



Incontro Nazionale  
Ecomusei 2003  
9 - 12 OTTOBRE BIELLA

**Sabato 11 ottobre 2003**

Sessione Ecomusei in Europa

Centro Culturale di Candelo – Sala dell’Affresco

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IRELAND: MUSEUMS, IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

It is commonly accepted amongst pessimists that we get the politicians we deserve. It is less widely agreed, especially among museum professionals, that museums, being institutions which are both part of society and in the service of it, reflect the political and cultural circumstances in which they exist. Sometimes they are slow moving, fossilising the conditions of previous decades, but ultimately provide one of those harshly-lit mirrors none of us like looking into, especially early in the morning. I hope it is not too much of a jump from these casually-sweeping statements to ask the question: why (to my knowledge) are there no eco-museums in Ireland? Especially as according to one recent survey more than 75% of Irish museums and heritage attractions have been opened since 1989, a figure that is, if anything, likely to be an underestimate.

To answer the question it is necessary to provide some context – one which I am afraid is rather personal opinion, but perhaps so far from home I can claim that indulgence. Everyone here, by their very presence, is probably agreed that the very essence of good museums is the link between people and place. Ireland is a small island off the coast of Great Britain, which is turn positions itself some distance (perhaps further than that shown on maps) off the coast of continental Europe. Man came late to Ireland, but since the last Ice Age it has enjoyed a temperate climate, growing wonderful grass but poorer cereals. Settlement therefore is based on pastoral models and tends to be what geographers call non-nucleated – that is based on scattered farmsteads distributed evenly through the landscape, rather than in villages and towns. Urban settlement first came with the Vikings then developed, and slowly increased, under English control, especially along the eastern seaboard. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have, of course, brought huge changes. Although Ireland’s population is only now starting the approach the peak it reached in the years before the Great Famine of 1845-49, its distribution has dramatically changed, becoming ever-more concentrated in dispersed urban conglomerations along the eastern seaboard.

As you are probably aware, Ireland is divided into two political jurisdictions, one independent, the other linked within the United Kingdom, both within the European Union. This circumstance has not just caused some political dissent and violence, it also makes generalisations difficult, even though in such a small area there are inevitably more similarities than differences. So taking Northern Ireland as an example, more than one million out of a population of just under 1.7m live in the greater Belfast area. Overall 36.2% are 24 years of age, or younger, a much higher proportion than is common now in the rest of Europe. In the Republic of Ireland (often called ‘the south’ for convenience) estimates vary but put between three-quarters and two-thirds of the population living on the urbanised eastern coast, and much of that with 50 kilometres of the centre of Dublin. In both parts of Ireland a lot of this population occupies dispersed development, more akin to that found in the US or Australia than the higher density living which typifies European urbanisation. In spite of this, Ireland sees itself as being, and in many ways still is, rural – certainly farmers have disproportionate political and economic power. Few people are more than one or two generations removed from the land; and given the scale of the country, even in Belfast it is hard to be more than fifteen or twenty minutes from agricultural countryside, although perhaps the distances are rather longer round Dublin.

So what of museums? The history of museum development shows few unusual features. At the end of the eighteenth, beginning of the nineteenth century, a small number of scholarly collections under the control of learned societies appeared. In the third and fourth quarters of the nineteenth century government and local authority museums were set up with the aim of public improvement and education. In particular, the National Museum of Ireland, sitting opposite the National Library and beside the parliament building, was modelled on, used the case design of and even received collections from, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, set up after the great universal exhibition of 1851. Like its exemplar, it was very much an imperial institution, predicated on a progress model, taking collections not just from all Ireland, but the whole world, aiming to show a direct connection between the industrial might of the nineteenth century and the classical past, and the triumph of western cultures. However, the end of the nineteenth century was also a period of political ferment and growing national consciousness. European theories of race, nationhood and culture were highly influential, often transmitted through the politics and deeds of those who by birth were members of the establishment. Irish nationalism and a desire to be separate from Britain, both politically and culturally, grew. Culture and politics were irretrievably linked with the policies of the national museum, even though it was a department of government.

