EIRE: The new WEST COAST

Clifford Harper

ONCE it was the West Coast of America that provided the international focus for experimental living for those dissatisfied with the direction society was taking. *Nick Wates* reports from Ireland on another West Coast which could take its place.

BANTRY BAY'S Reen Desert Hotel last New Year's Eve was, at first sight, the perfect tourist brochure image of Ireland with hundreds of couples of all ages whirling around the floor to a stream of jigs.

Closer inspection revealed that everything was not as one might have expected. Half those present were obviously of local origin. The other half were equally obviously not. They were young people — mainly in their twenties and thirties — with shaggy hair, loose, coloured clothing and healthy welcoming faces.

One could be forgiven for thinking that one was back with the 'sixties hippies or in a television medieval drama. With accents ranging from cockney to the best Queen's English, they had clearly not been born and bred in Ireland — yet they are not tourists and now consider themselves 'locals' too.

They are part of a remarkable wave of young, predominantly English, immigrants to the West Coast of Ireland, estimated by one itinerant to number 12,000.

Relaxed Reaction

Surprisingly perhaps, the reaction of the native Irish to this invasion has been relaxed, almost welcoming. In-built hostility for English people dwindled as it was realised that despite their frequently weird appearance the new arrivals are not a threat. Furthermore, they provide income by paying rent for cottages which would otherwise remain empty, and they provide custom for the small isolated shops.

Many of the older generation also feel respect for these young people who are doing what they would have liked their own children to do — instead of heading off to the big cities in search of higher wages and modern life.

In addition, the 'laid back' humanitarian philosophy of the new settlers is, paradoxically and despite outward differences in appearance, similar to the traditions of the local strongly rooted moralistic Catholic community.

The new settlers

People in both communities can and do wander in and out of each other's houses, and never get away without being offered a cup of tea if not something stronger (against pressure from the church and the media the Irish soon accepted that the new settlers' enjoyment of abundant marijuana was, morally, little different to their own consumption of large quantities of illegally distilled whisky).

Despite strong morals, there is in both communities, a tolerance of others with different views, and a resignation to larger forces — which can sometimes verge on apathy and passivity. Where the Irish talk about "resignation to the will of God"; the new settlers talk of "going with the flow of things and accepting karma".

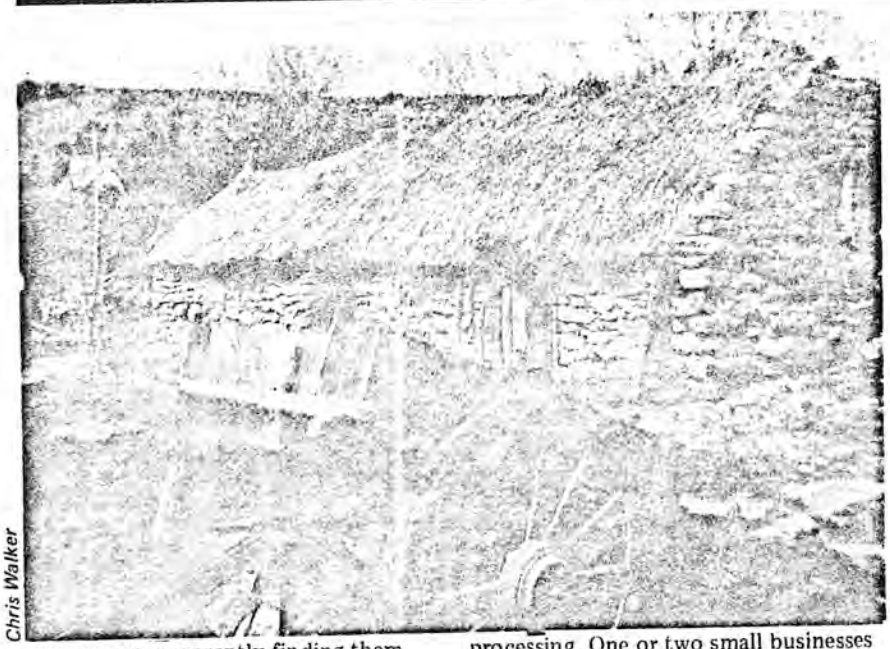
The Irish and English have not yet integrated much on a deeper social level — there are no mixed marriages for instance — and there has inevitably been the off conflict. But in most cases everyone knows what everyone else is doing, and the two communities live harmoniously side by side.

Back to the land

Life in the mountains of West Cork is not easy and the new settlers initially find themselves preoccupied with day to day living: fetching water in buckets from streams; digging turf for cooking and heating; learning about life without electricity, and discovering how to keep goats and grow vegetables without the former eating the latter.

Not to mention coping with psychic and supernatural forces which even the most rational newcomers soon accept as a major influence in daily life. (Few people do not have tales of their own encounters with 'wandering turf', standing stones or 'the fairies'. Whether it's a product of the mountains or simply a natural result of living so close to nature is hard to ascertain.)

