

TARA

RE-ROUTING THE DEBATE

It has become a touchstone for our guilt in eagerly seeking development while, at times, forsaking heritage. But the M3 controversy is only a symptom of much deeper-rooted issues. Three experts in the field offer their perspectives on how the debate should start to move on from the current entrenched positions

What defines the Tara landscape?



Gabriel Cooney

John Gormley TD, Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, has stated that, having reviewed the matter, and despite his own

clear opposition, he does not have the power to re-route the M3 motorway near the Hill of Tara. So where do we go from here? In relation to the extensive archaeological work carried out on the route by the National Roads Authority, the key objective must be getting the maximum information return.

Knowledge and interpretation of the past is the underlying premise of archaeology. All the sites and features were excavated to best professional practice. Despite this, in the heat of the debate there has been considerable coverage about "destruction" of sites. It would appear that in large part this is due to the use of the phrase "archaeological excavation is destruction", a term that personally I am unhappy with.

It is worth remembering that the vast majority of sites along the route are known only as a result of archaeological survey and testing. We need to stop thinking of excavation as destruction and see it instead as the creation of knowledge.

In relation to the Tara landscape, a key issue is minimising the impact of the motorway. There are established approaches to dampening noise and light impact and "greening" the motorway to make it less visible. The character of the area must not be spoiled by inappropriate development that could follow on motorway construction.

In this context the announcement by the Minister that he is considering designating the area as a Landscape Conservation Area (LCA) is welcome and builds on a commitment in the Meath Development Plan. Definition of an LCA will bring us to the issue at the heart of the Tara debate.

This debate has focused on different perceptions and definitions of the Tara landscape: legal, popular and research-driven. Photographs of the Hill of

Tara dominate coverage of the impact of the M3. The impression has frequently been created that the motorway is going through the hill. In fact, it runs 2km to the east in the Tara-Skryne valley. On the other hand, it has come to be recognised that the Hill of Tara forms the core of a wider archaeological landscape.

What is at issue is the extent, form and constitution of that landscape. Do we have an agreed definition of what area constitutes the Tara landscape? Defining the boundaries of historic, archaeological or cultural landscapes so they can be designated, managed or protected are difficult issues. But they need to be tackled.

There are other instances where landscapes are being impacted on by large-scale development.

One example is the proposed deep sea port at Bremore, Co Dublin, the location of a passage tomb cemetery and other archaeological features. As the European Landscape Convention recognises, alongside the definition of special landscapes, there has to be regard for the landscape as a whole.

On what basis do we make choices about the future character and appearance of the landscape? There is a commitment in the Programme for Government to introduce a National Landscape Strategy. Defining special landscapes and sustaining the character of the broader landscape will be central to such a strategy.

The motorway does not spell the end of the Tara landscape. With time the M3 will come to be regarded as a contested, major intervention in a landscape that has been formed by human action over millennia.

The questions facing us now are how we can learn from this to better inform the decisions and choices we make about this and other landscapes in the future.

◆ Prof Gabriel Cooney, of the UCD School of Archaeology, is a Heritage Council member and is on the committee advising the Minister of the Environment on the excavation of the national monument at Lismullin, Co Meath

Romantic notions simplify the debate



Ian Russell

The Tara controversy has shown that people in Ireland and throughout the world care deeply about the shared heritage and

landscapes of Ireland. It has also shown that, at times, this care and sentiment can regress to fundamentalist perspectives that dictate what heritage is or what a landscape is, rather than participate in their continuing negotiation.

George Petrie, in his 1839 survey of the hill, noted that Tara was 'undistinguished either for altitude or picturesqueness of form'. This insight suggests that Tara's significance is not in its static, restricted or romantic visual form but in its narratives and relationships with the wider landscape. As a landscape, Tara both inspires and confuses us. It has been declared, by some, to have universal and 'obvious' qualities, but from a more dispassionate perspective, there is nothing either obvious or universal about such claims. They derive from nuanced mixtures of sentiments, agencies and ideologies.

Landscapes are complex and capricious. As active human agents in changing landscapes we do ourselves a disservice by allowing a simplistic, romantic aura to be cast over our relationships to places. The idealistic gaze which dominates descriptions of places such as Tara obfuscates the dynamic qualities of our shifting engagements with such places, framing the debate in monolithic, culturally-specific terms.

As the composition of the people who live on the island of Ireland changes, our goal, in respect of the stewardship of heritage, must become the promotion of dynamic, open negotiation of how that heritage is constituted.