When the southern part of Ireland violently won its independence and went through a bitter and bloody civil war, the purpose of the museum and its focus inevitably changed. Drawing on German-trained senior staff (a practice maintained until relatively recently) it aimed to show the distinctiveness and superiority of Irish culture as a background to a narrative of Irish history which showed a steady progress towards an unitary, independent nation state, but at the same time largely ignoring eight centuries of English rule. The dominant political force of the 1930s to 1960s was Eamon De Valera, half Italian-American revolutionary, rebel, prime minister, president, who fighting in the struggle for independence and on the losing side in the Civil War, rejected compromise with Britain. His political party is still in power. He also espoused strong ideals of cultural, even racial purity, embodied and conceptualised in an almost-lost unitary peasant society. Continuity, self-sufficiency were placed in an assumed pre-lapsarian area of the west – away from the urbanised centres and associated with the use of the Irish language, even then only spoken on an everyday basis by a small percentage of the population, but remaining a compulsory element of the school curriculum. Only two years ago the National Museum finally opened a 'Museum of Irish Country Life' placed far in the west, launched by De Valera's grand-daughter, then the minister responsible. The museum largely continues to ignore regional distinctiveness and the roles of imported technology and external markets.

This use and control of Ireland's rural assumptions is not confined to the south. Whilst Northern Ireland did not formalise a national museum of art, archaeology, science and history until 1961, as early as 1956 the Ulster Folk Museum was opened near Belfast, following Scandinavian practice in dismantling old buildings, classified and re-erected in a zoo of former life-styles. The underlying political motivation was just as strong, if slightly more complex and this is not the place to examine it in detail, but it can be remarked that it too involved an attempted legitimisation and manipulation of identity. The state, founded in 1921 as an initially-unloved compromise regarded as the least-bad of the available options, had to invent itself in a way that both gave status and allowed it to distinguish itself from both the Republic of Ireland and England. Both museums, by the way, house fine collections, curated by good scholars and are well worth a visit, a remark that could equally well apply to the National Museum in Dublin, which has recently expanded and improved its displays. It, however, is still an essentially-centralising organisation – ownership of archaeological material found after the 1930s is illegal, even for other museums, without a licence from the National Museum. Archaeology remains core to the public presentation of the past everywhere – almost all curators have an archaeological training, as has had every director of the National Museum. This implies that identity is positioned in the distant past and that cultures and varieties of heritage are placed in a hierarchy, externalised from the individual. Following this central trend, the first wave of new museum expansion in the late 1970s, and still the most high-profile element in the Republic of Ireland, is a series of county museums, based on the major administrative unit, each of which aspires to be, and derives collections on licence from, the National Museum.

So what of developments which relate to the eco-museum movement? Over the last ten or fifteen years working through the Irish Museums Association, as chair, directing training and

policy, judging museum competitions, I have spent a lot of time training, helping, providing informal and formal consultancy to a large number of local and voluntary museums.

Ironically, in view of what I am going to say, the one which came closest to the political aspirations and practices of the eco-museum movement was based on an old power station in a run-down part of Dublin, but ultimately failed, perhaps for that very reason. A local community identified a piece of heritage which was integral to its identity and developed a concept which was functionally, conceptually and economically viable in the context of the prevailing social economy. Ultimately, however, that same context meant that a disfranchised and devalued community could not be allowed to control a valuable asset in an area of rising property prices, at a time of changing self-perception. The dispossessed and damaged, even when trying to heal themselves, are never popular viewing at times of growing prosperity and national re-invention, because this was a time when Ireland's economic growth and personal income grew at an unparalleled rate in a phenomenon known as the Celtic Tiger.

Leaving that example to one side, there is remarkably little happening in major urban areas, especially movements from communities trying to define themselves through heritage. Even in the late 1970s and 1980s, when there was a boom in societies devoted to the study of local history, the large numbers of people involved failed to cohere into a genuine, cross-generational grass-roots movement. Today many of the societies lose energy as their members grow old. Instead of providing cross-generational continuity, looking outwards and recruiting fresh blood they tend to turn towards the study of private family history rather than a public consideration or presentation of identity. The view that I insist on is that the energy in new developments is heavily concentrated in the countryside and small towns, rather than those major urban centres where so much of the population actually lives, which in itself says something about both real identities and self-perceptions.

