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# Introduction

## Summary of conclusions

You might expect that a book about ageing must be about people getting older. In some measure that is indeed the case, but the full title is 'Ageing with Smartphones'. When older people master the smartphone, they have incorporated a technology that up until recently was largely associated with young people. Consequently, this may make them feel younger themselves. The smartphone is pivotal, but is not alone in this process. The evidence from our fieldwork suggests a series of analogous movements as older people embrace the idea of wellness or the politics and aspirations of an environmentalist movement whose spokesperson, Greta Thunberg, was then aged only 16. This volume, therefore, is actually about how people paradoxically become younger as they grow older: how they acquire certain capacities as they lose others. This makes for a more unusual approach to ageing. However, the evidence will suggest that we need to appreciate and understand both of these trajectories if we are fully to engage with the experience of a large segment of the Irish population today.

The two fieldsites, here represented by pseudonyms – Thornhill in Dublin city and Cuan in Dublin county – are dominated by relatively affluent middle-class retirees, many of whom worked in the professions, banking or the civil service. The first conclusion of this volume is that for this population there has been a considerable change in a further aspect of the experience of ageing. Historically, ageing reflected conventional categories. People became elderly, conforming to stereotypical images such as the grandparent seated on a rocking chair with grandchildren

at the knee. People today increasingly refute any such categories of age, however, and have separated ageing from frailty. As long as they remain healthy, they prefer to see themselves as simply representing continuity. Even those in their nineties may not see themselves as elderly per se until they become significantly frail. This has resulted in a more egalitarian relationship between the generations and a more active older population.

Over the course of our research, we have found that the organisations dealing with ageing populations do not always recognise the extent of these changes, which also varies by social class. There are, however, other ruptures or step changes in life that feature in this volume. For example, the impact of menopause is discussed in [chapter 6](#), while [chapter 2](#) focuses on retirement. In several of the other ASSA fieldsites many people emphasise an identity based on continuity with their prior work status. This is much less a feature within our Dublin fieldsites.<sup>1</sup>

A volume on ageing in Ireland will also differ from others because of the particular history of this nation. It has to reflect the radical shift experienced by many Irish people whose lives originated in poverty. Generally our research participants little anticipated the relative comfort they now find in retirement. This may partly explain the subtitle of our volume: 'When life becomes craft'. Most of our research participants focus upon one specific life project, that of crafting their own lives. This becomes clear in [chapter 3](#), which focuses upon the myriad activities in which they are engaged. Crafting tends to be a social rather than an individual pursuit, however – even though one of its primary aims is to maintain the fitness and wellbeing of the body. The volume provides an account of the sheer range of activities undertaken by retired people in these fieldsites and also shows how these are crafted into daily routines.

[Chapter 4](#) is devoted to the most important activity of all: comprising their engagement with social relations, including family, friends and neighbours. One of the central conclusions of our project is that grandparents have become a kind of new 'sandwich generation'. They may find that for a few years they are intensely involved again as daughters and sons, assisting frail parents in their nineties. At the same time they may not have completed their responsibilities to their own children who, unlike themselves, may not be able to afford housing. Grandparenting also often turns out to be the resolution of the history of our prior experience of kinship. It consists not just of the relationship to grandchildren, but often re-develops the relationships to children, partners and the wider family. The smartphone has, in effect, reversed the historical shift from extended to nuclear families. It enables people to re-engage with the extended family, but keeps it at a distance, so this is not felt as oppressive.

Chapter 5 focuses specifically on smartphones. These have swiftly become an unprecedentedly intimate device that may reflect back both individual personality and wider Irish values. There is a curious discrepancy between a discourse that is generally very negative about the impact of smartphones, as devices that create screen addiction, encourage surveillance and the wasting of time, set against a relatively positive appraisal of the specific capacities of various smartphone apps, for example in seeking information, locating places and organising one's life. Our experience in teaching smartphone use to older people revealed how age can exacerbate an important digital divide, leading to the disenfranchisement of those who fail to master the technology. Knowledge gained over decades may now appear worthless: a well-honed sense of direction is less impressive when you have Google Maps available. At the same time smartphones become particularly helpful as people lose mobility; they have contributed to the sense of retained youth for those who have become comfortable with their use.

Chapter 6 focuses upon the changing experience of health and wellbeing. Among the middle class, complementary health practices have expanded to rival those of traditional biomedical health. We suggest this is partly because, for older people, the experience of illness expands from isolated and specific ailments to a sense that various forms of ill health, stress and difficulty are simultaneous and related. So a more holistic conception of health issues aligns directly with their own experience as older people. Menopause can also be an important nudge towards a more holistic sense of the interrelation between physical, emotional and social concerns. Older people also regard health as part of this shift to crafting, joining walking groups and yoga or Pilates classes and developing a commitment to a more general ideal of wellbeing related to diet and fitness, as well as a current fashion for mindfulness. The chapter also investigates the rise of 'googling' for health information, suggesting that this may exacerbate differences in education or class: well-informed people used their smartphone as a research tool to become better informed, while those less well informed may become more misinformed.

Chapter 7 examines the issue of downsizing and the surprising degree to which people who might have been expected to downsize may actually choose to move to properties with as many bedrooms as the house they moved from. Alternatively, they do not 'rightsized' at all because the types of accommodation they need are not being built in their localities. Our evidence suggests that moving house is most commonly seen as a way of becoming more modern or streamlined, creating a new domestic environment that reflects a new stage in

life. In addition, for some older people, divesting themselves of their possessions has become one of several ways to associate themselves with ecological concerns and current ethical issues. Much of this crafting comes together under the general umbrella of sustainability, since it involves both their efforts towards individual wellbeing and their ethical concerns for the planet. All these strategies help older people to align themselves with the most contemporary 'green' issues of the day, alongside young people. As a result, activities that would have once been viewed as an acknowledgement of ageing now contribute to older people's reassociation with the concerns of people of all ages. Such activities, set alongside the smartphone, help them in effect to feel younger rather than older.

