Between Memory and History: Irish Pubs as Sites of Memory and Invention

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Abstract

The pub has been at the centre of Irish culture and identity for at least two centuries, has become a pillar of the Irish tourism "product," and an export commodity as thousands of themed "Irish pubs" have been established across the world in the last number of decades, supplementing existing establishments that have served the global Irish community. This paper draws on key themes from the diverse material in our upcoming academic volume on the Irish pub, to be published by Cork University Press, later in 2024. The book brings together contributions from scholars of history, sociology, design, literature, culinary arts and music to explore the literary, visual, organisational, legal and social invention and reinvention of the "Irish pub" over many centuries. While the memory of the "traditional pub" is often evoked, for example in popular coffee table books, cinema and advertising, the Irish pub has always had a dynamic presence. Largely "invented" in the eighteenth century, it has been shaped by regulation, legislation, transport technology and the development of urban and rural centres. It has had a central role in Irish life, generating both community and difference. This centrality has been evoked in literary expressions: from drama to poetry and novels – from Seán O'Casey and Brendan Behan to, more recently, Louise Kennedy and Paul Murray. This has been the case for both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. The continuing literary (and associated visual) heritage feeds into the mythological image of the pub, so successfully packaged for export by major corporations such as Diageo, as well as underpinning the pub as a significant tourist attraction. The paper also addresses aspects of the pub and violence: it is often a place of trauma as well as community. What of the future? While the overall number of pubs continues to decline, this trend hides a number of significant variables, including a differential decline between rural and urban areas, a major shift into the food business, changing licensing laws, and consolidation and emergence of major pub "chains." The future of the pub will be significantly shaped by technological developments, regulatory environments, continued social and demographic change and consumer tastes. The paper will conclude with some speculations as to the future shape of the Irish pub: and the potential to invent new traditions and memories.

Keywords

Public house; alcohol; Ireland; literature; authenticity

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Introduction: Traces, Trauma and Tradition

In the summer of 2023, the Vintners' Federation of Ireland [VFI], one of Ireland's representative bodies for the licensed trade, made a submission to the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht for the Irish pub to be placed on the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Ireland.[1] This is an initial step in attaining broader UNESCO heritage status – where it could join other distinctive aspects of Irish cultural patrimony that include uilleann piping, hurling, Irish harping and falconry – with dry stone walling the current (2023-24) candidate.[2]

The VFI submission seeks formal international recognition of the phenomenon of the Irish pub – a designation likely to be more symbolic than of practical significance. But it also reflects the idea that the Irish pub is in existential peril. According to the *Guardian* newspaper, pubs in Ireland have "never been at greater risk."[3] Much of this recent discourse can be traced to the latest in a series of reports compiled by Dublin City University economist Anthony Foley, who has conducted much work funded by Ireland's influential drinks industry. Writing for the sectoral body Drinks Industry Ireland in 2023,[4] Foley has noted that since 2005, 1,829 - or one in five – pubs in Ireland have closed, albeit that around 7000 remain.[5]

This phenomenon is reflected in the experience of one of the authors. His local small rural town has seen a reduction in the number of active pubs from eleven to four and a half [6] over a period of two decades. Similarly, many rural roadside pubs

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[1] Una Mulally, "Since 2005 nearly 2000 Irish pubs have closed. It's time to declare them a cultural asset." *Irish Times,* 22 January 2024. https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/2024/01/22/una-mullally-why-dont-we-declare-our-pubs-a-cultural-asset/

[2] https://ich.unesco.org/en/state/ireland-IE

[3] Vic O'Sullivan, "Six of Ireland's best traditional pubs." *Guardian*, 16 March 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2023/mar/16/six-of-irelands-best-traditional-pubs

[4] Anthony Foley, *The Irish Pub: Supporting our Communities. A Drinks Industry Group of Ireland Report*. Dublin: DIGI, 2023. https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/39429/1/The-Irish-Pub-Supporting-Our-Communities2023.pdf

