

Rural Readings



www.v-learn.ie
Department of Adult & Community Education,
NUI, Maynooth

April 2006

The first issue of this monologue introduces us to a unique reflection from a group of NUI Maynooth mature rural development students who completed a survey on the typology of a rural dweller as part of a national study. The study “Rural Living: A Survey of 1295 households” was completed as part of the Diploma in Rural Development by Distance Learning in 2003 and published in 2006 (www.v-learn.ie/links). Each student was allocated twenty households in randomly selected rural areas to interview with a prepared questionnaire. The survey was completed in October/November 2003. No student surveyed in their own local area.

The following articles are reflections by students on their experience. Each reflection is edited to highlight a range of themes namely; Changing community & lifestyle, “disconnectedness”, time?, country living, the old & the new, the view and the hunger, future for farming, snapshot in time, and busy living.

The following are the contributors;

Ms. Mary Deery, Mr. Seamus Orr, Ms. Helen Gorman, Mr. John Moran, Ms. Philomena Finnegan, Ms. Helene Dooley, Ms. Angie McKenna, Ms. Carmel Dunne, Mr. Eddie Connell, Mr. Gerard Sherlock.

The articles are aptly titled;

A snapshot of a vanishing rural lifestyle: {Winter 2003}

Michael Kenny.

A snapshot of a vanishing rural lifestyle: {Winter 2003}

In November 2003 I had honour of engaging with the occupants of 20 households in a southerly tip of County Roscommon. This turned out to be the most refreshing and valuable experiences of my participation in the Diploma in Rural Development in NUI Maynooth.

I arrived in the area completely unannounced and unheralded. I had elicited good directions for my first and last town-land from the postman who co-incidentally came from the area.

As soon as I entered the first house, by the back door, my nervousness completely evaporated. I felt immediately that I would encounter no problem whatsoever in the pursuit of my goal of completing 20 questionnaires for the national rural survey. My main problem was going to be politely fending off the natural good-natured hospitality of the inhabitants.

The first and last town-lands on my list were areas situated in close proximity to the Shannon. I later discovered that this area is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). This made a lot of sense as it would be next to impossible to derive an income solely from farming in this area. As a result of my work there it struck me that there could possibly be an initiative that would also designate Special Areas of Cultural Preservation (SCAP).

I was struck by the relaxed and easy manner of the people of this area. There were a lot of extended families living in the area and the interaction with neighbours seemed excellent. There was a sense of the co-operation and *meitheal* that existed in rural Ireland when I was a boy. I had thought that with the advent of mechanisation and intensification this spirit was virtually extinct. It was marvellous to have the opportunity to experience this once again. However this experience was tinged with the sadness that such a way of life may no longer exist by the time the next survey of this sort is carried out.

While I was amazed at first to note that 80% of the households that I visited had no involvement whatever in voluntary groups or organisations, yet I had the belief that if a major catastrophe befell the area the people would automatically act as-one and instinctively know exactly what to do. Their training in this is honed annually by the flooding they experience each year. The flooding incidentally is the most common negative aspect to living in the area that they reluctantly admitted to.

Generally the people of this area value the quality of life, the clean air, and the safety of the area from a child rearing perspective. When pressed, in addition to the flooding, they cited poor quality roads and the lack of public transport as the main negative points. I was amazed to hear a woman of 80 years say that she did not like the long winter nights, although she had lived in the area all her life. I understood what she meant later in the evening when, despite a starry canopy above, the darkness was so intense that I could barely see my hand in front of me.

A snapshot of a vanishing rural lifestyle: {Winter 2003}

The area I visited was rural South Cavan displaying a combination of poorly and well-maintained land, combined with newly built houses dotted between older houses. All of the people seemed happy with the area they live in and everyone seemed to cherish peace and quiet as a quality of the area.

I was invited into half of the houses I interviewed. I did all my visits in the evening time after 7.00 pm and on Saturday. The impact of this was that I was in competition with TV soaps, children's bed-time, DIY work in two houses, the rugby match, the news, meal times and work. In one house the interviewee was quite happy for me to stay on for a chat. A lady on her own, who was been treated for cancer and seemed very happy to have a diversion from the TV.

