (Beaumont, 2005). The alternative abandonment scenario was official evacuation, the authorities sending out a boat to remove the last residents who had arrangements for rehousing on the mainland. This happened most famously with Great Blasket Island in 1953, but also elsewhere as with Inishmurray in 1948 (Heraughty, 1982).

### Resurgence

Table 1 may be misleading in its implications that the islands as a whole have now turned a corner. Certainly the total population living on the islands rose from 2002-2006 and this is the first time this has happened since the 1830s. The number of populated islands also rose. However, Inishmore (sometimes called Deer Island), County Clare lost its last resident in that period, just the latest island which once housed a substantial population (here 133 in 1841) to fall silent. On the other hand, some islands became repopulated, such as Owey, County Donegal with a population

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of 27 at the 2006 census, having been abandoned in 1974. One must question whether such repopulations, however, represent a return of proper island communities. The author recently carried out fieldwork on Gola, County Donegal. This island, the location of Aalen and Brody's classic 1960s study of depopulation, regained a presence in the census in 2002 for the first time since 1966. Observation showed a pile of building material on the quay; mains water had recently been installed and the visit was accompanied by the sound of hammering as house repairs were being carried out. However, a number of the few inhabitable houses in the ruined village had signs advertising that they were available for holiday lettings (Figure 3). This and other islands are being 'repopulated' largely or, in some cases, only by visitors and the census, in Ireland a *de facto* count of where people are on census night rather than a record of where they actually live, would capture those on holiday there that night.



Figure 3 – Holiday cottage to let, Gola, County Donegal

This must certainly have been the case on Owey, where renovated cottages are let to holidaymakers through a company called Donegal Thatched Cottages, whose website is replete with shamrocks. Another consideration is that a number of the 62 inhabited islands are linked, including Achill, the largest, which has a causeway to the mainland and is in real terms no more isolated than the Belmullet Peninsula to its north, also only accessible by a single road. Does the fact that Achill's population in 2006 was precisely the same at 2620 as in 2002 tell us anything about a resurgence of *islands*? It

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is better perhaps to consider true islands and those large enough to have still a community (Table 2).

This shows that whilst there was a reduction in the total from 2002-2006 to the lowest ever recorded and the population had fallen by over a third since 1961, the total has been relatively stable since 1991 and although talk of resurgence might be premature, at least decline has slowed. And whilst there is evidence of holiday homes and their occupants contributing to the islands' totals, this is not the same as the cases of Gola or Owey. For example, on Aranmore, County Donegal a recent study found that 22% of houses were holiday homes but many were occupied by former islanders coming back to live in their community on a seasonal basis (Loncle, 2006).

	1961	1966	1971	1979	1981	1986	1991	1996	2002	2006
Aranmore	948	847	773	825	803	735	596	602	543	522
Bear	382	306	288	258	252	230	216	212	207	187
Clare	205	167	168	132	127	140	137	136	127	136
Clear	235	217	192	155	164	145	132	145	129	125
Inishbofin	248	247	236	203	195	177	181	200	178	199
Inisheer	358	345	313	257	239	255	270	274	262	247
Inishmaan	357	342	319	237	238	236	216	191	187	154
Inishmore	933	925	864	883	891	848	836	838	831	824
Sherkin	101	92	82	82	70	87	93	98	129	106
Tory	264	243	273	213	208	136	119	169	133	142
Total	4031	3731	3508	3245	3187	2989	2796	2865	2726	2642

Table 2 - Population of ten largest true islands, 1961-2006 censuses

### Self-help and official aid

Credit for any resurgence must go to a great extent to the islanders themselves. In the mid-1980s they formed a pressure group, *Comhdháil na nOileán*, the Federation of the Islands of Ireland, which held meetings of island representatives, usually from the co-operatives, on different islands (Royle, 1986). The group pressed for a dedicated government minister to co-ordinate island development, one of the problems the islands faced being that they lie scattered around the coast and were each unimportant, tiny parts of their counties, the local government areas. Eventually the group, or rather its successor organisation, *Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann*, the Irish Islands Federation, achieved this end and the islands had a dedicated home under the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands, later recast as the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. The Department's mission statement is:

*To promote and support the sustainable and inclusive development of communities, both urban and rural, including Gaeltacht and island communities, thereby fostering better regional balance and alleviating disadvantage, and to advance the use of the Irish language.*

The Department supports the islands through community development programmes and general schemes for Gaeltacht (ie Irish speaking) districts, which apply to many of them. An enterprise scheme for the anglophone islands compensates them for not

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being eligible for Gaeltacht support. In addition, the department is currently implementing a capital investment programme for the development of essential infrastructure on the islands, a sum of €4m per annum is allocated for the provision of ferry and air services, there being a recognition that such provide vital links for island communities. The National Development Plan from 2007-2013 has an Islands Sub-Programme with €126m committed for continued development to sustain island communities. Also the islands, like other parts of the west of Ireland with Objective 1 status, have received much support from the European Union, especially through the Regional Development Fund. Other countries with marginal island groups in Europe and elsewhere have also set in place support systems for the insular communities as a recent comparison between Ireland and Taiwan made clear (Royle and Tsai, 2008).

The Irish state, like all government bodies, has a duty to ‘alleviate disadvantage’ but that could be done simply by decanting the islands’ population into more ‘advantaged’ locations. The state (and the EU) rather now choose to support island populations *in situ*, at considerable expense. The islands’ language and heritage were significant in the Gaelic Revival Movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries when their traditional culture was subject to regard, not unconnected with the nationalism abounding in Ireland at this time as political pressures for independence from Great Britain mounted. Particularly noteworthy here was the relationship between playwright John Millington Synge (1871-1909) and the Aran Islands, particularly Inishmaan, the middle of the three and the most traditional. Synge visited the islands for several summers towards the end of his short life to steep himself in the Irish language and traditional culture no longer practiced widely in his County Dublin home area on the more developed east coast. He wrote several plays based in the west and a book, *The Aran Islands* (1907). Modern government support for island living seems to be a contemporary expression of renewed regard for the heritage of the islands.

Official support is combined with islanders’ efforts. *Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann*, has 33 member islands. Its mission “is to support sustainable, permanent communities on the islands”, its website noting that the “greatest concern expressed by communities in all of our member islands is the decline in their populations” (2008a). The organisation has developed a comprehensive document, ‘Island Policies’ (2008b), aimed at promoting action on a number of fronts especially access, employment, housing and sustainable enterprises, whilst developing infrastructure and services to make island living attractive. The *Comhdháil* works with the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, this interaction being a good example of bottom up community development in operation. Its bilingual magazine *Saol na nOileán*, which focuses on development and cultural issues, can be accessed through the website.

Many islands are also aided by their co-operatives, bodies that were important, too, in the establishment of the original *Comhdháil na nOileán* in the early 1980s. A study of that on Aranmore, County Donegal (Lewis, 2000) notes that since its establishment in 1978 it has been involved in the introduction of a regular vehicular and passenger ferry, the construction of ten council (publicly subsidised) cottages, a health centre, a craft centre and the renovation of the community centre. It produced a development plan in 1993 and later interacted with various EU schemes, especially the LEADER programme which focused on rural development. Social, cultural, community issues have been addressed; also economic development, including tourism training, infrastructure and marketing. One element of Aranmore’s development is the utilisation of its heritage.

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Being Irish-speaking the island qualifies for extra support and the island also attracts about 200 students each year to immerse themselves in Gaelic summer schools.

### Culture

Regarding culture and heritage, the author has published a paper which discusses whether the Irish islands celebrate or exploit their heritage (Royle, 2003). One that nears the latter is Inishmore, County Galway, which might be considered as a museum of itself. The largest of the three Aran Islands, Inishmore has focused on tourism, marketing its heritage and also its landscape with characteristic tiny walled fields and ancient stone forts, especially Dún Aonghasa on its magnificent clifftop site. Tourism has helped many islanders to build modern bungalows, past that trippers pass with barely a glance en route to photograph the handful of extant traditional whitewashed thatched cottages in which few islanders now live. Tourists also have opportunities to buy Aran sweaters, a faux ‘traditional’ garment developed only in the early 20th Century by enterprising locals looking for a marketable product (Figure 4). Inishmore’s visitors enjoy a real experience but one that is partial, focusing on the picturesque not the commonplace. The author, in interviewing people from other islands, has seen them shudder at Inishmore ‘selling out’, but that island now has nearly as high a level of services as mainland areas with supermarkets, banks and guards (police). Inishmore’s population was at its lowest at 824 in 2006 but, as Table 2 shows, it has been fairly stable in recent years, supported by this new economy.



