Tourism and Place Identity: A case-study in rural Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine aspects of the relationship between tourism and place identity in rural Ireland. This relationship is conceptualised in terms of the seemingly contradictory themes of change and continuity and, through a case study, it is argued that the impact of tourism must be understood in terms of the new social relations which emerge as individuals and institutions interact to commodify place identity. These new relations in turn are mediated through resilient existing social relations. Whilst there is evidence of a gradual redefinition of local identities towards a more touristic orientation through, for example, the commodification of cultural practices, heritage and landscape resources, there is also evidence of resistance to this re-orientation. Thus places retain their distinct identities in the face of potentially homogenising global processes.

Key index words: tourism, place, identity, Ireland.

Introduction

It is widely recognised that tourism has become an industry of major importance in the Republic of Ireland, with visitor numbers rising from 2.5 million in 1990 to over five million in 1996. European Union funds and public and private sector investments totalling 388.84 million ECU during the period 1989-1993, have helped to improve the roads, infrastructure and accommodation base, and have raised the number of visitor attractions (Hurley *et al.*,1994), whilst accessibility has been enhanced through the liberalisation of air travel in the late 1980s (Gillmor, 1994).

An important feature of recent Irish tourism development has been the explosion in cultural or heritage tourism (Duffy, 1994; Mullane, 1994; McManus, 1997). As Richards notes (1996), this is part of a broader European trend towards the conversion of former production spaces into spaces of consumption. Coalmines become museums, factories become visitor centres and, most relevant to the case of Ireland, countryside becomes leisure landscape (Cloke, 1993). Cultural tourism is no longer restricted to the mainly visual consumption of 'high culture' artefacts such as galleries, theatres and architecture, but has expanded to include simply "soaking up the atmosphere" of a place (Richards, 1996), sampling the local food (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1998; Bessière, 1998), and participating in local events. In Ireland, cultural tourism has been particularly developed in the form of heritage attractions such as historic houses, interpretative centres, parks and monuments (O'Donnchadha and O'Connor, 1996). In addition to historical or heritage attractions, the people of Ireland and their lifestyles are seen as a key component of the cultural tourism product. Hospitality, humour and the relaxed pace of life are all emphasised as part of the appeal of a holiday in Ireland (Browne 1994). Aer Lingus (1998), for instance, claims that "Irish hospitality begins in the air", whilst Irish Ferries (1998) emphasise the warm welcome which will be provided by their staff: "Have you heard the one about the unfriendly Irishman? Neither have we". Travel articles too emphasise the gregarious nature of the Irish, who always make time to "chat on a street corner" or "meet new friends over a pint" (Geographical, 1998).

Rural tourism has been encouraged by EU policies such as the 1990 European Year of Tourism and LEADER programmes which seek to promote tourism as a means of 'bottom-up' local development (Jenkins, Hall and Troughton, 1998). In rural areas the human resource is regarded as being of special importance and successful tourism is seen as being dependent on the active engagement of local people.

This participation in turn is viewed as a means of regenerating crumbling senses of place identity and providing communities with "the occasion for a new self-reflection: a cultural examination of conscience" (Feehan, 1992: 21).

In summary, therefore, Irish tourism over the last decade or so has been characterised by rapid growth, with particular emphasis on the use of cultural or heritage tourism to promote 'bottom-up' development in rural areas (Deegan and Dineen, 1997; Keane and Quinn, 1990). The emergence of this kind of all-encompassing tourism has implications for the people who live in tourist destinations, people who themselves become part of the tourist product. For instance, O'Connor (1993: 73) suggests that one of these implications is that "Irish people become inscribed within tourist expectations. Tourists expect a certain type of behaviour and are disappointed if these expectations are not met." This paper aims to explore these implications further through a case study of tourism development in the small town of Foxford, County Mayo. It is suggested that the response to the expectations generated by tourists is mediated through the resilient local social relations which exist within the host community. Sometimes the response may be characterised in terms of change; at other times, it may be characterised as continuity. In the following section, an attempt is made to conceptualise these responses in terms of the relationship between tourism and place identity.

Conceptualising Tourism And Place Identities In Ireland

It is broadly agreed that tourism has an impact on place identities. What is not agreed is the extent and nature of that impact. In this paper, the phrase 'place identities' is used to capture the broad range of social relations which contribute to the construction of a 'sense of place', a sense which enables people to feel that they 'belong' to a place, or that a place 'belongs' to them. The idea is to explore the ways in which tourism may cut across the particular 'lifeworlds' (Butz and Eyles, 1991) and experiences of certain groups of people and to try and convey a sense of the complexities and conflicts surrounding the construction of place identities. The plural 'identities' is used to suggest that different versions of identity may circulate within a place, versions which are shaped by the individual or collective experiences of different people. In terms of conceptualising the relationship between tourism and place identities, two broad themes can be identified within the tourism studies literature. In the following section, these themes are outlined and a third, alternative conceptualisation is then introduced.