Two of my households were bachelor farmers. Farmer A had a big badly scrawled sign up on the lane to his house stating "Beware of Mad Beast". I don't know whether it was the man or the dog the sign referred to, but as I sat in the car conducting the interview I was glad I choose day-time rather than night to visit. Farmer B asked me "Had anyone walked away and left me in the middle of the interview?": What would you make of that question?.

Transport independent people thought it was a great area, convenient to all services. However the next-door neighbour, who might be more dependant on a lift from a relative/neighbour, would say it was too far away from services. I also noted that the people who had no personal transport did not avail of the bus. When I asked why I was told they had a family member who would bring them to town, etc. any time they needed to go. I noticed that in some cases the respondent did not personally or directly use public services. The service was used on their behalf. Clearly the extended family model is working.

While I encountered practically no suspicion to the interview or the questions, in one case a question to a bachelor farmer regarding local services which asks "How often do you use the services of your local bank?" got the sharp response; "What do you want to know that for?"

The contradiction in the way neighbouring people view the same area was striking. For example in one row of eight local authority semi-detached houses and one private house, some said they interacted daily while others were saying they didn't interact at all. I suggest this was down to the definition of the word interact. To some it means going into each others houses for tea or coffee, while to others it just meant saying hello as they met going to or from their houses.

The most striking issues arising from the interviews were

- The low proportion of farmers and their age profile, combined with their lack of optimism for the future.
- The lack of home or farm enterprises in the households surveyed
- Other than football there was no noticeable involvement in voluntary organisations in the area.

A snapshot of a vanishing rural lifestyle: {Winter 2003}

Behind every face lies a story, sometimes a sad one, sometimes an ordinary mundane one, and sometimes one filled with great achievement. None the less a story. It was with this in mind I felt a sense of fear and even excitement when asked to take part in a nationwide survey on the typology of the rural family as part of our joint field project for our diploma course in Rural Development. I knew as I crossed the threshold of a household I would also cross the threshold of that story for the short time I would be there.

The area I was allocated is located in west County Louth, bordering Monaghan and Meath and perhaps somewhat isolated from the central activity of the county. As I travelled along the N2 I could not help being struck by the autumnal colours that lined the road and the green rolling hills to the south. This was the area I was heading towards. From the N2 it was not obvious that many houses occupied the area and my first impressions were that this must be a predominately farming community. However it turned out that the landscape I was looking at was practically owned by one farmer. As I left the N2 I noticed there was no activity on the roadway, no tractors transporting round bales, no children on bicycles, no women walking. The roads were very quiet. I did notice quite a few old houses being renovated, new houses being built, and quite a few “for sale” signs around the roads.

There was definitely a sense of neighbourliness in the area in terms of respect for each other and support in times of need. However, there was also a sense of “disconnectedness”. Very little interaction between neighbours seemed to take place on a daily basis. Apart from the GAA I did not interview anybody who was a volunteer or a member of a local group. The first person I interviewed had moved into the area on her marriage and did not know where some of the neighbours actually lived. One lady whose husband died two years previously spoke of the great support she had from neighbours at the time of the death. However, since then she feels totally cut off as she has nowhere to go to socialise as a single person except the pub where she just could not see herself going. Neighbours do not call and she feels unable to call to others. Her grief was still very evident and a sense of hopelessness was present.

The level of sickness people talked about during the interviews also struck me. A lady with multiple sclerosis talked about her illness. I could sense a real loneliness in her voice especially when she seemed to mourn the loss of the younger generation. She said there may be more houses but there are not as many young people in them. It was at this stage I looked over the surveys and noticed that the younger people were in fact not living in the area. They either had left or were commuting on a daily or weekly basis. I visited another lady who suffered from severe backache. When I asked how often she interacted with her neighbours she raised her arms towards the window and the green fields and asked “What neighbours?”. Isolation, illness. If you drove through this area on a Sunday afternoon you would fall in love with it. But if you lived in it I wonder how much you would feel a part of it.