The penultimate chapter brings some of these themes together through a consideration of life purpose. This begins with acknowledging further dramatic changes that have taken place in Ireland. Most of our research participants were born at a time when Catholicism was immensely powerful within the family, in government and in providing an answer to questions of life purpose. It does not seem that secularisation, including a decline in belief in the afterlife, has been replaced by any clear substitute. The shift has rather been towards the crafting of life discussed in the previous chapters, a process that includes a more general ethical responsibility to the wellbeing of individuals and the planet. Some older people may link this to forms of alternative spirituality that they first encountered when they were teenagers in the 1960s.

Equally important has been the moral imperative towards wellbeing and sustainability. A good example of this has been the growth in interest in the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage trail in northern Spain, an activity that blends the secular interest in walking and keeping fit with a sense of spirituality bequeathed from religion. Overall, then, a project that started out trying to investigate how people become older has instead accumulated considerable evidence for how people become 'younger' in later life. Within this re-orientation, arguably the single main contribution has come from their adoption of the smartphone.

## **Ireland: a historical and contemporary portrait**

### Introduction to Ireland

The Republic of Ireland, with a population of almost 5 million, shares the island with Northern Ireland, a part of the United Kingdom with a population of around 1.8 million. Ireland declared independence from

the United Kingdom in 1919 and this was acknowledged in 1921. The capital city of Dublin has a regional population of around 2 million, with Dublin city standing at around 600,000. One of our two fieldsites lies within the city itself; the other is in the region within an hour's travel from Dublin. Ireland became a member of the European Union (then called the European Economic Community or EEC) in 1973.

The lifetime of most of our research participants has been an economic rollercoaster. Younger people find it hard to comprehend the social and economic transformation that Ireland has undergone within living memory. At the time of independence, 58 per cent of employed men worked in agriculture;<sup>2</sup> up until the 1950s this agriculture-oriented economy was constantly on the 'verge of collapse', resulting in both mass unemployment and mass emigration.<sup>3</sup>

Many of our participants were born into rural locations; even the present-day Dublin suburbs were countryside when they were young. They talk of collecting milk from the local dairy or working on the farm as a child. One man describes tasks like making the porridge in the morning and stew in the afternoon as the source of valuable skills that stood him in good stead in later life. Another recalls having to milk the cows before school each morning and remembers being 'overworked as a child'. Whereas some recall childhood memories fondly, others comment bitterly on the deprivation – 'I know poverty, I know what it smells like, I know what it tastes like' – or on the socially conservative environment of their youth.

Emigration too has been a hallmark of twentieth-century Ireland, creating a diaspora that is widely dispersed around the world.<sup>4</sup> From 1922, Irish Independence saw a steady replacement of colonial authority with that of the Catholic church. Religious orders ran the health and educational systems and had a strong grip over government, creating something of a theocracy. Very many research participants commented on the deeply conservative beliefs held by their parents, if not themselves. Not infrequently differences of opinion about religion led to rifts within families that spanned decades and left lasting scars.

For older people, the transformation in these underlying religious beliefs and social norms over their lifetimes was as dramatic as that of the economic transformation. First gradually, then more quickly, life changed and most of our research participants saw a marked improvement in their standard of living and disposable income. Urban centres, particularly residential construction in Dublin suburbs, sprawled. As sociologist Tom Inglis argues, in one generation Ireland has transformed from being an isolated Catholic rural society revolving around agriculture to being a

liberal-individualist, secular, urban society revolving around business, commerce and high-tech transnational corporations.<sup>5</sup> In the past 20 years the pace of change has been dramatic. In the early 2000s Ireland was identified as having an open global economy. The authority of the Church did not so much decline as abruptly collapse from the 1980s onwards following the key scandals of sexual abuse and the ill-treatment of unmarried mothers and children.<sup>6</sup> This development reached perhaps its apogee during fieldwork in 2018 with the convincing vote to repeal the constitutional ban on abortion. The scale of such change is also evident in issues such as homosexuality, illegal in Ireland in 1993. Just 22 years later, in 2015, Ireland represented the first country to legalise same-sex marriage by popular vote and was hailed as the 'vanguard' of social progression by *The New York Times*.<sup>7</sup>

However, also seared into the consciousness of our participants was the depth of the economic crisis after 2008. The recession, sparked by the economic freefall of the global banking system, led to a bailout by the International Monetary Fund and EU.<sup>8</sup> The period was characterised by high levels of unemployment, mass emigration, a collapse in domestic construction and austerity measures imposed by the European Central Bank.<sup>9</sup> Among the other casualties of the crash were retirees who had invested their retirement packages or savings in the expectation of a decent income in the future, only to experience massive losses. By 2017, when the fieldwork began, the recession had largely passed, but many scars remained. Austerity had led to increasing levels of inequality and the percentage of the population at risk of relative poverty (if not absolute poverty) had risen to 21 per cent. Economic growth for 2017, however, was among the highest in the EU (at 7.3 per cent), due chiefly to the activities of the IT sector. Domestic activity was up 4.9 per cent and there was strong employment growth, while property prices in 2016 soared to rates of increase that mirrored the earlier 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom.

A long history of emigration had been halted by the attractions of Ireland as a site of immigration during its 'Celtic Tiger' period. With recession this was again reversed, only for the tide to turn once more as Ireland recovered its economic prosperity, such that by 2013 there were renewed invitations for emigrants to return.<sup>10</sup> One example was The Gathering, which was launched by the Irish Tourism Board. The Gathering encouraged Irish people to invite the Irish diaspora to return to Ireland to participate in 5000 events across the country.<sup>11</sup> Here we see evidence of the Irish economic and social rollercoaster in action.