Tourism constructs or reconstructs place identities

The first theme is that place identities are (re)constructed in order to meet tourist desires for particular characteristics such as authenticity and tradition (Urry, 1990; 1995). In the case of Ireland it has been suggested that, in the context of constructing an image for tourism promotional purposes, tourism images and texts are important to the construction of national identity. For instance, Gibbons (cited in O'Connor, 1993) argues that tourist images are a source of dominant visual representations of the nation. Similarly, O'Connor (1993: 69) argues that tourist imagery "plays a significant role in providing a native self-image" because firstly, Irish people have been exposed to tourist representations over a long period of time; and secondly, there has been a high level of contact between tourists and locals due to the small scale of the island and its population and the large proportion of tourists who are 'visiting friends and relatives.'

The forms which this construction of national self-image has taken have been explored through analyses of the ways in which certain touristic images of place have been constructed on the basis of historically-rooted perceptions of the country and its inhabitants as the romanticised 'other' to entities such as 'England', 'modern society' and 'urban industrialised Europe'. Bell (1995: 42) for instance, notes that Irish tourist agencies "draw on the 'melancholy vision' of the northern Romantic tradition of landscape painting to capture the imagination of the potential German tourist". Similarly, Quinn (1994: 64), in her study of images of Ireland in Europe, observes that the overwhelming message is that "Ireland is a world apart from

modern society" which offers "genuine unspoilt landscapes" and "the chance to rediscover old world values."

The West of Ireland in particular is used to symbolise Ireland and Irishness. As Nash (1993: 86) writes, "Images of the western landscape function in promotional publications as a shorthand notation for the landscape of Ireland in general." She shows that historically, the West was constructed both in opposition to Englishness and within Ireland as a site of true Irishness. The people of the West were endowed with particular qualities ranging from lawlessness, sensuality and physicality in the writings of Synge, to peasant resilience, puritanism and courage in the vision of nationalists such as Pearse and MacNeill (Gibbons, 1996; see also Duffy, 1997; Graham, 1997; Johnson, 1997; Brett, 1994; Kockel, 1994). Some of these connotations are sustained in contemporary tourism images and texts. For instance, Uris (1978: 60) writes of the West as "the Irish conscience," describing its people as "the gentle beauty of Ireland, soft and unsophisticated yet so full of wisdom and so dogged", "the last great peasantry of Europe", and the "backbone of the race." More recent sources describe it as a land which "embodies all the stereotypes generally associated with the country" (Howard, 1998:98) where the inhabitants have "clung to their own traditions in spite of the past invaders and the more insidious advances of modern life" (Day, 1995: 228).

Whilst it may be that touristic representations contribute to the construction of dominant images or perceptions of Ireland and the Irish, little primary research has been conducted into the relationship between tourism and other aspects of local place identity such as sense of place, the relationships which tie people to places, or the cultural, social and economic practices which help define individuals' perceptions of places. Yet, as this paper hopes to demonstrate, it is these features which shape the ways in which communities respond to touristic images or expectations of themselves.

Tourism destroys unique place identities

The second broad argument is that tourism destroys unique place identities. MacCannell (1992) for example, writes that commodification leads to the 'death' of third-world and ethnic cultures and the destruction of authenticity. Similarly, authors such as Greenwood (1989) and Mason (1996) argue that tourism results in the 'destruction' or 'prostitution' of once unique cultures. In reference to Ireland, Brody (1972) suggests that rural communities may become dependent on tourists for reassurance and self-worth, whilst Byrne *et al.* (1993) feel that in adapting to tourism, hosts in Connemara conform to the expectations of visitors from more politically and economically powerful cultures. In the process, unique cultural identities are eroded:

> *"[W]hen indigenous inhabitants of places like the West of Ireland gradually abandon local criteria regulating forms of reasonable thought and feeling, they will have become much more similar to people everywhere else"* (p. 253).

Furthermore, critics of the rapidly developed heritage industry in Ireland have accused it, among other things, of creating 'twee' (McDonald, *Irish Times*, 22/9/92), 'jumbled', 'folksy' (Busteed, 1992) 'stereotypical', 'nostalgic' and 'biased' (Mullane, 1994) images of Ireland and the Irish. An over-arching theme of these criticisms is the idea that heritage centres contribute to the 'trinketisation', commercialisation and trivialisation of culture.