To my knowledge are the only two examples of attempted eco-museums, so styled, in Ireland. The first demonstrates the dangerous seductiveness of the eco-museum ideal. Based on spurious marketing projections a local government authority in an economically depressed rural area with a beautiful landscape full of archaeological monuments, reproduced with some scholarship, but in some cases at less than full size, a range of different types of monument, from Stone Age to the seventeenth century, seemingly in the expectation that this 'History Park' would be self-sustaining. It ignored not just the lack of transport links and substantial population in the area, but also the existence of a good museum close by which seems to adequately serve the limited market. As the 'History Park' has proved to be a drain on local taxes, rather than a source of revenue, and closure is a real danger<sup>1</sup>, a number of options were looked at and the eco-museum model chosen as the best way of continuing to justify the institutions continued existence, in spite of the fact that there is no link with communities, or indeed a community immediately available with whom belated engagement might be made, or any real effort to look at the continuity of human experience in the landscape. There was no consultation before this park was built to help decide whether it was the best way of representing and communicating the heritage of the area, because the idea was tourism driven – something I will return to later. In the meantime, it is disappointing that a site which sits *on*, rather than *in*, its landscape should seek to exploit eco-museum ideals.

The other development directly calling itself an eco-museum is also, sadly, a failure and closed last year, for reasons unconnected with its mission. The Upperlands Linen Museum was based in small village of the same name in the north of Northern Ireland. The village was built by, and originally existed entirely to serve, a linen weaving and bleaching business established there in the early eighteenth century. The landscape consists of surrounding farmland, where flax was grown and at various stages of the past farmers will have prepared the fibre, some weaving thread spun by their wives and daughters, before selling it on in a rough form. More recently, the family which owned the factory used their prosperity to build a series of quite grand houses in the area. Much of the village consists of houses built to accommodate workers, the river running through it powered machinery and provided water for the washing and bleaching processes. Among the industrial buildings were a beetling (the process of pounding linen to close up the fibres and give it a sheen) house from c. 1740, a bank of beetling machines from c. 1800; another bank, still in use three years ago, and the last in production in the British Isles dates from the 1860s; fine nineteenth century and even art deco factory buildings, set in open spaces once used for grass bleaching of the cloth. The project

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<sup>1</sup>At time of writing, and since the conference, the closure has in fact happened and the site is up for sale.

originated from the local economic development committee, which aimed to improve facilities within the village, maintain its identity at a time when a lot of new housing was being built for in-comers, and preserve some sense of history as the industrial base on which its identity formed entered terminal decline. The project had a lot of potential but the factory owners would not pass over ownership of the key buildings and eventually, as all industrial production stopped, excluded the museum as it interfered with their ambitions to commercially develop the property. Our legislation means that only small elements of the buildings, not the landscape or contents, are protected, and the real value, which lies in the continuity, relevance and interconnectedness of the assemblage – that crucial interaction between people, place and history – is undefended against short-term commercial gain. Under our system, to be registered as a museum the institution needs firm tenure of its building, so the situation became impossible. I was the museological adviser, as was the case of the project described in Dublin, which suffered in exactly the same way, so my disappointment and anger has very personal edge.

So instead of looking with regret at what might have happened, let me tell you about what has.

Even before the disruption which followed violence starting in the late 1960s, Northern Ireland was economically underdeveloped and the both the actual disruption and the image generated by it increased the problem. If anything, economic problems had been worse in the Republic of Ireland, with a chronic shortage of modern infrastructure right through the 1970s and a steady outflow of population from emigration which both leached talent and demoralised society as many of the best and brightest left to seek lives elsewhere. Both parts of Ireland have received very substantial European funding, which in the case of the south has been transformational. This money has had an important effect on both heritage provision and attitudes to heritage. Starting with the north, money was channelled through the British government, with little or no local democratic accountability. The relevant mechanism was to pass funds to the Department of Economic Development, often to be dispensed by the Tourist Board. As you can imagine, attracting visitors to an area where violence was so internationally prominent was not easy, but it is also true that the standard of management and vision within tourism bodies was not high. A tourist chief felt able to make the bald statement 'Museums are not a tourist attraction'. In policy terms this translated to mean that any proposal with the word 'museum' in it was not eligible for EC structural funds. The favoured model was the Heritage Centre – that is a display with no historic artefacts, usually relying solely on graphic panels. Though initial concepts may have arisen locally, the actual direction and production was almost always entrusted to outside consultants – often not even from Ireland. The initiation depended on an economic impact assessments, generated by more consultants using figures which seem to have plucked from the clouds. In one example, now closed, it was suggested that the centre, though isolated and with no supporting infrastructure, would attract a comparable number of visitors to the national museum sited within 10 minutes of Belfast centre.