There are virtually no private telephones, few stereos — so that people learn to sing again) and no-one seems to listen to the radio or read



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newspapers, apparently finding them both irrelevant to their lives.

There is a pioneering atmosphere. People arrive with only a few treasured possessions, and put up for a while until they can find a cottage to rent with a plot of land and turf rights.

Then, after several years, assuming they are deemed to be good neighbours by the natives, they may be offered the freehold. Or they might choose to buy a derelict cottage nearby and painstakingly restore it to habitation. Some people have lived in caravans while building their own homes from scratch — usually for very little money.

Handbuilt timber houses ranging from an 'A' frame roofed with locally hewn cedar shingles to a geodesic dome can be found tucked away in the mountains, as well as beautifully built stone cottages.

The opportunity to live cheaply combined with low land values and an enlightened local planning department has enabled people to realise projects which would have remained dreams in England where high land values and rigid planning regulations combine to make it virtually impossible for young people to build their own homes.

And while a few people have bought farms with 60 to 100 acres, the overwhelming pattern is one of smallholdings of the kind which have been ruthlessly eradicated in England in the interests of investment land values and financially efficient agriculture.

'Employment'

Employment cannot be analysed in a traditional way. A few fortunates have brought capital with them from England which has helped them to get established, a few others have taken jobs in local industries such as fish processing. One or two small businesses have sprung up such as cafes, bookshops and so on.

The majority of the new settlers survive on a combination of the dole, casual work in the fields and small cottage industry — pottery, weaving, knitting, furniture making and so on. The most striking economic fact about the new community is the small amount of money that people need.

Prices in the shops are actually slightly higher than in England but people buy little. Self-sufficiency, a concept so hard for economists on both the Left and the Right to comprehend, is almost a reality for many people and is certainly aspired to by nearly everyone. The peat bogs provide fuel, the vegetable patch and a few animals provide fish and some people have started fish farming to regularise their supply.

Seaweed can be collected from the beaches instead of paying for fertilizers. There is little opportunity to pay for entertainment which is mostly self-generated and free. Home grown grass, home-made beer, home-made cheese are the rule rather than the exception.

Few people own cars, preferring to walk long distances and hitch rides. One young farmer I met drove the 16 miles to Bantry every week in a horse and cart. Yet he was far from being an olde worlde fanatic. Although using the horse for ploughing too, he was quite happy to hire a bulldozer to carve out a track up the mountainside to open it up for forestry.

Self-sufficiency is clearly seen as a way to break people's dependence on the money economy and hence the need to work long hours in menial work for someone else simply in order to survive.

Low material consumption is seen as the quickest road to freedom. It enables people to become masters of their own destiny and is pursued at times with religious vigour.

Many people connected to mains electricity do not use it because they prefer to survive without it and not to have to pay bills. Instead they devote their time to developing methane generators which produce gas for cooking and heating from freely available pig shit. Self-sufficiency leads naturally into ecology; using what is available, and conserving rather than consuming.

It is this aspect of the community which makes it politically significant. Few people went to West Cork with any political purpose. What attracted them was the beauty of the scenery, the magic of the mountains or a desire to 'get back to the land' and live in a community which still manages to retain its stability and traditions.

It is one of the few areas of the British Isles where the mood in 1981 is of optimism rather than pessimism, of growth and vitality rather than decline and stagnation.

Organisation

Until recently, there has been little attempt to develop any communal organisation in the area. The community has grown organically through loose networks of friends and acquaintances and people helping one another out.

The large distances between homesteads and the absence of telephones makes any form of organisation more difficult than in the city, and in any case many people went there to escape organisation. As a result, the community is conservative in many respects.

For instance, nuclear family units predominate with clearly defined traditional sex roles — the men do the

physical work and the women cook and look after the children.

This, and the lack of any effective feminist organisation may be responsible for the frustration felt by many women, several of whom have done midnight flits back to careers in the city. There are fewer women than men there.

Isolation from other political and social movements has led to many people searching out religious rather than political solutions. One valley lost half its new settlers after they were converted to Islam and instructed by their religious masters to leave Ireland (deemed to be a lost cause).

Nevertheless, the growing awareness among some people of the community's political relevance combined with a recognition of the need for organisational structures to make rural living even more self-sufficient and viable is leading to some new developments.

At the beginning of 1980, an organisation was launched called HOPE (Help Organise Peaceful Energy). HOPE's aim is to make it easier for people interested in alternative technology and alternative lifestyles to find out about it and a small library has been set up in Bantry with a register of useful contacts, people and projects.

HOPE is also an anti-nuclear group, affiliated to CND sending delegates to national anti-nuclear meetings and campaigning against nuclear projects in the area. Those active in HOPE see what is going on in West Cork as a positive solution towards eliminating the need for the high energy society and nuclear power.