These critiques of the heritage industry can be seen as part of a broader vision of tourism as a symptom of the homogenising onslaught of global capitalism, whereby places are seen to lose their distinctive identities in an increasingly bland world of MacDonalds and Coca-Cola consumption. Yet, contemporary conceptualisations stress that cultures can be seen to change, to be constantly contested (Hall, 1995; Crang, 1998). Indeed, it can be argued that globalisation is not new, and that even remote places have long been open to global influences and connections. For instance, as Smyth (1997) points out, the fortunes of the West of Ireland have been tied up with those of America's east coast cities since the late sixteenth century.

Furthermore, this historical perspective also highlights the fact that tourism is only one relatively recent aspect of globalisation and hence, in the case of Ireland at least, only one of the many processes which may potentially contribute to the homogenisation of unique place identities.

An Alternative Conceptualisation: Tourism, Change and Continuity

The intention in this paper is to arrive at a more balanced appraisal of the relationship between tourism and place identities. Rather than simply (re)constructing or destroying previously fixed and stable place identities, tourism contributes to on-going processes of change, whilst at the same time being mediated through the elements of continuity which exist within place identities. As proposed by Oakes (1995), tourism should, therefore, be thought of as just another process through which localised identities are continually reconstructed. Similarly, Cohen (1988) and Black (1996), have recognised that tourism can be used as a valuable tool in the re-assertion or re-evaluation of local identities in the face of external pressures. In other words, tourism can be seen as an example of the unique ways in which global-local relations are negotiated within the context of particular places, thus allowing for the maintenance of diversity and difference.

Whilst identities may be in a constant process of flux and change, there are also elements of continuity which enable one to talk about a sense of place, to make qualitative, subjective assessments of what places are like. In each place, the relationship between change and continuity is different, with change being more rapid and noticeable in some locations than in others. Although the tourism industry may seek to promote un-complicated, easily communicable and readily consumed images of place identity, these constructions exist alongside other deeply-rooted expressions of place identity and need not necessarily dominate or over-ride all of them. As Boissevain (1996) demonstrates, communities are capable of utilising their cultural resources whilst at the same time preserving spaces of cultural autonomy which remain inaccessible to tourist expectations. Furthermore, evidence from the case study shows that some aspects of local place identities are resilient and often resistant to change. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to illustrate ways in which tourism development is mediated through resilient local social relations, whilst at the same time creating new social relations which overlay the existing foundations within a particular place. It is argued that it is the emergence of these new social relations, rather than the presence of the tourists themselves which, in this case, have had most impact on place identity. In the following section, the case study location is introduced and a brief outline of the research methodologies is presented.

Introducing the Case Study: Foxford in County Mayo

Foxford, a small town with a population of 944 (1996) is located on the banks of the River Moy in the north of county Mayo (Figure 1). Whilst tourism has developed rapidly around the honey-pot of Westport in the south of the county, the north is less well-known and it was for this reason that the area was chosen as the site for a case study.

The aim was to capture the transition to an increasingly tourism-centred economy in a relatively remote place which is known for its strong cultural identity. In recent years a series of impressive heritage attractions (Kneafsey, 1995) and tourist circuits have been developed, and despite problems of accessibility and a relatively poor accommodation base, tourism is seen as an important part of the county's future (Mullaly Report, 1989; Mayo County Council, 1995).