Fieldwork coincided with a new confidence, although the shadow of the recession is still present in many people's lives.<sup>12</sup> In the post-recession era Ireland became the fastest growing economy in Europe, while still dealing with the legacy of recession. Whereas a century ago ideals of rural life were closely associated with an authentic Irish identity and nationalist sentiment, today by contrast Dublin, as a European city, stands at the forefront of new continental sensibilities.<sup>13</sup>

The period of fieldwork was one that reinforced this positive sense of European identity, set against a dramatic decline of the international reputation of the former colonial power of Britain. This was particularly true during the height of what were regarded as the somewhat farcical Brexit debates, a very common topic of conversation.<sup>14</sup> These also created renewed anxiety about the future of the Northern Irish border and the potential economic slump of a no-deal Brexit. Additionally, fundamental state services such as housing had been cut during austerity, while health and welfare provision were still quite fragile. The word 'crisis' was a common adjective to describe both health and housing.

Housing represents a particularly potent cypher for the state-citizen contract in Ireland,<sup>15</sup> with economic boom and bust measured in the popular imagination in bricks and mortar. The fact that Ireland saw the highest percentage increase in property prices during 2017 of any developed country, at 12.3 per cent (5.6 per cent in 2018), seemed reminiscent of the unsustainable pre-recession property boom. Income inequality is average for OECD countries. It would be more unequal, however, if Ireland's redistribution of taxes from household income had not been so effective in reducing inequality, as a recent study shows.<sup>16</sup>

By contrast, Irish politics is relatively stable with nearly a century of fairly predictable alternations between two parties that had origins in a bitter civil war: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. These are generally regarded as now two sides of a centrist coin. Our two fieldsites, being mainly middle-class, would be strongly reflective of this largely liberal consensus. A further conspicuous factor is the sheer size of the Irish diaspora, which dwarfs the local population. A more recent emigration to the UK in the 1950s, and again in the 1980s, succeeded the better known migration to the US from the seventeenth century onwards.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, immigration was relatively sparse within our fieldsites owing to high property prices. However, women from Eastern Europe and Brazil were increasingly evident within the local labour force, particularly in catering and childcare.

Today there is a generally positive sense of Irish identity at home and abroad. A growing sense of European identity has been boosted by



the sense of European support for the Irish position during the Brexit negotiations. There is a keen interest in foreign travel, with the Irish generally finding that they are regarded as genial and egalitarian. At the same time many people either retained or were developing interests in icons of specifically Irish culture. These included Gaelic athletic sports (GAA) such as hurling, or traditional music. Many of our research participants took pride in the fact that Irish music and literature punches well above its weight, represented by figures ranging from the novelist Sebastian Barry to Fontaines D.C. (a post-punk band from Dublin), alongside a generally positive – albeit romantic and often crudely stereotypical – American-Irish identity disseminated through film and television.

### Anthropology in Ireland

Historically, anthropological studies in Ireland focused on rural communities, family structure, inheritance and religion. The early classics such as *The Irish Countryman* (1937) and *Family and Community in Ireland* (1940) traced rural farming communities in transition,<sup>18</sup> although other works such as *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics* by Nancy Scheper-Hughes have since been criticised for representing Ireland as a ‘culture in demise, a social system characterised by pathogenic tendencies’.<sup>19</sup> With the late twentieth century, however,<sup>20</sup> there has grown a sizeable body of work that focuses on contemporary Irish life.<sup>21</sup> This scholarship is both rich and varied. It has ethnographically explored the dark underbelly of urban life, in areas such as addiction,<sup>22</sup> migration, marginality and precarity,<sup>23</sup> as well as expressions of creativity, language<sup>24</sup> and music.<sup>25</sup>

This volume continues these more recent trajectories, situating itself in the mainstream of contemporary Irish urban experience. We have deliberately chosen to engage more with the mainstream than the margins, focusing on everyday life for the majority rather than populations that require policy interventions, which are often the grounds for social science research. We appreciate the specificity of our fieldsites and participants, but also believe that the core of our findings could be extended beyond Dublin. In contrast to historical studies, we find our participants in cafés rather than in pubs, discussing WhatsApp rather than religion. Although this volume does represent an ethnography of ageing in Ireland, we are concerned with historical precedent only where there is evidence for continuity and we trace evolving ideas surrounding belief or affluence insofar as they are relevant for our participants. For example, being

middle class but born into conditions of poverty may make this feel more like achievement than an entitlement – something that may in turn prove relevant to practices of sustainability or ideals of generalised equality.

A key priority for our participants was the use of their smartphone to communicate with family members and friends; we spent a good deal of time discussing the roles and responsibilities that arise from grandparenthood or intergenerational living. Irish family structures have undergone profound changes in recent decades and are characterised by a particular blend of tradition and modernity.<sup>26</sup> Historically, the family has occupied a core position in the social structure and religious ethos of Ireland. The strong presence of Catholicism played a formative role in ideals and practices surrounding the family, particularly for women. In their role as wives and mothers, women were one icon of the new Irish Free State and religious nationalism. Inglis argues that placing women at the centre of a state ideology based on moral superiority served to discourage them from participation in the public sphere of work or political life. For example, through the introduction of a marriage bar in the 1930s and its enforcement until 1971, women in the civil service were legally obliged to give up work on getting married. Both church and state thus encouraged women to concentrate on rearing children and caring for families.<sup>27</sup> However, the clerical scandals in the 1990s and 2000s have undermined the Church's credibility, while shifts in economic profiles and a dramatic rise in living standards have both had a profound effect on modernisation processes.<sup>28</sup> A reversal of past attitudes to same-sex marriage, divorce and co-habitation have led to newly established norms.<sup>29</sup> What is distinctive about Ireland is not these liberal values per se, but the fact that they developed both later and faster than in many other regions of Europe.<sup>30</sup>