[5] Notwithstanding this gloomy prognosis, the Health Research Board's periodic survey of alcohol-related harm in Ireland notes that Ireland has the third highest number of pubs per capita in the OECD (after Slovakia and Hungary) and that three quarters of Ireland's population lives with just 300m of a licensed premises (which could be bar, pub or off-license). See Anne Doyle, Deidre Mongan and Brian Galvin (2024) *Alcohol: Availability, Affordability, Related Harm, and Policy in Ireland*. HRB Overview Series 13. Dublin: Health Research Board, 51-53. https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/40465

[6] The "half pub" now has highly restricted opening hours, is strictly cash only, and has a choice of just four beers on tap. See G. Tipton on Heraghty's pub, Manorhamilton in "From pints to property and beyond: Irish shops are multitasking to make ends meet" *Irish Times,* 06 April 2024. https://www.irishtimes.com/life-style/2024/04/06/from-pints-to-property-and-beyond-irish-shops-are-multitasking-to-make-ends-meet/

have ceased to function, as wider, faster roads, better vehicles, town and village bypasses and drink driving legislation have rendered them obsolete. Many significant country towns have seen well-known pubs disappear from their streetscapes, leaving gaps in the urban fabric that are not always filled by other users.[7]

Cultural change is often experienced as traumatic - even when a person is not directly affected. The loss of pubs, especially but not only in rural areas of Ireland, can be seen as an attack on traditional ways of living. This has resonances when so many other aspects of life can be perceived to be under threat, from the "traditional family," recently debated in the context of a constitutional referendum, to "traditional farming practices" – such as turf-cutting – that are being challenged by climate breakdown.

There has been a substantial industry in the creation and celebration of the "traditional" Irish pub, by way of glossy coffee table books; films and television series; podcasts and blogs; memoir and travelogue; to the physical construction of faux Irish pubs for export across the world.[8] These cultural expressions have combined to create and sustain a particular image of the Irish pub that has come to form both a potent cultural imaginary and a lucrative commodity for tourism, export and marketing.

Surprisingly, for such a central and ubiquitous institution, the Irish pub has not been subjected to sustained academic analysis. The authors of this paper are currently finalising an edited volume on the Irish Pub[9] and its invention and reinvention within Irish culture. The book draws on literary, sociological, design history, musicological and psychological perspectives, amongst others. We hope it may help scholars of food and drink to frame broader and more nuanced responses

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[7] "This building is of a type that was, until recently, a ubiquitous feature of the streetscapes of small Irish towns and villages but is now becoming increasingly rare due to insensitive alteration and\or demolition." McGonagle's Bar, Market Place, Churchland Quarters, Carndonagh, Donegal. National Inventory of Architectural Heritage. https://www.buildingsofireland.ie/buildings-search/building/40805029/mcgonagles-bar-market-place-churchland-quarters-carndonagh-co-donegal

[8] We could cite many sources here, but a selection could include: James Fennell and Turtle Bunbury, *The Irish pub*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2008; *The Irish Pub*, film 2013, dir. Alex Fegan; *Ireland's Perfect Pub*, RTE TV, 2023; publin.ie [podcast], https://www.thedublinpublopedia.com/ blog (to be fair, neither the blog nor podcast aim to perpetuate the "traditional" notion of the pub); Bill Barich, *A Pint of Plain: Tradition, Change and the Fate of the Irish Pub*, London: Bloomsbury, 2009; Pete McCarthy, *McCarthy's Bar: A Journey of Discovery in Ireland*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000; Stephen Brown & Anthony Patterson "Knick-knack Paddy-whack, give a pub a theme." *Journal of Marketing Management,* 16, no. 6 (2000): 647-662, DOI: 10.1362/026725700785045903

[9] Cork University Press, 2024 forthcoming

to the perceived decline of the pub (a phenomenon not unique to Ireland[10]), what this might mean for Irish culture and what new social patterns and forms may be emergent in helping to reinvent this aspect of Irish social life. By drawing on some of the contributions to this volume, we explore here some aspects of the significance of the Irish pub in history and cultural memory.[11] How has the pub evolved in history and how do we hope to remember the pubs in the future? To briefly explore these questions, we place the Irish pub within the thematic context of this year's Dublin Gastronomy Symposium: *Traces, Trauma and Tradition.*