Tourism images of Mayo draw on the romanticism associated with the West of Ireland to claim that the county is the most Irish part of Ireland. A French language brochure, for instance, asks "which is the only region of Ireland which is more Irish than Ireland?" The answer, "Mayo, naturally." Statements such as these are supported with reproductions of artworks such as Paul Henry's portrayal of men pushing a curragh out to sea, or Frederick William Burton's landscapes of Achill. Similarly, English language brochures
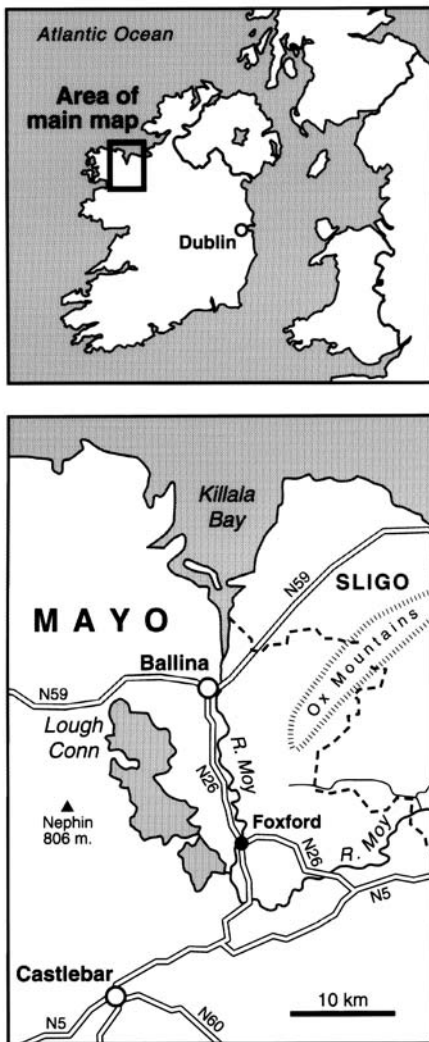
Figure 1: Study area.

describe a visit to Mayo as a "journey into an historic past", to the "final frontier of beauty and hospitality." References to the county's "scenic splendour", "rolling hills and gentle valleys" and "natural, clean and green environment" help to create an image of this place as one of the last wildernesses. One of the county's chief attractions is the "spontaneous hospitality of a caring people" who are "renowned the world over for their warm and hospitable nature" and who will offer the visitor a "warm welcome." In the words of the then minister for tourism, a resident of and political representative for county Mayo, "the magic of Mayo lies chiefly in the people you will meet during your stay" ('aMayozing brochure', 1995). The Moy Valley brochure similarly reflects the idea that "it is the warmth of the people that make Moy Valley the Emerald that is Ireland." In many respects, Mayo is represented as the archetypal Irish county, with references to a strong religious element (e.g. Knock shrine), a turbulent past, a romantic landscape, warm-hearted people, a different pace of life and suggestions of the opportunity to restore one's self through a return to nature.

Foxford is seen as a town which is doing well for itself, largely as a result of the development of a visitor centre based at a woollen mill. A local Teagasc socio-economic advisor described it as a "typical small town that was almost invisible before." One inhabitant of the town said "Foxford has thrived over the last couple of years" whilst another commented "Foxford is getting a reputation for being pretty progressive. Something good is happening." Foxford is regarded as something of a beacon in an area which generally suffers from high levels of unemployment and de-population. Before looking at some of the reasons as to why this is so, it is necessary to briefly outline the research methods which were adopted for this study.

Methodology

The case study of Foxford forms part of a comparative research project, the other study being that of a small commune in Finistère, Brittany (Kneafsey, 1997; 1998). The comparison allowed for a greater understanding of those processes which were generic and those which were place-specific. Most importantly, it provided evidence of the fundamental importance of unique local social relations in shaping the kinds of tourism which develop and in mediating the impact of that development.

As Crick (1989, cited in O'Connor and Cronin, 1993) notes, the 'local voice' is often absent from studies of the impacts of international tourism (see also Boissevain, 1996). The methodology adopted for this study was guided by a wish to engage with and record such local voices, and consisted of two main strategies. First, participant observation was undertaken throughout the four-month research period. This generated field diaries containing accounts of events such as festivals and heritage days, descriptions of participation in social activities such as music sessions, guided tours and walks, as well as observations made

during attendance at local meetings, cultural events, talks and classes. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants such as local hotel owners, publicans, shop-keepers, accommodation owners and representatives of the main agencies active within tourism development in the area. These included Teagasc (national Agriculture and Food Development Agency), Mayo Naturally (the county marketing company), Meitheal Mhaigheo (an Area Based Partnership Company which works with local community groups, trade unions, employers, farmers groups and State agencies to deal with long-term unemployment), Moy Valley Resources and Foxford Resources (Integrated Resource Development (IRD) Companies), the Foxford Woollen Mills and the Admiral Brown Society (a local group). In most cases the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Although respondents were fairly open in expressing their opinions, there were some individuals who felt uncomfortable with the use of a tape recorder, and often, the most interesting comments were made once the recorder had been turned off! Within the context of a small community, their reluctance to commit words to tape was understandable. In view of this, individual identities have been protected, particularly when views which were critical of other individuals or groups in the town were expressed. For this reason few details are given about individuals beyond a general description of their occupation.