Figure 4 - Aran sweater shop, Inishmore, Co Galway

Culture is also significant on Tory, County Donegal. Access is now by a dedicated licensed ferry, *Tormór*, which runs to a timetable, rather than the more ad hoc arrangements dependent upon a local boatman that operated during the author’s first

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visit in the 1980s. As the ferry draws in to a newly extended harbour, visible from its deck is the new health centre, new houses, some private, some in the public sector and a new school and community centre with children's playground (Figure 5). These expensive investments have not been supported by the traditional economy. Tory's fishing industry is much reduced. At the harbour at the author's last visit in 2007 were just four inshore boats and on the quayside was a tiny pile of lobster pots. And it is not that there were many other boats at sea. The British Broadcasting Corporation's correspondent, Kevin Connolly, reported from the island in 2005 that 'If you order fish in the only restaurant, it tends to have been brought across by ferry, not plucked from the rich seas that surround you as you eat' and a walk round the island will find little evidence of an active agricultural sector. Much of the investment is from the state and Europe - on the extended harbour wall is a bilingual plaque acknowledging the contribution of the EU's Regional Development Fund to the project. This is the public face of the new regard for the islands discussed above and here marks a considerable distinction from darker days in the 1980s when depopulation seemed inevitable. There is self-help, too. The island co-operative, operating from premises in the new school and community centre complex is active and some of the new housing is for returned migrants. There is a new small supermarket replacing the old general store and another key private investment was a hotel put up in the 1990s by a returned migrant which provides a community focus in its bar and restaurant and is also a venue for the many cultural events now staged on the island. These in 2007 included a festival of island films and a rock & roll festival. Tory is noted for its music and its art, especially the School of Primitive Painters, encouraged originally by a visiting English artist. These local artists paint island scenes and are internationally renowned. People now travel out to Tory to participate in and celebrate the island's culture, whilst the decline in agriculture has actually helped the wildlife, another factor in tourism. The BBC featured Tory in an issue of 'Countryfile', its rural affairs programme, in 2008 which identified the island as one of the last repositories of the corncrake, making its own resurgence there as agricultural withdrawal increases the area available for its habitat. Tourism has helped Tory's resurgence, from a nadir of 119 people in 1991 to 142 in 2006.



Figure 5 - New developments on Tory, County Donegal

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Culture on the Irish islands may not be as pure as it was in the early 20th Century when Synge was learning his Irish on Inishmaan and O’Crohan was writing that people as Irish as him would not be seen again (1978/1929). One can make facile accusations that the islands have sold out, perhaps that is what was irritating the sheep farmer featured in the first paragraph. The author has a photograph of a sign welcoming people to Achill in German – *willkommen* - rather than the usual Irish *cead mille failte* (a hundred thousand welcomes). However, the traditional islands did not hold their populations, maybe they still cannot. One relatively large offshore island that in the author’s experience is more traditional than most, still focusing on fishing and farming rather than tourism, is Inishturk, County Mayo and its population fell from 72 to 58 from 2002-2006 whilst other islands were seeing a population recovery. Any resurgence is not solely down to tourism and outside aid - Clare Island, County Mayo has profited from aquaculture, for example - but certainly the islands as a whole do benefit from the outside interest and regard discussed here. Heritage and culture have in a sense become ‘edible’ now, for as the BBC correspondent said: “Ireland keeps its offshore islands going because they are time capsules of a vanished national life, Gaelic-speaking reminders of how the country was before the demands of Britain's imperial economy took a grip over the centuries” (Connolly, 2005).

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Most Irish islands have names in both English and Irish, for example Uaigh and Owey. Their English names are used here.

<sup>2</sup> ‘From Marginality To Resurgence: European Island and Regional Cultures in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries’, a month-long event organised by The Island Cultures Research Centre of Macquarie University, Sydney, March 20th – April 19th 2008.

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