While there has been a growth in secular values and some forms of individualism,<sup>31</sup> the two-parent nuclear family is still the most typical environment in which children grow up in Ireland.<sup>32</sup> Divorce rates remain low (6 per cent) when compared to trends in other European countries. Many Irish parents rely on grandparents for regular childcare and there is an emphasis on extended family relationships. While most countries in Europe are concerned with increasing older populations and low birth rates, Ireland's population is relatively young and fertility rates are among the highest in Europe<sup>33</sup> at around 1.9 children per woman.<sup>34</sup> Intergenerational ties are strong<sup>35</sup> and The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) has found that a high proportion of householders live near their parents – one of the reasons why grandparenting is a major topic for this volume.

## The focus on ageing

Along with gender, age is one of the primary parameters by which societies throughout history have structured and governed themselves.<sup>36</sup> Through countless gerontocracies, older men have historically ruled much of the world. Yet since the 1960s this hegemony has been undermined by the increasing value placed on youth culture, facilitated by the association of new technologies with youth. In Ireland the ‘baby-boomer’ generation who were the first to create this positive association with youth cultures have now themselves aged.<sup>37</sup> Today we see unprecedented icons of aged rock stars who continue to embody ‘youth’ values. As a result, there is a new ambivalence and uncertainty about what age is and what it may mean. The demographic sector we studied are unclear whether to claim the traditional authority of seniority or the status of youth.

This project began with the observation that academics who study ageing will tend to focus upon periods of life defined by age, either youth or the elderly. This might lead to a neglect of people who are in between. This is reflected in rather indeterminate, contested (and often relational)<sup>38</sup> labels for this period of life; life-cycle has become ‘life course’,<sup>39</sup> old age becomes ‘third age’ and, along with the mid-life crisis, we have ‘life reimagined’<sup>40</sup> or indeed ‘smart ageing’.<sup>41</sup> In many wealthier societies, age has also extended class discrepancies as those between the ages of 45 and 70 become the most asset-rich segment of the entire population; they represent a class that has settled its children and can now capitalise upon the new choices of consumer culture. Yet at the same time these ageing populations may face problems of isolation and loneliness linked to a loss of respect for the authority of seniority, though this may be alleviated by contact through new media.

As people become older, they may also find that, as Hazan noted,<sup>42</sup> ‘The aged are conceived as a mass of needs bound together by the stigma of age’. As their children move on and they experience mandatory retirement alongside the decline of religion, identities and life purposes may become less defined as previously dominant role-based conceptualisations of personhood have declined. The [next chapter](#) will show how our expectations became challenged by our evidence. Research on ageing in Ireland with particular attention to the role of digital technology builds on extensive work such as the Global Ageing Experience Programme in Intel’s Digital Health Group,<sup>43</sup> as well as research undertaken within academia.<sup>44</sup> Our research results have also been continually assessed against the findings of TILDA, The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing.<sup>45</sup>

## Introduction to our fieldsites

Both of our fieldsites are predominantly middle class, as is most of Ireland.<sup>46</sup> By 2002 more than one-third of employment was professional or managerial.<sup>47</sup> In the most recent census, Cuan is only slightly above the average national income. These relatively sedate areas with low levels of crime are again fairly typical of contemporary Ireland, as are the high standards of local education.

### Cuan

For some periods in its history Cuan (a pseudonym) was an important fishing port, but this peaked in the eighteenth century. Towards the late nineteenth century the boats were used to trade items such as coal. The surrounding area is good for agriculture, but was dominated by English landowners under a tenants-at-will ruling that meant life was extremely fragile. Generally the area was poor, as was most of Ireland, but it was perhaps a bit less food-poor, and consequently less affected by the famine than the west of Ireland. The historical records emphasise the heroism of those who supported Republican calls – for example, in the 1916 uprising – and streets are named after associated martyrs. Less discussed were the splits, even within families, represented by that period and the subsequent civil war, a probable catalyst for the emigration of those who ultimately supported the losing side. This turbulence was combined with the destructive impact of the First World War.

The population before the modern expansion was around 2,800. When most of the research participants were born, Cuan had become mainly known as a holiday destination; local people often rented out their homes for the summer and lived in a smaller dwelling during that period, often set up within their own gardens. Cuan was known for its holiday camps, ballrooms and lively music scene. This proved highly significant when the first private estates were built, since many of the people who chose to purchase these houses knew of Cuan because they, or their parents, had taken holidays there. (The holiday industry itself pretty much collapsed in the 1970s when people in Ireland started taking cheap holidays abroad.) Despite this, if you mention Cuan in Dublin or elsewhere, it is seen as an undistinguished place, off the beaten track. People know little about the town and it does not feature in the main tourist books.

There was never much by way of industry in Cuan. Its class identity was mainly a result of geography. People saw themselves as higher class

than the more proletarian town on one side and lower than the more upmarket towns on the other side that continued to draw holiday makers from Dublin. With respect to internal class divisions within Cuan, there have been two major state housing projects, the first built conspicuously outside what would have been the town boundaries at that time. Private housing really took off in the 1970s, during which time the population doubled. From that time onwards there has been an almost continuous building of new estates, which remains the case today. The result is a major expansion of the population, to around 10,000 at the time of fieldwork. Much of the state housing has been sold off, with less than 200 such homes remaining. It is common for adult children in Cuan to leave in their twenties, but return in their thirties when they want to have families since their memory of their own childhood is generally positive. Many people from the new estates commute to Dublin and around 700 individuals in Cuan stay at home to mind their family. A feature of note is the degree to which community activities tend to be dominated by the 'blow-ins' – the population not born in Cuan who come from all over Ireland, attracted by the housing estates and proximity to Dublin. They are now the majority population. People today remain very conscious of whether someone is Cuan-born or a blow-in.