The research was 'grounded' (Strauss, 1987, Strauss and Corbin, 1990) in that methods and analysis were not guided by strict rules but were adapted to the diversity of social settings and contingencies of research. Whilst the methodologies employed are discussed in more detail elsewhere (Kneafsey, *in press*), it is worth noting that the two strategies allowed the collection of a wealth of primary qualitative data. These are supplemented with secondary data such as photographs, newspaper cuttings, postcards, tourism publicity, local archival materials, policy documents and development plans. The fieldwork, carried out in 1995, was supplemented with short return visits in successive years. In a sense, the account presented here is a 'snap-shot' of a certain place in a certain time. In some ways, this could be seen as a limitation, and, indeed, the experience suggests that there is a need for more longitudinal studies of culture change in relation to tourism. Yet it can also be seen as an advantage, in that situations were seen with an outsiders' eyes, and there was less chance of the researcher, 'going native'. At the same time, the author's position as the daughter of a Mayo emigrant meant that research was not conducted in a completely alien environment, but was informed by an awareness of local political debates, gossip, social conventions and behavioural norms.

Tourism and Place Identity in Foxford: Change or Continuity?

The following section is structured around the main groups who are directly implicated in tourism development within the town and locale. It should be noted that there are, of course, individuals who belong to more than one group. The use of these groups is intended as an analytical tool with which to begin to uncover some of the complex sets of responses towards tourism. The account concentrates mainly on the perspectives of the host population, rather than those of the tourists, the intention being to evoke a sense of the different conflicts, negotiations and new social relations which are emerging within the town as groups and individuals combine to commodify place identity. Indeed, it is suggested that it is this process which has more impact upon place identity than the presence of tourists. This can be explained, in part, by looking at the types of tourists who visit Foxford:

The Visitors

The word 'tourist' is rarely used by locals. Rather, the term 'visitor' or 'angler' is applied. For instance, when asked to talk about tourism in the area, one Bed and Breakfast owner dismissed the idea because "there aren't any tourists here, there's only the anglers". Another woman described the visitors as being like "the swallows" who return every summer. In many ways, it seems that tourists are incorporated into the rhythms and routines of the place. This can be explained partly by the kinds of tourists who

visit Foxford and partly by the relations which exist between the town and its global outposts. The visitors can be grouped into four general types, as follows:

Anglers: This is perhaps the most important group of visitors, both because of their numbers and their economic impact. They tend to stay locally and spend money locally - on meals, drinks, fishing gear and licences. Accommodation owners estimated that anglers represent 70-75 percent of their clientele. Many anglers return year after year, drawn by the large numbers of salmon to be fished in the River Moy. In a sense, they become part of the extended community which revolves in and around Foxford. As well as the impact made on a personal scale, in terms of friendships which have developed over the years, well-organised angling tourism interests increasingly exert an influence on the management of surrounding lakes and rivers. For instance, pressure from angling interests prompted the North West Fisheries Board to take Mayo County Council to court over pollution from sewage plants (*Western People*, 19/6/96).

'Exiles': A traditional part of the seasonal rhythm of many Irish villages is the return of emigrants for holidays, and this continues to be an important and integral part of local place identities. This type of visitor has different expectations to the 'tourist' and tends to blend in with local lifestyles and habits, staying in relatives' homes, socialising with family and friends in local bars. It could be argued that this ebb and flow of people contributes to a more global sense of place, a fluid interchange between the locale and its global outposts which weakens the boundaries between hosts and guests.

Coach tours: Coach tours account for the large number of people who visit the visitor centre each year (around 60-70,000). Despite their large numbers, this type of visitor makes relatively little direct impact on place identity, apart from the obvious economic impact of spending money and hence keeping the visitor centre and mill open. Beyond this, their impact is limited because they are usually deposited at the visitor centre and spend most of their time in there. Although further research would be needed to establish a more accurate profile of these groups, they tend to make timed stops at the woollen mills as part of a scheduled tour. They are encouraged to stay within the confines of the mill by the presence of a restaurant and shop and the fact that the visitor centre is located at one end of the main street in the town at some distance away from the other restaurants, cafes and pubs. As one publican said:

"Tourism would be very important, we all want them coming you know. But as far as I can see, at the mill they're just in and out... very rarely do they walk down the town or come in".

When asked if many came into the bar, the answer was "No, no. One in probably 10,000 and that would only be a man who'd come in for a pint while his wife was going round a tour at the mill!" The majority of coach tourists have only a transitory experience of Foxford and hence remain largely anonymous to the hosts.