A snapshot of a vanishing rural lifestyle: {Winter 2003}

This is a brief description of my experiences of carrying out my rural household survey in Southeast Westmeath. It is a very rural area, mostly made up of unspoiled farmland, still unaffected by the building boom, although relatively close to the main Dublin to Galway route. It was a typical Irish village with a church, school and community hall of which the local people were very proud. Almost every householder participated in local activities.

I found the people I surveyed to be most kind and decent people who were extremely helpful. In all cases I was invited into their homes and given a cup of tea in a very traditional manner. I was never asked to show my identification. They were very trusting of strangers despite the media warnings to the contrary. My observations were mostly of happy content people who were very proud of the area in which they lived although this was sprinkled with a degree of loneliness and isolation, some aspects of which were particularly sad. In one instance down a long lane- way a farmer living on his own invited me into his home in order to carry out the survey. He apologised for any untidiness in the house but explained that his mother had died. I sympathised with him presuming it was in the recent past. I later discovered that his mother had died thirteen years previously. When I asked him the question "Had he identified a successor?". He said he had not and a bewildered look came over him, as if it had only dawned on him that he was in a time-warp. His life was completely taken up maintaining things as they were but he did not seem to know for what.

When asked what they liked about living in the area almost all respondents said they enjoyed the peace and quite of the countryside and the fact that it was remote. Ironically it was the same remoteness that was the greatest cause for complaint, e.g. the distance from various amenities. In general the people were very reluctant to complain. In one house that I surveyed there were two elderly brothers who sat smoking their pipes, one on each side of an old black Stanley range, all three puffing equally. As a result it was a smoke filled kitchen I thought it comical that when I asked what they liked most about living in the area, they said, "it was a clean environment". They also give me several other positives in answers to my questions, even though they were living in a cottage that was built in the seventeen hundreds. It had no running water and was without all other modern conveniences. They could not give me any negatives when pressed on the issue. They told me they would like more Irish music in the locality. Two happy men!

In general I found the people to be looking forward to the future although concerned about the changes taking place in farming. In all cases farmers were opting for part-time farming for their families and did not see full-time farming as an option going forward. The people I surveyed were very attached to their roots. Even in their pastimes, they reflected on their country way of life; their involvement in game clubs, the breaking and training of horses and the breeding of greyhounds. Their passion for the Gaelic games showed a people steeped in the culture of their area.

A snapshot of a vanishing rural lifestyle: {Winter 2003}

I surveyed 20 households randomly selected area in the North Midlands. Based on the adage that “a man’s home is his castle” I was conscious that when you knock at someone’s door, regardless of whether you know that person or not, you are requesting permission to enter their world and it is within their power to accept you in or to leave you on the outside. The welcome I got from respondents was equally split between those who were quite willing to accept me into their world and those who gave the impression that they might have preferred to keep me on the outside.

The top of my list had to be the household of a very elderly couple who were just sitting down to dinner when I knocked at the door. I apologised for interrupting their mealtime indicating that I wouldn’t stay long. “You can stay the whole day if you like” the elderly man said! It transpired that this elderly couple (she was 89 and he 91) did not attend a senior citizens club and had only occasional contact with neighbours. This lack of contact with the outside world didn’t deter them from asking me as many questions as I had asked them (some questions too personal to include on any survey!). I completed my interview at a leisurely pace and could have stayed a lot longer. I bid them goodbye and let myself out. It struck me how trusting they were as I walked to their front door. The lack of security measures at the house was glaringly obvious, a situation not helped by the fact that both occupants were hard of hearing. All of the elderly people I visited were just as chatty and curious as this couple. All were only too delighted to tell me all about their aches and pains, their grandchildren and, of course, their favourite programmes on TV. Croppers on Coronation Street, and Marty and Mary on Open House were as much, if not more, a part of their lives as were their families or neighbours.