Why pick Cuan as a fieldsite? One reason was that it enabled Danny, who researched Cuan, to remain not too far away from Thornhill, Pauline's fieldsite. A second reason was that Cuan has a particularly active 'Age-Friendly' organisation and the main demographic shift evident from the censuses of 2005 through to 2016 is an increase in the proportion of older people. More than 10 per cent of the population are over 65, with many representing those who arrived in the 1970s. A third reason was that a town of 10,000 individuals seemed big enough to preserve the anonymity of our participants, but small enough that an ethnographer would frequently bump into the same people, making it easier to get to know and feel part of the local community.

Cuan is well served with restaurants and pubs, generally more upmarket than those in the surrounding villages and towns unless one goes closer towards Dublin, which can be reached within an hour. Otherwise the high street is fairly typical of Ireland. It has one large and one more local supermarket, a garage, two banks and a good number of hairdressers and pharmacies. The most striking discrepancy is between how people within Cuan and outside Cuan describe the town. Those living there generally have an extremely positive view of Cuan, both as an ideal place to bring up children and also for retirement. They take pride in community activities, such as the Irish Tidy Towns competition.

However, as noted above, little of this intense local pride is reflected in the way people outside of Cuan refer to the place: the majority see it as nondescript and evince surprise that Danny would choose to live there. Politically, this is a fairly liberal area. Its votes reflect those of much of Ireland, fluctuating between Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Labour, though with a marked increase in Green and Sinn Féin votes in recent years.

Today there are four main types of housing in Cuan. The first is the old town, representing around one-third of the whole. This is extremely mixed, including some very large fine period housing and equally large new houses built by wealthier people to exploit the views over the beach. It also includes much smaller housing and is the area with the most bungalows – often the original cottages, some of which still have thatched roofs. The second type consists of big estates, built from the 1970s through to the 1990s. These are mainly very decent three- and four-bedroom houses, with little variation (Fig. 1.1).

The third type is social housing, mainly the Vartry estate, comprising smaller, mainly three-bedroom houses. Around half of the 330 houses are now privately owned, as is almost the whole of an earlier social housing estate. Many of these were originally rented to less well-off local people. While the Vartry estate represents the primary area of



**Figure 1.1** Example of the older housing estates in Cuan. Photo by Daniel Miller.



**Figure 1.2** Film: *Bob*. Available at <http://bit.ly/assabob>.

state housing, it is certainly not homogeneous. It includes some families who the state regards as highly dysfunctional. If a crime is committed in the town, it is generally assumed the perpetrator was from either outside Cuan or from the Vartry estate. Cuan also has a group of older men, who might once have been fishermen and labourers; they spend much of the day in one of the core pubs watching the fate of their betting slips.

At the same time, all the children of Cuan go to the same secondary school and education has been a significant instrument of equalisation. Even for the older population there are new opportunities, and it is likely that the majority of people on the estate seek to make use of these. An example is Bob, who appears in the film above (Fig. 1.2): no one would ever have expected that this former butcher and school caretaker could, on retirement, become an accomplished poet – but he did. The number of people in Cuan involved in creative writing was astonishing and represented a very wide range of backgrounds. Bob is thus both unique yet also, in some ways, typical.

The fourth and final type of housing is the big new Brittas estates, again consisting mainly of three- or four-bedroom properties (Fig. 1.3).

Apart from in the old town, there are very few flats, bungalows or one- or two-bedroom properties. House prices went wild during the ‘Celtic Tiger’ boom. Many people bought properties to let and lost considerable sums in the subsequent crash.

One silver lining of the financial crash was that more children of local people could afford to buy into the new estates. About one-third of the Brittas estate has been bought by people from Cuan, mainly children who have returned to bring up their families here. Most of the rest are from this region of Ireland, though there are some middle-class migrants from all over Ireland, as well as others from abroad. Cuan housing is





**Figure 1.3** Example of the new estates in Cuan. Photo by Daniel Miller.

more expensive than most of the towns and villages nearby, but less expensive than middle-class Dublin and some of the towns between Cuan and Dublin. A three-bedroom property sells for around €350,000, a four-bedroom for €450,000 and a house with a sea view for €550,000. Less than one-quarter of properties are rented. Over 90 per cent are houses, rather than apartments. The population is fairly homogeneous as only around 8 per cent are foreign-born, the largest group being British (often of Irish descent), followed by people from Eastern European countries often working in the town. Income levels tend to be a bit above the national average, but lower than in Thornhill. Overall the sense is of a middle-class town with a central pocket of social housing.

## Thornhill

Thornhill (also a pseudonym) represents one of the closer suburbs to Dublin city (Fig. 1.4). Fishing represented its core centre of gravity in the eighteenth century, but by the nineteenth it had developed as something of a holiday resort for affluent city dwellers, who sallied out from the city on a local tram service that followed the coast northwards. From a location that was rural and dominated with large estates, farms and dairies, large residential areas were gradually added, especially between 1920 and 1960. With the sea marking the eastern edge and a large private estate marking its western fringes, however, there was a limit to the space that could be developed. In addition, one or two prominent families ensured that no large-scale estates or manufacturing were built. There were strenuous efforts, for example,





**Figure 1.4** Film: *An Irish town*. Available at <http://bit.ly/anirishtown>.

to avoid the construction of large estates of social housing that one finds in nearby areas. Instead smaller estates, red-brick, semi-detached and terraced houses were built, starting in the 1920 and 1930s. These tended to be on the lands of previous dairy farms, though some farms remained in place until the 1970s and 1980s, where participants were sent to collect milk when they were young. An example of this type of housing is pictured below (Fig. 1.5). Thornhill was still considered countryside in the 1930s, retaining some large houses and estates as well as former bungalows built for returning officers in the British army after the First World War.