Independent travellers: the final group consists of those who make their way to Mayo in search of authenticity, 'real' and meaningful experiences (Urry, 1990). Their expectations are likely to have been shaped by representations of the county's beautiful environment and friendly people which were described earlier. One German tourist, in response to a question about why he had come to Mayo replied "because it is the edge". To a central European, it certainly is the physical edge of the continent, but in his reply there was also a sense that he meant the edge in other ways - the cultural periphery, the romantic Western seaboard, a place apart. Without further research, it is difficult to assess the impact of these independent travellers because their presence is transitory. Yet it is worth noting that it is this kind of traveller who could, potentially, return to the county and try and settle there, as has already happened quite extensively in places such as west Cork (Kockel, 1993). Indeed, there are German and Dutch incomers in the Foxford area who have bought local properties to use as holiday homes, and in some cases, have set up small craft and tourism businesses. Thus it could be argued that their real impact is felt when they start to drive the commodification process.

These are the main types of visitor to Foxford. Their presence is, of course, important in economic

terms; without them, there would be no visitor centre at the mill and no tourism industry at Foxford. Yet it is suggested that they do not exert a strong direct impact on place identity because they are either incorporated into existing rhythms and seasonal activities or their presence is only fleeting and transitory. Rather, it is argued that the most significant impact on place identity is to be found in the new relationships, attitudes and conflicts which emerge as different actors combine to transform Foxford into a tourist destination. To illustrate this argument, the paper now turns to the different groups who are involved in this activity.

The Hosts

Within Foxford, two main sets of actors are involved in hosting the tourists: the people 'at the mill' and the other tourism-related businesses within the town. Local families who host 'exiles' are not included in the following discussion, given that exiles are not generally considered to be 'tourists':

The Woollen Mills: The re-development of the woollen mills has been the most important factor in the re-invention of Foxford as a tourist attraction. The mills have been central to Foxford's economic, social and cultural life for over 100 years since their foundation by an English-born nun in 1891. They went in to receivership in 1987, which is when the current managing director stepped in with the idea of developing a visitor centre based on the story of the woollen mills. The whole idea behind the visitor centre is that it creates a market for the mill shop, which is where the real money is made. As the managing director said:

> *"everything comes in circles, be it anything you look at, and when Mother Arsenius set up the mills in 1892, the wool industry was a huge industry, a massive industry all over Western Europe, and the tourist industry was only in its infancy. Now it's a little bit in reverse, so you play your strengths. You use the retail operation to help the manufacturing..."*

The visitor centre (including restaurant) is run as a separate business to the mill and shop. The centre is managed by Foxford Resources, a company limited by guarantee which was established not only to develop the centre, but to act as an engine to drive tourism and other related activities in the area. The establishment of this company, which has on its board representatives of the Industrial Development Authority, Bord Failte, North Connacht Farmers and the local business community, facilitated an application for a grant from the European Structural Funds. In addition, large sums of money were donated by local individuals and businesses such that over six months, £1 million was raised and the mill and its new visitor centre were opened in 1992. In the words of the managing director, "everybody came on board, everybody saw what we were doing was right and good and couldn't have been more supportive." He remembers that "the whole area was on a high. It proves what can be done by people themselves." Foxford Resources, which in effect has superseded the old Integrated Resources Development Company (see Shortall, 1994 for an overview of the IRD programme), leases space from the mill and, at the time of research, the visitor centre was sustaining itself through entrance fees and the restaurant, although not all of the employees could be maintained without government assistance in the form of various FÁS (the State training and employment authority) schemes.

The mill as a whole is now a significant employer in the town, with a total of 96 full-time, part-time and temporary staff working in both the manufacturing business and the visitor centre in 1995. Not only is the mill important in this sense, but Foxford Resources has been involved in a number of local projects which represent new and changing attitudes towards previously under-utilised aspects of place identity such as heritage and environment. The biggest of these projects is the development of a new visitor centre based on the life of William Brown, a native of Foxford who emigrated in 1777 and, after many adventures at sea, founded the Argentinian navy. The project is the brain-child of a local shop-keeper and president of the Admiral Brown Society, which was founded in 1992 to "promote the memory and achievements of Admiral Brown". Foxford Resources has assisted in the development of proposals by providing

practical support such as access to telephones and fax machines, office space at the mill and help in making contacts with funding sources and key actors such as the Argentinian ambassador and the former president of Ireland, Mary Robinson. Not only is the Admiral Brown centre intended to be an important tourist attraction, but it is also hoped that it will promote social, cultural and economic links between Ireland and Argentina (information from Admiral Brown Society documents). The £2.2 million project includes a memorial park and a life-size reconstruction of the Admiral's ship which will be located at a riverside site downstream from Foxford and near to the existing woollen mills visitor centre.