The elderly respondents and farmers were available during the day but I found after 6 o’clock the best time to get other respondents at home. However, visiting at this time of evening presents its own difficulties. I felt I was intruding on the domestic ritual of evening meals, homework and, of course TV viewing time! It was interesting to note though that most of these respondents stated “Lack of Time” when asked if they were involved in any groups or organisations. I increasingly felt like an “Agony Aunt” listening to peoples’ justifications for not using the local place of worship, local doctor or local bank. Most of these people worked outside the area and, as one lady pointed out to me, she doesn’t see her house in the daylight during the winter months!

My feelings as I drove away from the area on the last day were about the ways that rural Ireland has changed beyond recognition. Whereas in the past rural areas have been characterised by close knit communities made up of interdependent units the trend nowadays seems to be characterised by those who live by the “Urban Living with Space” ideal – the people who have no time or little interest to talk or interact with their neighbours and think rural development is for others. In the words of Gertrude Stein (1948)¹ “A house in the country is not the same as a country house”.

¹ Stein, G. “*Blood on the Dining Room Floor*” Banyan Press, 1948

A snapshot of a vanishing rural lifestyle: {Winter 2003}

The allocated rural area was totally unknown to me and appeared to be so far away. Knowing how absolutely dreadful I am with reading maps, I felt I was sure to get lost. With the able assistance of my teenage son I consulted the map and, thankfully, he located the area. I was heading to South Meath.

I made contact with the local Curate who very kindly (and speedily) provided me with an introduction to a local community activist. This gentleman agreed to take time to meet me at his house. After a chat he offered assistance. He delivered the notices and put me in contact with a friend who lived in the second town-land. This man was just as accommodating. The icing on the cake was when my first contact agreed to take me around to show me the various houses I would be visiting.

There were nine houses in the first town-land, 6 of which were labourer's cottages built in the 1950's. Most of these had undergone some form of renovation. All were beautifully maintained. In addition, there was an old country house, which originally was used for farm labourers but had now been converted into a private residence for the new owner. The second town-land was much larger and had 24 houses. There was quite a mix of housing in the area. An old farm-house which added great character to the area, a number of houses which I estimate were built from the mid seventies onwards, a few recently constructed houses and some local authority houses. Again the whole area was very well maintained.

It would be hard to meet a more accommodating group of people. The households welcomed me with such amazing warmth it will remain in my memory for a long time. These were people justifiably proud of their area and the amenities in it. They were most open in their comments and provided me with many refreshments and on one occasion a most delicious meal. In relation to local interaction, the majority spoke regularly with their neighbours and many socialised with their neighbours on a weekly basis.

The households highlighted many reasons why they enjoyed living in a rural area. Among them being the peace and quiet, the lack of pollution, nature, the views and the quality of life. Some were concerned about a lack of amenities and the isolation. But quite a number perceived that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. The majority enjoyed the close knit community in which they resided and there was quite a mixed response to the issue of allowing development to take place purely for locals or for anyone who wished to build in the area. Interestingly a number of those who had relocated to the area were fussy about allowing others relocate!

A number of households remain in my memory. However there is one that really stands out. As I drove around the second town-land I noticed a light coming from a house at the top of a long garden. Curiosity got the better of me and, in the pitch dark I approached the house, walking up a long unlit drive way as I could not get the car through the gate. I was greeted by two gentlemen who invited me into their home. The house was decorated in a style akin to the 1950's yet one of the brothers had recently purchased a computer and was really looking forward to surfing the net!

A snapshot of a vanishing rural lifestyle: {Winter 2003}

Leitrim is a county that I have seldom visited. I was delighted to be given the opportunity to carry out the interviews in this unexplored county.

On a bright cloudy November Sunday morning I left my home and headed for East Leitrim. As I drove I wondered to myself what would the people be like and would they be keen to see me on a Sunday afternoon. Just before lunchtime I reached my destination. For a while I looked at the beautiful mountains all around and could see some small houses hidden within. Little did I know that I would be visiting those same houses? I soon realized I was in the heart of rural Ireland.