Although Thornhill lacks a single ‘village centre’, it contains a small clutch of shops, including restaurants, a bakery, cafés, a supermarket and estate agents, pharmacies and an off-licence; these make it feel like something of a centre. Thornhill has good public amenities, such as large playing fields for rugby and cricket. It also has a large building that houses the Gaelic Athletic Association sports, which heaves with hundreds of children during training at weekends and weekday evenings (Fig. 1.6). There is also a large park, previously privately owned but now run by Dublin City Council, and the sea is not far away. A good deal of research for this book involved meeting people along the seafront.

Thornhill is well served by churches. Historically it has had a strong Protestant community, with the Church of Ireland parish being one of the most populated Anglican parishes in the country up to the 1950s. Other Christian denominations were equally well represented and the area included a Presbyterian and Methodist church alongside the Catholic churches and those of the Church of Ireland. Relations between these Christian communities have always been good and mixed marriages were part of life even in the early twentieth century. The religious orders



**Figure 1.5** Typical housing in Thornhill. Photo by Pauline Garvey.

associated with these churches are heavily involved in the running of local Catholic and Protestant schools, with the local priest and vicar respectively sitting on the schools' boards of management. Commonly found close to the churches are spacious parish halls; these host diverse activities for children and seniors as well as occasionally running the local Meals on Wheels.

At the time of research, Thornhill had a core population of about 17,000 people. It is designated as middle class/affluent according to the



**Figure 1.6** Thornhill is well provisioned in terms of sports pitches. Parents usually volunteer to help with training. Photo by Pauline Garvey.

national deprivation index. Estate agents describe the town as primarily populated by professionals, including those in management and banking. Housing is similar to other Dublin suburbs which are primarily owner-occupied (68 per cent). Although people think of the main divisions in Dublin as lying along a north–south axis, the Dublin Housing Observatory website illustrates that the real social and economic divide is actually between east and west: a more affluent area to the east, stretching along the coast, and a higher incidence of social housing, overcrowding and bedsit accommodation to the west. Thornhill feels a world apart from areas of considerable disadvantage, just 5 km away.

The socio-economic profile of the area has changed since the ‘Celtic Tiger’ era of the 1990s–2000s. With the rise of inflation, many of the children of its middle-income residents have had to settle in less expensive areas. Residents talk of three Thornhills. There is the area occupied by long-time residents who grew up there. They describe going to the local convent school and the farms that were then just a short walk away; some recollect the basic amenities in the houses, with outdoor toilets characteristic of what was a down-at-heel working-class area. In the 1990s many left for larger, more comfortable homes, and

their cottages were occupied by the professionals who were increasingly moving into the area. Lastly there are the recently settled populations, the 'blow-ins', who were in the main more affluent and attracted by the area's amenities and its proximity to Dublin. There is little social and ethnic diversity in Thornhill, unlike proximate areas in Dublin's inner city. Within Thornhill the exceptions would be a strong representation of female childcare workers who came from around the city and from further afield, particularly Brazil.

Relevant here is the wider growth of Dublin's suburbia, the subject of recent studies by Corcoran and her colleagues.<sup>48</sup> Suburbia retains its sentimental attachment to rural living. Generally Irish people do not consider themselves to be urbanites and it was not until 1971 that the majority of Irish people lived in settlements with more than 1,500 inhabitants.<sup>49</sup> Ideals of community and nationalism reflected these origins in rural life.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, despite the extensive immigration of new residents or 'blow-ins', there is strong commitment to locality in Cuan and Thornhill. Even if residents were 'unlikely to share an identity created solely through their interactions in the place where they live',<sup>51</sup> they nevertheless developed strong affiliations with their local neighbourhoods (Fig. 1.7). There are local networks of social support and



**Figure 1.7** Every spring one Thornhill Catholic church hosts a meal for all the people who volunteer with them during the year. Photo by Pauline Garvey.



either established or, for the blow-ins, subsequent development of family networks. People generally felt good about where they lived and were emotionally invested in its history, heritage and distinctiveness.<sup>52</sup> While Irish society has undergone dramatic transitions in recent decades, 'there is little evidence to suggest that being more globalised has a dramatic effect on how close people feel to their town, city or country'.<sup>53</sup> As will be shown in later chapters, Facebook has emerged as an important site for community interaction and information; during fieldwork WhatsApp also developed as an important site for still more local affiliation around individual streets or housing estates. These were further invigorated during the Covid-19 pandemic when streets and localities created or resurrected these WhatsApp groups. People who had previously shown little interest in participating in something associated with a residents' group found that these connections became more immediate and relevant.

## Field methods

Ethnography consists primarily of participant observation – that is, simply living within our fieldsites, getting to know people and taking part in local activities. Unlike most disciplines, anthropologists do not aim to adhere strictly to their original intentions with regard to methodology, nor to remain consistent. The point is rather to change and refine methods as the work proceeds and understanding of the local community grows. While Pauline, who is Irish, was brought up with this knowledge of the local community, Danny, who is English, gradually learned the appropriate ways of getting to know people. He came to realise that when two strangers meet they tend first to establish who they know in common; only then do they relax in each other's company. This meant that methods used in previous studies, such as door to door introductions, would not have been appropriate here. Participation is privileged over interviews or surveys. It is easier to have an honest and relaxed conversation when on a five-hour hike as a fellow hiker or sitting with a Guinness in a pub for an evening.