Archaeologists who have participated in this negotiation by engaging with development have been described by some as entering a Faustian bargain, of making an illicit pact with the destroyers of heritage. It is true that archaeologists and developers work together. This is nothing

new and is, indeed, a professional obligation.

What is new, however, is the appropriation of archaeological sites to oppose road construction by using them to create reductive and fundamentalist frames for debates over heritage and landscapes. It could be suggested that the Faustian bargain presented to us today is to make a pact with regressive cultural politics, giving over heritage and the negotiation of landscapes to an exclusive, monolithic view of how best to manifest, narrate and perform the past in the present.

Ireland has undergone immense changes over a short time. People in Ireland have had to make difficult choices between a myriad of competing values and infrastructural and developmental concerns, under intense pressure both from within and from the international community. Many other developed states in the world underwent similar periods of change, but what is unique in Ireland is that this has occurred in tandem with increasing social concern for the preservation of heritage and a dramatic "boom" in the archaeological and heritage sectors. The tensions between development needs and the desire to preserve and safeguard heritage and traditional ways of life present us with difficult choices. These are the growing pangs of development.

Difficult choices will still need to be made, and no single solution will heal the wounds or alleviate the guilt some may have for the paths that are finally chosen. We can, however, participate in the negotiation of these choices, exploring the roots of our values and working to build consensus through compromise. If there are any things worth preserving for future generations they are the readiness to engage in open debate and the will to work towards mature compromises over competing values.

◆ Dr Ian Russell is the NEH Keough Fellow of the Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, in the US

Will our descendants thank us or curse us?



Pat Cooke

In about 50 years or so, an Irish historian will be faced with an interesting challenge: to explain to a

contemporary audience how a putatively post-Christian, secularised Ireland of the early 21st century could have become so fixated on the idea that part of its territory – the Tara-Skryne Valley – was a "sacred landscape".

One of the ironies of heritage is that when thinking about it people tend to lose any historical sense of the thing itself; we behave as if the values we profess about it are good for all time; as if all generations cared, or will care, as much about "our" heritage as we do.

What posterity has bequeathed us is substantially that which has survived as much by accident as design. But what characterises our age is that it is an "age of heritage": never before in history have so many been preoccupied with saving so much for future generations. Whether our inheritors thank us or curse us for the burden remains to be seen.

For the moment, we seem to be working off the vainglorious assumption that our value judgements about the vast amounts of heritage that should be protected will prove timeless.

Some of those defending Tara have described it as an Irish Acropolis, but it might be more accurate to think of it as Thermopylae. If the pass is not defended, the Barbarian hordes will rush through, spiritual values will be trampled and a rash of untrammelled development will plague the land. That Tara is required to bear this symbolic weight explains some of the extraordinary heat the cause has generated.

Unprecedented economic expansion has coincided with a process of rapid secularisation in Ireland. Tara is synonymous with a world of seemingly lost faith in priceless things. We want to consecrate Tara by throwing a mantle of conservation across much of it. But even if we do that, we will have treated only the symptom, not the cause.

The pains of development are universal across Ireland; there are still a thousand other Taras to be fought over with equal passion. But will they? A few miles away, the building of a hotel in the very lee of Trim Castle caused no more than a flutter of outrage. This may be the more typical case.

The impassioned defence of the Tara-Skryne valley as both a coherent landscape and a sacred one is presented as a rhetorically self-evident proposition. But there is nothing at all self-evident about either of these deeply value-laden words; both "landscape" and "sacred" are terms that serve to mystify rather than clarify what is actually there. In this sense, they are contestable as purely cultural propositions. We can, and should be, arguing about this.

The overwhelming rhetoric of sacredness and spirituality demands the elision of the costs involved in prioritising the value of one thing (heritage) over another (infrastructure). It helps to reify landscape as relic, placing an overriding value on conservation – the preserved scene – over the knowledge that might be extracted through excavation.

This readily translates into a kind of aesthetic bullying that treats those who are not of the faith as Philistines or Infidels. The deep attraction of asserting landscape as an a priori value is that it facilitates the avoidance of difficult questions of choice and prioritisation by casting a sacred spell over the lot.

It manifestly refuses to recognise terrain as a palimpsest, ceaselessly scratched over with the graffiti of dead generations, and subject to the interventions and exigencies of the contemporary moment.

For as long as we treat Tara as a cause rather than a symptom of much wider or deeper anxieties, the argument over it will be riven by polarised passions. It will be interesting to see what that future historian will make of it all.