Like all Irish men I headed straight for the pub to ask for directions but more urgently to use the 'bathroom'. I started to ask the pub owner some questions about the area and she answered them with more questions. It wasn't long until I got a feel of the area by travelling around it and from what the people were telling me. I saw no green fields but many fields of rushes and heather. I saw no dairy farms, no mushroom or poultry farms. I saw many sheep. I met only part-time farmers who were trying to do as many farm jobs as possible on the Sunday afternoon. I saw very happy, easy-going people who were contented. I saw a lot of retired elderly people who were growing old in the area they loved. I saw some single elderly men. I saw no factories or enterprise centres. I saw the church, shop, post office, and the pub.

The welcome to me as a stranger was heart warming. Even though some people were in a hurry they still found time to talk with me. Their likes of the area included the freedom, quietness, good neighbours, nice to bring children up in; fresh air, knowing everybody. These far outweighed any dislikes. Dislikes were the lack of amenities and isolation for children.

The area could be divided in two – the village and the mountain. The mountain's inhabitants were mainly older single people whereas in the village the younger families lived. Those on the mountain worked the very poor land on a part-time basis. The village was simple – a pub and a few houses. A family run garage was the main business in the village.

On leaving the area I felt some sympathy for it as I knew it would take a lot of work to develop it and to make it sustainable into the future. Not enough young people are remaining in the area to maintain enthusiasm and life in it.

It is an area of tremendous beauty and scenery. On my second day of travelling I drove a few miles up the mountain to one of the farming dwellers. After completing the interview I got up and looked out the window. There was a valley below of beauty and tranquillity – a view I will never forget. I commented to the single farmer about his great view. His reply was 'it's not much good if you're hungry'

A snapshot of a vanishing rural lifestyle: {Winter 2003}

The allocated rural area was in East Offaly on the Laois border about 50 miles west of Dublin. From the outset I was enthusiastic about the project as I love research but a little apprehensive as to what kind of reception I was going to get on the doorstep where the questionnaire could take anything from 30 minutes to an hour.

I am glad to report that my fears were unfounded. In fact the warmth and friendliness of the people and their willingness to share information surprised me. The condition of their houses and surrounding gardens were, by and large, in mint condition with one or two exceptions. All respondents loved living in the countryside and saw no disadvantage apart from some minor irritants, like distance from shops or playgrounds for children. I only met one Dublin woman 'born and bred' who loved the area and the only disadvantage she saw was that too many "Dubs" were moving into the area and creating a "Dublin community" in the country. The only depressing aspect of this survey was a certain despondency among farmers about the future of farming.

Everyone I interviewed put a high price on the neighbourliness of the locals. The only area of disagreement (but not among the neighbours) was on whether they would build houses for local families or anybody on demand. On the one hand you had people who bought a site to build. On the other hand you had farmers who needed the bit of extra cash. So it was difficult to get an impartial view as everybody had their own agenda.

Approximately half the people in the survey had an active voluntary involvement in the community, mostly in the form of sport, GAA in particular. We now live in the era of the internet. It is often claimed that people don't want to know their neighbours. I found quite the opposite.

I met a small farmer in what outwardly appeared to be in very poor circumstances and who freely admitted that most of her income came from farm-assist, but whose whole ambition in life, apart from educating her two daughters, was to pass the farm intact on to the next generation. The next man I met was a French national who loved the sight of animals in the fields when he got up in the mornings. I met a young farmer in his late twenties farming 250 acres with his degree in agriculture who had diversified into buying yearling race horses and selling them as two year old's in order to supplement his farm income. I met a retired engineer who did his first parachute jump at the age of sixty-nine and continues to tandem jump at the age of seventy-nine. I met Liam, the happiest person that I interviewed. He had suffered from ME for seven years and reckoned that he was cured about 2 months ago.

I was warned by the neighbours not to approach the next man who was described as a "contrary bachelor" as I might get a cool reception, or even worse. The challenge was too much to resist. Much to my surprise I got a very warm welcome and he jokingly said towards the end of the interviews that his only dislike about the area was people doing surveys. As I was leaving he said you're a very lucky man, and I said why? Because he said " *You're the only person who ever got in by my dog without being bit*". It subsequently transpired he had no dog.