Danny started by volunteering for the local theatre to make tea, hanging around the two local cafés where groups tended to meet up and then joining more and more groups. The ones he most frequently attended included the Active Retirement group for playing bingo, the Men's Shed,<sup>54</sup> the ukulele group, various traditional music sessions as part of the audience and a session that he participated in through reading



local developments. At a guess Danny probably spoke at some time or other to at least one-quarter of those aged over 65 in Cuan.

Both Pauline and Danny volunteered to work with Age Action Ireland in tutoring older people on how to improve their computing and smartphone skills. Pauline then contacted a local secondary school that was offering a similar service and found that people were much more interested in learning how to use smartphones than computers. As a result, Pauline worked with several large and small Active Retirement groups in Thornhill; here she explained the nature of the research and offered to give smartphone assistance to their members. In addition, Pauline joined a raft of locally-based volunteer activities that would bring her into contact with people. Over 16 months these included everything from litter picks to helping out in the activities of organisations such as the Scouts, the schools and fundraising activities arranged by the Catholic Church and Church of Ireland. These tended to be short-term activities, but were bolstered with longer-term, in-depth weekly meetings with retired participants, in situations ranging from evening meetings of the local history society to morning craft groups and church-based social occasions (Fig. 1.9). Through helping out with cake sales and Christmas events, Pauline was included in preparations for other church-based activities; she thus gradually got to know some of the people who dedicate their time and energies to providing a social outlet for other members. Some of these groups were composed of older people who either had no smartphone or were fearful of them. Such meetings were informative in revealing the extent of the ambivalence that some people continue to feel about these technologies, and the degree to which they feel themselves to be digitally excluded.

By contrast, groups run by local retirees such as music groups or sports groups tended to attract people with a very different perspective; many relied on their smartphones to organise their hectic lives. Walking groups and traditional music lessons are two examples that brought Pauline into the orbit of people representing a broad spectrum of ages, and whose age was somewhat irrelevant to participation. In general, Pauline, being younger, worked with more people in their forties, fifties and sixties while Danny concentrated more on people in their sixties and seventies, though with considerable overlap.

Because so many of the research participants are relatively affluent, free from obligations and still healthy, their responses may seem to paint a rather rosy portrait. In a later volume Danny will discuss in more detail the low-income families living in social housing in Cuan – a group that



**Figure 1.9** Craft and coffee weekly meetings. Photo by Pauline Garvey.

also works as a community, but in a different way. He will also focus on more problematic issues such as the incidence of depression. This is one reason why there is less about low-income families or depression in the present volume. But the main reason is that the middle-class population which dominates the examples given in this book does represent the clear majority of those whose lives we were engaged with in both these two fieldsites, and seems to represent the mainstream of contemporary Ireland.

The protocols for the project as a whole included an initial commitment to carry out around 25 recorded interviews. These were to be concerned with each of our three primary areas of smartphone use: ageing, life purpose and health, considered either separately or in combination. A key element in the smartphone interviews was to ask people to open up their smartphones, record every single app present on the screens and discuss whether these were used and, if so, how. Generally anthropological interviews tend to follow the lead of the participant and their interests rather than follow a strict questionnaire. Interviews were recorded with well over 200 different research participants. There was some limited background surveying, mainly to establish typicality,





**Figure 1.10** Film: *Ethnography in practice*. Available at <http://bit.ly/ethnoinpractice>.

since we put more trust in our qualitative work. In addition, it is helpful to interview people with specialist knowledge. These may encompass pharmacists, hairdressers, vets, the police, retired GPs, nuns and complementary health practitioners. Each can provide perspectives that might not be available in day-to-day fieldwork. For example, some men who were struggling with issues around retirement would only open up to psychotherapists, so it was only through interviewing the latter that we might gain access to the depth of those problems. Much of [chapter 7](#) on downsizing is informed by estate agents. We also made an effort to try and find people who did not join groups of any kind but might agree to meet up with us in local cafés or locations of their choosing. A further sense of how we conduct fieldwork is given by the film *Ethnography in practice* ([Fig. 1.10](#)).

## Ethics and people

The issue of ethics has been transformed for anthropologists in recent years by the development of ethics committees and bureaucratic compliance. The danger with this trend is the temptation to think that one is behaving ethically primarily because one is compliant with the procedures mandated by these processes, such as following the data protection requirements of GDPR or making sure people read information sheets and sign consent forms. These processes homogenise ethics as something that applies equally to all. This is quite different from an anthropological view of ethics.

For us, ethics has more to do with taking individual responsibility for learning what would cause harm to people. We assume that this will differ across different populations and demands a sensitivity to the specificity of each population. For example, it quickly became clear to us that many research participants in Ireland were not comfortable with being photographed, unlike those in the other fieldsites within this project. In our craft and coffee groups or in Active Retirement gatherings it felt intrusive to pull out our phones and snap photos. We therefore took relatively few photographs of people and always ensured that we had their permission when we did.

Discretion is of particular importance to anthropological work, since we are constantly exposed to information about people whom we also know. It is important not just to respect anonymity in publishing, but also to ensure that we are not the conduits for local gossip. Mostly our participants appear in anonymised form. We may change details about them that are not relevant to the points we are making, in order to ensure that they are not recognised. If people who appeared visually wanted to keep their own names we respected that choice, using an additional consent form to register that preference. In these days of googling, it would not be hard for a reader to work out the actual places in which we lived. But we would ask readers to respect our pseudonyms, as these assist in our concern to protect the anonymity of individuals.