Universally, these developments have failed to provide the economic benefits promised – fewer jobs have been generated, and those usually seasonal and poorly paid; just as importantly, they have not brought visitors into the area. Those who have come from outside find the experience of poor quality, poor value for money, generic and providing no insight into the defining characteristics of the location. The expenditure is very heavily concentrated on capital asset provision at the start; usually little thought was given to on-going costs, which then become a drain on the local economy. Much of the money spent has gone out of state, almost none into local hands. Many now see this as a financial and political scandal, but I would like to argue that the real effects have range more widely and cause more damage than mere administrative incompetence. There is a lot of literature about the commoditisation of heritage and the heritage boom which occurred elsewhere at the same time. In other places, however, there was often an existing heritage or museum infrastructure, which might be damaged, but remained in place. There also tended to be more administrative stability than was the case in the midst of Northern Ireland's huge democratic deficit.

In Ireland, where very real and genuine questions about identity, belonging and self-definition bedevil society and have wide-ranging effects, the idea that heritage only has value either as a political tool, or as something which can be sold to visitors, is central to the process of disassociating the individual from real identities founded in the continuity and diversity of society. This damage is compounded by the fact that the past is simplified, again both politically and commercially, to hide the multi-faceted nature of the reality and the shared

nature of experience, linked to place and land, is rejected.

Although the method of distribution was more democratic, and decisions taken at a more local administrative level in the Republic of Ireland, including making funds directly available to museums, very much the same process happened there too. The heritage centres are hardly distinguishable in style or content one from the other: even those of some interest are only visited once – the experience is designed to be processed in a short period of time, and there is never a depth or complexity in displays which might repay further visits, as happens in a good museum. The Bord Failte designation of 'heritage towns' has been another well-funded failure. Instead of starting from a position of connecting inhabitants with their history and environment, identifying and preserving the built heritage, and thereby leading to an improvement in the small societies within which people live, the process has literally been one of signage – like making the town wear a uniform – and a marketing exercise.

This is all very depressing, but there are signs of hope.

At a subconscious level and without necessarily having a political awareness of the reasons for it, people are rejecting this top down approach. Finally stimulated, rather than being repressed by the changes happening in our society, many of which are positive - like peace in the north, a reversal of the population loss and the start of a multi-cultural society - and perhaps enabled by a greater prosperity, people all over Ireland are starting themselves to express the links between individuals and the environment, both natural and historical, in which they exist.

A good example might be a young woman, married with a family, who attended an Irish Museums Association training course. Coming from a small village which had been famous for making clay tobacco pipes, she has set up a small museum, shop and workshop in the front room of her house. The industry was destroyed by changing fashion and part of the village being burned as a retaliation by the Black and Tans in the War of Independence. She has recovered a lost part of the history of the region, not just for outsiders, but for many of the residents themselves, whose perceptions of their village were defined by the victimhood of the single, destructive act of destruction, which they saw as giving them value in the national story, greater than generations of a skilled and specific craft. Neither really makes sense without the other.

Radical change has come later to the Irish countryside than many other parts of Europe and it is undoubtedly that change, with the loss of jobs on the land and incomers building new houses from which they commute to the cities and towns, which has stimulated much of this energy. At its worst it seeks to fossilise the past and continues the failure to position or distinguish locality. It often seems as if most small Irish voluntary museums share the same generic objects, which they lack the skill to interpret. Objects are described in terms of what they are, rather than that they mean, which derives from a combination of the taxonomy, where they came from, who used them, who made them, how they relate to the economy, how they came to be in the museum. Preservation in itself fails to grant meaning to artefacts. Tragically, often the information is available, but is rapidly being lost with passing time. This antiquarian approach, lack of connection or communication, is one of the factors which has distanced many new initiatives from the existing museum and vice versa. Another, it must said, is museum professionals, who habitually proclaim that there are too many museums in Ireland. There seem to be no more than about 450 for a population of 6 million. Since most of these are very small, receive little public funding and are not expansionist, this does not seem in general terms too excessive. The reality, however, is that "too many museums" actually means "I have a museum, so you are not allowed one", or at best, that there are too few museums of good quality. Few museums are set up by direct democratic vote, but I believe they can be a legitimate means of expression for communities, which, if they are prepared to accept standards of sustainability, ensuring that they preserve rather than destroy material culture, have just as much right to exist as those which happen to have been founded earlier.

I hope that I, along with my colleagues, will learn that knowledge and certain basic professional skills do not in themselves give us wisdom or the right to direct the expression of others. A dichotomy is becoming visible, between those new museum developments which depend on expensive large buildings and lavishly fitted exhibitions, and those which seek to facilitate and enable, often for people who conventionally will have had no dealings with our sector. If this results in a recognition of the value of interconnectiveness, between people, place and heritage, there is hope – whether the term eco-museum is used or not.