A second scheme which is being co-ordinated by the projects officer at Foxford Resources is a proposal to set up a walking club. The scheme involves negotiating access to farming land, taking on FÁS trainees to conduct guided walks and maintain paths and stiles, developing a list of accommodation along the route, and ensuring that the club is publicised. In Mayo, there is only a limited tradition of rambling for pleasure in the countryside, although there is a custom of walking the lanes and calling on neighbours for conversation and tea, especially amongst women. The trails which do exist, such as the Bangor Trail, served practical functions, such as the transport of livestock to fairs. The diasporic component of Irish tourism also means that residents are not used to the idea of visitors being interested in landscape, as 'exiles' were more likely to be interested in meeting up with family and friends. Yet, although most of the interest in the environment does seem to be generated from outside the local community, in the form of walking groups, nature conservation organisations and individual enthusiasts, there is evidence that residents' attitudes may be changing. On one section of the new trail, a handmade sign had been erected: "No more dumping - tourist trail starts here". Furthermore, interviewees recognised that tourists were attracted by "the beauty around us", "the fantastic scenery", "the peace and quiet".

So there are grounds for suggesting that, to quote Shields (1991) new 'imaginary geographies' are having 'empirical impacts' by being incorporated into the decisions of local policy makers, development workers and, perhaps, some residents. These new 'imaginary geographies' construct the area as a leisure space, where the environment is clean, and where heritage and history are available for ready consumption. Indeed, as one observer wryly remarked "we don't have history now, we have heritage!" These ideas are largely being imported into the local community through the medium of the mill and the Resource Company. It is notable that many of the key actors who are involved in the commodification of aspects of place identity such as the Resource Company's project officer, and the textiles designer and managing director of the mill are themselves relatively new to the town. Yet although they might be described as 'outsiders' they had, as the manager put it, "a good feeling for the place" and they allied themselves with the community against the planners and officials from Dublin. As the manager said "the important thing is that we didn't allow them to impose their ideas on us," even though "they couldn't understand why, what they would describe as 'rednecks down the country' was [sic] dictating to them how they should design".

Yet, although the mill visitor centre is generally perceived as a project which had wide community support, its existence has provoked new sets of tensions, particularly amongst the second key group, that is, the other businesses in the town.

Other tourism-related businesses: The accommodation, restaurants and bars are locally run and small scale, the largest establishment being the hotel. There was general agreement that tourism is very important for the town, with one person saying "we can't survive without it" and another saying "really that's all we have." Amongst interview respondents, the attitude towards the mill was generally positive. As one individual said, "the founding of that visitor centre has been the lifeblood of this place". Yet the very success of the centre raises questions about ownership and participation in the creation of a tourist product. Although local support and contributions have been highly praised, one commentator thought "they'd have far more people involved in it if they hadn't been so narrow...an awful lot of people feel left out". Contrary to the image of public participation, it appears that "...a lot of people felt they were never part of it, and should never be part of it, and that it was only for a few". Another respondent explained this in terms of

the social dynamics operating within a small community, whereby "everybody tends to watch everybody else" and often wonder "am I meant to be part of that." The respondent went on to analyse the situation in terms of power:

"I think what has happened is this sense of 'we've got to get it all'. No, you can't. A community thing - you can't - you've got to spread it around...and everyone's struggling for power and it doesn't work."

There was a definite feeling amongst business people that the financial benefits of the mill were certainly not being 'spread around.' One interviewee complained that the visitors "don't come up the town", so her business hardly benefited from their presence. Another complained that that out of season "you could close the town". A further cause for complaint was that the mill, partly funded by state agencies, is in direct competition with private enterprise. As one person said

"there is an awful lot of government money going into the interpretative centre where there are very few 'real' jobs - what I call real jobs - where they're no longer being paid by FÁS...I created six jobs this year and I could have created more if I got more people [i.e. tourists]."

From talking to business people it becomes apparent that the greatest changes to place identity stem from the social relations which revolve around the mill. Furthermore, the rivalries and economic competition are intensified by the personal nature of these relationships given the small size of the community. Urry (1985) describes this as the degree to which social relations are based on the 'local community' rather than either commodity relations or the state. As he notes, "the consequence of such a community structuring of local civil society is to produce communion so that ones' neighbourhood has an emotional meaning derived from the people who live there and from the mutually supporting ties of trust, friendship and reciprocity within that local civil society" (p. 40). Market transactions within such a "place-bound community are indelibly suffused by considerations of long-term reciprocity and community" and "one's living space is necessarily personalised, particularised and non-directly commodifiable". Another way of conceptualising this is to conceive of tourism development as being mediated through existing aspects of place identity. These aspects include the personal relationships which can promote or hinder entrepreneurial attempts to commodify local cultural resources.