## Notes

1. This was particularly the case for Cuan. ASSA refers to the Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing project. See <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthroplogy/assa> for more details.
2. Share et al. 2007.
3. O'Riain 2014, 32.
4. One example is the Global Irish Civic Forum, which encourages the Irish diaspora abroad to come to Dublin to discuss their work and engage with government. See Ireland Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017. Its website can be accessed here: <https://www.dfa.ie/global-irish/support-overseas/global-irish-civic-forum/>.
5. Inglis 2007, 7.
6. See Keenan 2014, 99–109.
7. Hakim and Dalby 2015.
8. State pensions (contributory) are relatively generous at €248 per week, compared to the UK where they are £159. Some of this is explained by the high cost of living in Ireland compared to other countries in the EU. See *The Economist*, 2019.
9. See O'Riain 2014, 1–31.
10. See Fáilte Ireland 2020. For more details of the 2013 initiative to encourage the Irish diaspora to visit Ireland, see the website: <https://www.discoverireland.ie/The-Gathering-Ireland>.
11. [https://www.failteireland.ie/FailteIreland/media/WebsiteStructure/Documents/eZine/TheGathering\\_FinalReport\\_JimMiley\\_December2013.pdf](https://www.failteireland.ie/FailteIreland/media/WebsiteStructure/Documents/eZine/TheGathering_FinalReport_JimMiley_December2013.pdf).
12. Murphy 2017, 158–74.

13. Horgan 2004, 44.
14. See Miller 2020.
15. See Norris 2017, 37–59 and Norris 2020.
16. A 2020 study by the Economic and Social Research Institute found that Ireland's tax system does more to reduce inequality than any other country in Europe. 'While the distribution of household income in Ireland is the most unequal in the EU before taxes and benefits, the study finds that Ireland's highly progressive tax system substantially offsets this, bringing inequality in take-home income very close to the EU average'. See Economic and Social Research Institute, 2020. See also *The Economist*, 2019.
17. See Hickman 2014, 133–44.
18. See Arensberg 1937, Arensberg and Kimball 2001 [1940]. See Byrne and O'Mahony 2013, 9 and Wilson 1984 for discussion. See also Brody 1973, Fox 1978, Taylor 1996.
19. For discussion of Scheper-Hughes 2001 [1979] and others, see Peace 1989, 89–111 and Egan and Murphy 2015, 134–41. See also Scheper-Hughes 2000.
20. More recent studies include Taylor 1995, Peace 2001. See also Wulff 2007.
21. Curtin et al. 1996. See Wilson and Donnan 2006, 17–42 for discussion.
22. Saris 2008, Saris and Bartley 2002.
23. Maguire and Murphy 2015, Murphy 2019, Curtin et al. 1996, Maguire and Murphy 2016, Heffernan et al. 2017.
24. Ó Crualaoich 2003, Ó Giolláin 2000, Ó Laoire 2005, Coleman 2004. Also see Wulff 2017.
25. Wulff 2015.
26. Forsberg and Timonen 2018.
27. Inglis 1998. This can be seen in the 1937 Irish Free State Constitution, which 'endeavours to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home' (Article 41, Paragraph 2). See Wills 2001, 33–57 for discussion.
28. Breen and Reynolds 2011, 195–212.
29. See Garry, J., Hardman, N. and Payne, D. 2006, in Forsberg and Timonen 2018.
30. Forsberg and Timonen 2018.
31. Most of the trends described above are typically interpreted as aspects of growing individualism. See Gray et al. 2016, 101. In one of his scholarly works Tom Inglis (2007) charts a rapid and profound transition in Ireland. He documents a series of shifts during the late twentieth century in which Irish society moved from being dominated by values related to Catholicism, such as humility, piety and self-denial, to being a liberal-individualist consumer culture in which self-indulgence was, generally, valorised over self-denial. Ideas surrounding the person, self-realisation and the body took centre stage in this transition and former taboos surrounding sex were challenged in politics, the media and popular culture. The prime movers in this transition were, he argues, the media and the market, under whose influence a Pandora's Box of unspoken topics was broached on the airwaves and in print media. See Inglis 2007.
32. Connolly 2015a, Introduction, Connolly 2015b, 10–38.
33. Gray et al. 2016, 56.
34. Hannan in Connolly 2015a, 39–54.
35. Gray et al. 2016, 167–77, Arber and Timonen 2012. See Forsberg and Timonen 2018.
36. Spencer 1990, Aguilar 2007.
37. Hodkinson and Bennett 1999, 1–6. See also Blaikie 1999.
38. See Degnen 2007.
39. See Hunt 2005.
40. See Hagerty 2016.
41. Hockey and James 2002, Keith et al. 2005, Cohen 1994, Featherstone and Wernick 1995.
42. Hazan 1994, 21, Hazan 1980.
43. Which has resulted in several publications that are relevant to this topic, including Prendergast and Garattini 2015, Garattini et al. 2012, Drazin 2018.
44. See King-O'Riain 2015, 256–73.
45. See 'The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) 2020. The TILDA website can be found at: <https://tilda.tcd.ie/>.
46. Ireland experienced the biggest expansion in the middle-class cohort of any EU country between 1991 and 2010, according to the US-based Pew Research Center. The share of middle-income adults rose from 60 per cent to 69 per cent of the entire adult population over that period. See Walsh 2017 and Kochhar 2017.

47. Share et al. 2007.
48. Peillon and Corcoran 2002, Corcoran and Share 2008, Corcoran et al. 2007, Corcoran et al. 2010 and Corcoran 2010.
49. Horgan 2004, 44.
50. Horgan 2004, 44.
51. Corcoran et al. 2010, 270.
52. Corcoran et al. 2010, quoted in Inglis and Donnelly 2011, 134.
53. Inglis and Donnelly (2011) argue that globalisation does not impede attachment to the local. Instead they believe that local attachment and identity not only become adapted to globalisation, but that these also complement and sustain each other.
54. The Men's Shed movement was started in Australia in the 1980s as a means to give occupation to older men that could enhance their health and welfare. There are now over 450 Men's Sheds in Ireland.