Traces: the literary life and artistic imagination of the Irish pub

The pub occupies a significant place in Irish literary life and imagination. Leopold Bloom in Joyce's *Ulysses* muses that you couldn't cross Dublin without passing a pub, while Brendan Behan famously declared himself a "drinker with a writing problem." Irish writing's inextricable connection to the pub, whether in shaping the writer's life or their writing, is an important site for the invention and reinvention of the pub. (Re-)invention requires imagination; the pub fosters imagination and is itself re-imaginable through language and stories. If Brendan Behan has contributed to the solidifying of a stereotypical "staged, drunk Irishman," propped against the bar of the Palace Bar or McDaid's, other writers have shown how the pub has been a space of contestation and negotiation.

Nicholas Grene[12] analyses short stories set in pubs by James Joyce, John McGahern, Claire Keegan and Kevin Barry, that portray the pub-goers" desperation, frustration and impotence and the different ways in which language expresses or fails to express what they feel. In the stories, the pub is a place of unresolved and inexpressible feelings. James Little takes a feminist approach in literary criticism, providing us with close readings of Paula Meehan's poetry. From Meehan's declaration of herself as a public poet, Little looks at how her poetry produces a "counter-public sphere," reconfiguring the quintessential Irish public sphere – the pub – into a place where we hear the voices of traditionally marginalised children

[10] The pub/tavern has been noted to be in decline in (at least) Britain, Australia, the Netherlands and the US.

[11] The title as well as the concept here is drawing on Pierre Nora's work, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24. Nora claims that there are "lieux de memoire" (sites of memory) because there are no longer "millieux de memoire" (real environments of memory). Using these concepts, we analyse how the pubs have been constructed in cultural memory and how they still (or no longer) function as real environments of memory.

[12] In the volume under consideration

and women.[13] In the process, her poems expose the many social ("public") issues in Ireland, including gender violence and addiction.

Literary texts themselves can be a form of performance and intervention. Dramatic representations and theatrical performances set in pubs range from J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), set in a shebeen in the West, via John B. Keane's *The Field* (1965) to more recent productions of Conor McPherson's *The Weir* (1997). Most quintessentially, Roddy Doyle's pub-set play *Two Pints* was toured nationally to pubs across Ireland in 2017 and presented on the Abbey stage in 2018. There is well over one hundred years of pub drama history: the pub itself is a performative space full of rich dialogue and storytelling. Irish playwrights have appropriated the pub, channelling pub language into dramatic form, which has become a unique trademark of Irish theatre.

Pubs have also influenced Irish visual culture, not least in terms of our built environment. Irish pubs contribute significantly to our urban streetscapes, rural towns and villages and our roadsides. They have been all but ignored in writing about architecture: perhaps as they are so ubiquitous and everyday. But their exteriors and interiors are indeed distinctive. From the outside, the classic Irish pub shares much with the traditional shop front, signified by the name above the door (a residue of early licensing requirements) and design features such as mullioned windows, cornice, entablature, corbels, fluting and plinths[14], instantly recognisable on many "Irish pub" posters and prints.[15] Meanwhile, internal pub design has been codified and packaged for both export and domestic markets by companies such as the Irish Pub Company.

The Irish pub is a global cultural phenomenon, whether as an exportable commodity or a refuge for millions of the Irish diaspora across the globe. The ubiquitous faux Irish pub is an obvious target for criticism and critique[16] but, in the book, Tracey Dalton takes a more nuanced approach as she deconstructs the

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[13] Historically marginalised both in Irish history and in the physical space of the pub itself.

[14] Marion McGarry, "Why Ireland's older pubs are part of our cultural heritage." *RTE Brainstorm*. 19 August 2021. https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2021/0316/1204062-ireland-pubs-decor-interiors-heritage/; Seán Rothery, *The Shops of Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1978).