Recognising this, the chairman of Foxford Resources identified the biggest challenge facing the area as that of achieving "a broad consensus across a small community". When asked how this could be achieved, the weary response was 'God knows!' Local development workers were convinced that the local 'mindset' or 'small town mentality' was, in fact, the chief obstacle to tourism development. This was described as 'grant-oriented', 'a hand-out mentality' or 'dependency syndrome' and was attributed largely to the agricultural background of the population. Indeed, despite EU and government policies to encourage farmers to diversify into agri-tourism, there are few examples of such diversification in north Mayo, and recent plans to designate parts of the county as a National Park provoked anxieties amongst local councillors concerned about the future of remote farming communities.

Added to this resistance from the farming community, there was also reference to the 'begrudger'. As one inhabitant said, "there's lots of knockers in this town", people who ridicule any attempt to try anything new. John Higgins (1995: 7), the chief executive of the Western Development Partnership Board, wrote that "no other single factor impedes the bottom up development and expression of communities than the national pastime of begrudgery". The Resource Company projects officer also commented that, although she thought people were being encouraged to try out new ideas by the success of the mill and visitor centre, "you have to be careful. It has to be confidential, because you know people don't want to be seen to be coming in either, because the gossip 'll start". This perhaps explains why it is more likely to be the relative newcomers, unhindered by previous antagonisms or expectations, who are involved in commodification. Indeed, the majority of interviewees had in fact moved from other parts of Ireland, or in one case, returned to the area after living for years in England.

Conclusions

Through the case study it has been shown that the relationship between tourism and place identities can be conceptualised in terms of social relations. On the one hand, changes to place identities occur as groups, institutions and individuals act to commodify resources such as the local environment or heritage for tourism. The process of commodification is mediated through new social relations between individuals and groups within the town and further afield. The Resources Company, for instance, links Foxford into a network of Resource Companies in other towns of North Mayo, as well as into an array of EU and state development programmes and facilities. Meanwhile, the Admiral Brown project, whilst building on existing links with Irish Argentine and Mayo Associations world-wide, has also led to the forging of new relationships with institutions, organisations and individuals in Argentina.

On the other hand, resilient existing social relations influence the degree to which commodification for tourism takes place. In Foxford, some sets of relationships, such as the existence of the so-called 'small town mentality' and the dominance of farming as a way of life in the broader community, may act to hinder individual entrepreneurship in the field of tourism development. Furthermore, at a micro-scale, it seemed that certain sets of social relations, including friendships and business relations had crystallised around the mill in a way that left other individuals, such as some of the bar owners, feeling excluded in an economic and social sense. This may have contributed to a lack of awareness of events which were organised at the mill and a certain scepticism about some of the activities there which was expressed by some respondents. Meanwhile, other sets of relationships, such as those between local hosts and perennial visitors such as anglers and emigrés for instance, account for the ability of the community in general to provide a genuine welcome and to accept the comings and goings of non-residents with ease. The result is that the pace of change is uneven. For example, even though relatively large numbers of people visit this small town every year, one respondent thought that:

"probably 60-70 percent of them (townspeople) don't know what's happening at all and they have no idea and they won't know what's going on down at the interpretative centre."

Many people, even though they themselves may be considered as a part of the tourist product, remain largely unaware of tourism or its implications. This may be due to the type of tourism which operates in Foxford, whereby large numbers of visitors are attracted to the Woollen Mills, but relatively few of them wander further afield within the town. Furthermore, other types of visitors, such as anglers and emigrés are not generally regarded as tourists at all, and seem to have been incorporated into the seasonally changing identity of the town. Given that this investigation concentrated on the views of representatives of the host population, further research would be required to establish a more accurate profile of all the visitors to the town and to trace exactly what activities they undertake and the kinds of relationships that they develop with the host community. The point is that an understanding of the impact of tourism should take into account the specificities of the places in which it operates. Whilst some impacts may be universal, such as the physical pressures created by the presence of large numbers of tourists, other, less visible impacts differ, depending on the unique combinations of people, histories, global and local relations which intersect within the local arena. In summary, the relationship between tourism and place identity can be conceptualised in terms of the seemingly contradictory themes of change and continuity, features which themselves ensure that places retain their distinct identities in the face of potentially homogenising global processes.

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