◆ Pat Cooke is director of the MA in cultural policy and arts management in the UCD School of Art History and Cultural Policy

In with the big hitters

The British Open introduced the world to amateur golf sensation Rory McIlroy – and it won't be long until he is taking on the pros every week, he tells **Brian Rowan**

On a little bench overlooking the 18th green at Holywood in Co Down there is a plaque in memory of Jimmy McIlroy, a long-time member who died in 1992. Jimmy's son Gerry is the bar manager at the golf club, and his son Rory needs no introduction – not after last week.

The British Open at Carnoustie was exceptional for Irish golf – for Pádraig Harrington and Rory McIlroy, professional and amateur, winners of the Claret Jug and the Silver Medal respectively.

He is just 18, but already McIlroy has more than 16 years' practice and playing experience. In Holywood they remember him, at just seven years old, telling one of the older members that he was "playing the golf of his life".

His father reckons he introduced him to the 17th tee box at Holywood when he was just 18 months old, and,

as the story develops, you are told about the young boy spending hours and hours playing balls down that fairway towards the hole they call Holly Bush.

There are photographs of him at no size, showered in sand as he plays out of bunkers.

His coach, Michael Bannon, made him his first set of proper clubs when he was about nine, and ever since they have been working to "build and structure a swing that would work for him". Carnoustie, then, didn't just happen – it is the result of many hours on the driving range, and in a routine of chipping and putting.

Away from the course, he stretches and does yoga. "He is a strong boy because he has hit so many golf balls," Bannon says. "There are lots of people who can swing the golf club. The other part is between the ears – coping with the pressure." That was something else in that Open perform-

ance that impressed his coach, "that he held up under such immense pressure".

McIlroy has a history of winning. By nine he had won his first underage world championship in the United States. He once appeared on a live Northern Ireland television chat show, chipping a ball into the drum of a washing machine, something he practised from the hall into the kitchen at home when it was too wet to go outside.

He strolled onto the set that night with a swagger, which has been with him since.

I GREW UP on the same street as McIlroy's dad – our homes were the swing of a nine iron from the Holywood club. For a number of generations, the McIlroys have been a part of the golf there. Rory and his father have both been club champion.

McIlroy knows the course so well – those holes stretching from Hazel Wood, past Cherry Tree, down Nun's Walk, through the Valley, over Irish Hill, and coming home past Holly Bush to that 18th green and the Clubhouse finish, where that bench sits with his grandfather's name on it.

Golf has been good to Rory McIlroy, and it is getting better. It has been a week of front-page and back-page news, of television interviews, and of

visits to the media centre. Everybody wants to talk to him.

"It gave me a glimpse of what Tiger Woods has to do every day," he says, back home. Being in that spotlight was "quite exciting", but, at times, "pretty intimidating".

Here he is talking about his first visit to the media centre at Carnoustie "after shooting the 68" – three under par in his first ever major – "and there's 100 reporters sitting waiting to talk to you".

"The good thing about that is you say what you want. You don't have to answer everything." McIlroy has always been a quick learner. He has a calm focus, likes the attention and knows how to play to it.

And he knows who has helped him most. A few months ago, at a gala dinner for him in the Holywood club, he paid tribute to his parents, Rosie and Gerry. Their dedication and sacrifice made his golfing success possible.

Has his performance in the Open begun to repay them for all of that?



Rory McIlroy in action during last weekend's Open Championship at Carnoustie, Scotland. The 18-year-old won the silver medal for leading amateur. Photograph: Phil Noble/Reuters

'It gave me a glimpse of what Tiger Woods has to do every day'

"Nothing can replace the money, the support and the time they gave me," he replies. "Mum and dad knew I was a good player, but to go to the British Open, my first major – it was very special for them. They were very proud."

What about Rosie – how nervous was she as she watched? "Oh God," she says, "the first tee, and then the 18th on the first day, the tears came streaming down my face. It was fantastic."

AT THE MOMENT, McIlroy is taking a break – some "complete relaxation" in Dubai – before he begins his build-up for September's Walker Cup, the amateur equivalent of the Ryder Cup, which will take place at Royal County Down.

"I can't wait," he says. "If the Open was good, I think this could be even better – the atmosphere." After the Walker Cup, he will turn to the professional game. He loves the crowds, the big golfing theatres, and he loves to entertain.

The curtain has come down on Carnoustie – "In a way it has changed my life," he says, in a calm, matter-of-fact way – but this is just the start for Rory McIlroy. The teenager has given the sport and the world a glimpse of what he can do.

We will find out soon.