Towards the end of the year a more ambitious project emerged and the firesides came alive with talk of "The Co-op". The aim broadly is to harness the skills and energy of individuals to carry out projects which cannot be carried out by the same individuals in isolation.

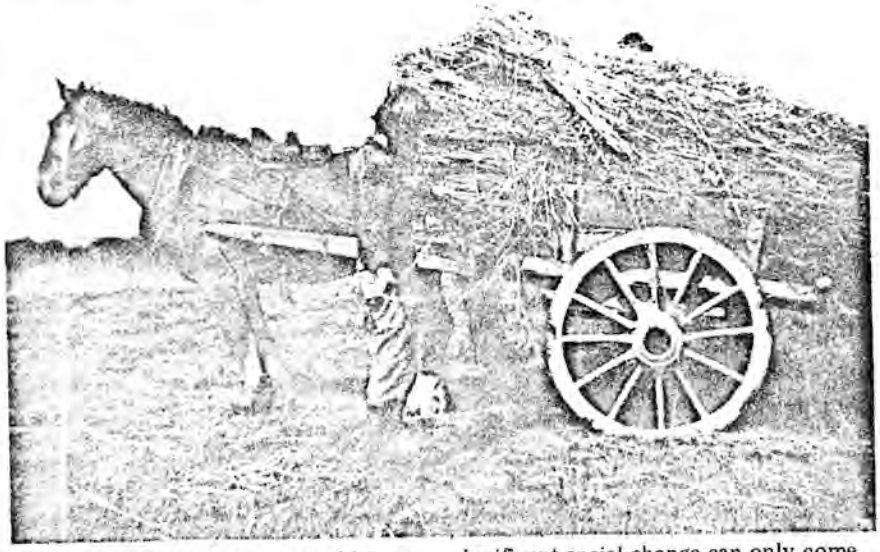
For instance, helping each other out with ploughing or building has been going on for ages but it may well be that the person that one helped with ploughing is not the best person to help one build one's roof.

The co-op could operate a labour pool whereby if one worked for 10 days on a project, one would be entitled to 10 days labour from other people who would not need to be the same people as one was working for. As money would not enter into the exchanges, the system would be totally inflation-proof.

The Co-op would also be able to provide funding for getting projects off the ground, such as an engineering workshop for instance

The governments co-op experts in ICOS (Irish Co-op Organisation Society) have been approached about the scheme and are reported to be enthusiastic although no funds have been made available as yet.

The seed of doubt in some people's minds about the Co-op is summed up in the question, "Is 'A Co-operative' any better than private enterprise plus co-operation?" Those who argue for the Co-op say that it is, that real rural independence, without the dole, can only come about through organisation; and that only organisations with rules can give people the confidence to invest their time and money in them.



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Whether those of more anarchist inclinations can be persuaded of the value of organising, and whether any organisation proves successful, remain to be seen.

As yet, 'The Co-op' has not progressed beyond being a vision, bogged down in arguments about its aims and constitution. In the meantime though, the spin-off from the debate has led to numerous small co-operatives and mutual aid ventures and projects springing up, many with an appropriate technology bias!

- A wholefood co-op distributes food and encourages people to grow food and sell it to them;
- Four people have started making fiddles, guitars and mandolins;
- Others are making baskets from locally grown willow;
- A transit van shared between five people is used to go to festivals, collect seaweed and turf and move furniture;
- A methane generator has been constructed and others are planned;
- Restoration of one old waterwheel is underway and new ones are planned;
- 14,000 trees are being planted on a bare hillside;
- Three people have bought a portable chain-saw mill which can be used to turn trees into planks where they fall, making timber available in places which cannot easily be reached with heavy haulage machinery; and
- A large greenhouse is being constructed with people getting space in it in proportion to the labour they put into building it.

These small co-operative ventures may simply develop into successful capitalist businesses. On the other hand they may be incorporated into a larger co-operative structure. Either way, the developments in West Cork will be of interest in the coming years, particularly for those who have believed that significant social change can only come about in the *cities* of the industrial world.

Planning controls and high land values combine to make it impossible for events in West Cork to be paralleled in most other rural areas. Yet the precedents for change are established.

While there are at present no significant subsidies to enable young people to start small-holdings, it must be remembered that social and political pressure in the past led to society being prepared massively to subsidise housing and jobs in the cities. There is no reason why part of these subsidies should not be switched to rural areas.

The last twenty years has provided several examples of relatively small isolated groups of people reacting against society's pressures and building up new cultures which have sparked off much wider movements for change. The West Coast of Ireland may well provide such a spark.

Nick Wates

Anyone wanting to know more about life in West Cork can write to HOPE, c/o Derryduv, Coomhola, Bantry, Co.Cork. Ireland or enquire at The Brown Pub, Kealkil, near Bantry.