A snapshot of a vanishing rural lifestyle: {Winter 2003}

The area I was given was in the North Midlands. I planned to do half of the survey in one day and complete it the following week. While driving into the area I was struck by the natural beauty, the lake and the autumnal colours of the trees. Some of the people lived down lane-ways off narrow roads and lane-ways that had grass growing in the centre of them. I had a sense of entering an area that had been barely disturbed by time. My visit to the first household seemed to compound this feeling, as it was a household situated at the end of a lane-way and the only occupant was an elderly woman. She was delighted to have someone call on her, and was most welcoming. She trusted me completely and invited me in even before I had finished explaining what I was doing. I explained to her the dangers of inviting a stranger into her home and she assured me I was ok as she felt she would know by the look of me if I were not safe. During the course of the survey a neighbour dropped in, he had seen the strange car and was checking to see the lady was all right. I found this strong community spirit present throughout the survey though many people were not involved in community organisations. I found I spent a lot more time in each house than I had anticipated, with the result the survey took four days instead of the two I had allowed.

One household I visited was like stepping back in time. There was a dog sitting in one of the chairs and numerous cats everywhere sitting on the couch and one was sitting on the windowsill next to the table. The kitchen was very dark and you had the feeling of not knowing what was going to jump out from any of the dark corners. There was a very old couple living there and the man was without question the head of the house. Even when I was trying to make conversation with the woman the man answered. Of all the houses I visited I felt this was one that had not changed since the day the couple were married. The couple had no children and had no interest in how the area would develop as they felt they had lived their life and were just waiting until they were called to the next world.

Each household was unique but running through the whole community was a sense of belonging to their area and being proud of who they were and the whole area surrounding them. People had to think really hard about things they disliked about their area and most found they could not find three things they disliked. There were a few households with young children and these couples had made a definite decision to live in the country. They were happy to commute to work and felt any inconvenience was well worth it as they felt they were getting a much better quality of life by living in rural Ireland.

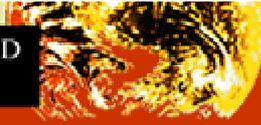
As I left this area I felt that I'd had a snapshot of people suspended in time. They seemed to think nothing would change and things would remain as they are at present. I felt this area would change over perhaps the next ten years as the natural life cycle took place. There is a danger that local people are too complacent and leave planning development up to others. Then they can do is object. It is hard to project what the future holds for this area, as I did not come across individuals involved in stimulating development. This is where discussion needs to take place to ensure that any development is in tune with the natural local environment and the needs of the people.

A snapshot of a vanishing rural lifestyle: {Winter 2003}

This area is in north Monaghan situated a number of miles from a town and over four miles from the nearest village. As I turned into the area I noticed that the road surfaces had been neglected, and were potholed and narrow. The houses were mixed. Some were traditional old farm-houses but the majority were newly built houses within the last ten years. Most of the land in the area seemed to be used to its capacity whether it was stock or crops. At the beginning I was very nervous but people were very nice and, in most cases, made me welcome.

What I did find is that the people in this area lived very busy lives and you really have to fit a visit into half an hour to get honest answers. The majority of the people in the area loved the peace and quiet, the freedom for the children, being beside their families and the close-knit community that they had. Many had no dislikes but commented on the lack of proper health care, lack of jobs for the younger generation and also lack of leisure facilities within the area.

Most of the people interviewed noted that traditional farming is a thing of the past, the younger generation have no interest and unless they specialise or intend to diversify into other means of income the small farmer will not exist in the next ten years. They noted that more industry was needed within the area to attract the younger generation back into the area again. My overall impression of the area was that it was rich in community spirit and the people had a love for the area and its environs.



Rural Readings;

To register to receive Rural Readings

Email: rural.readings@nuim.ie

Post to: Department of Adult & Community Education, NUI, Maynooth, Co Kildare

Frequency; Two Issues per year

Cost; Free to NUIM students

Information

For information on NUIM courses visit <http://admissions.nuim.ie/subjects/>

For information on NUIM Adult Education courses visit

<http://adulthoodeducation.nuim.ie/>

For information on NUIM Adult Education Rural Development courses visit

<http://www.v-learn.ie/>

Contributions welcome to rural.readings@nuim.ie