[15] See, for example, https://jamartfactory.com/product-tag/pubs-of-ireland/

[16] See, for example, previously cited Bill Barich and Brown & Patterson. Also, Bill Grantham "Craic in a box: Commodifying and exporting the Irish pub," *Continuum* 23, no. 2 (2009): 257-267; Mark McGovern "The 'Craic' Market: Irish theme bars and the commodification of Irishness in contemporary Britain," *Irish Journal of Sociology*, vol.11, no. 2 (2002): 83. The conscious commodification of pub design has long been a lament of pub traditionalists, perhaps most famously in George Orwell's 1943 essay "The moon under water." https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/the-moon-under-water

strategies employed by the "Guinness Irish Pub Concept': the typologies, designs and methodologies developed by McNally Design/Irish Pub Company and Guinness. Rather than a critique from the outside, Dalton, as a design insider, presents us with the creativity and effort of those involved in the successful (re-)invention of the pre-packaged Irish pub. The design process involves both a close study of existing pubs in Ireland, as well as a reimagining of the essence of the pub for the international market: where "Irish pubs" can be found from Kathmandu to Macau. The outcome can take a fantasy form, such as the "Gaelic" pub, an amalgam of various Celtic motifs (such as those found in the music of Enya and other globally distributed New Age/ "Celtic" commodities) or a more "authentic" construction, such as the "Victorian Dublin" pub, modelled on real and celebrated city centre hostelries such as the Long Hall or the Stag's Head.

Trauma: pubs, crime and violence

Irish pubs can be a place of both positive and negative experiences. Their role as community centres, "third places," business hubs and meeting facilities are well-known and documented.[17] But pubs can also provide a focal point for a potentially toxic mix of alcohol, violence and masculinity. As places where people congregate, often on a socially differentiated basis, they can attract attacks on individuals or communities. And while pubs are famously locations for the conduct of business, that business can sometimes be of a criminal nature.

In the popular 2022-23 RTE TV crime drama *Kin*, the pub is a setting for murder and mayhem, as well as criminal plotting. In the first series, a key character is assassinated in Frank Ryan's bar in Smithfield, Dublin 7, while much of the second series, including a bloody finale, is filmed at the (regrettably now closed) real-life Furry Bog pub in Whitechurch, Dublin 16. The fictional representation of crime drama reflects a reality of shootings, stabbings, punch-ups and other fatal violence in various Irish pubs, past and present, comprehensively listed on the *Dying for a pint*[18] blog. The compiler of the blog estimates that "since the regularisation of the licensed trade in the eighteenth century there have been over 650 reported violent fatalities in the pubs of Ireland": consequently, the site lists numerous examples of deaths and assaults as a consequence of land rows, gangland feuds, robberies, domestic conflicts, terrorist attacks and other examples of violence. As part of the "night-time economy" pubs continue to be locations for violence that ranges from

[17] The chapter by Perry Share in the volume under consideration outlines the sociological and anthropological analysis of pubs within Irish communities. See also Perry Share, Mary P. Corcoran and Brian Conway, *A Sociology of Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2012), 311-321.

[18] https://dyingforapint.blogspot.com/

sexual harassment to drunken assault to murder.[19] Unsurprisingly, this is not an aspect of Irish pub life that is celebrated in tourism promotional materials. But it has been central to debates around reform of the alcohol licensing laws in Ireland, particularly in terms of plans to extend opening hours to more "European" norms.[20]

Of note in the Irish context has been the role of pubs in the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland. Pub locations such as Greysteel, Ballykelly and Loughinisland remain emblematic of some of the worst atrocities of the war in Northern Ireland, as well as a source of continuing trauma for the communities involved. At a more mundane level is the contested place of the pub in a community that remains significantly divided by religion and politics. This has found expression in recent novels set in the North of Ireland, including the Booker-prize winning *Milkman* by Anna Burns (2018), *Close to Home* by Michael Magee (2023) and, perhaps most vividly, in *Trespasses* by Louise Kennedy (2022). In all these novels, the pub strongly reflects a particular community identity and can thus act as a place of comfort or of threat, dependent on one's own particular affiliations, or perceived affiliations.

Similarly, writer and researcher Eli Davies[21], recounts her various experiences of Northern Irish pubs:

> In most Belfast city centre pubs these days, […] you are probably on much safer ground asking – and answering … questions [about identity] than you would have been in 1987. But those echoes of violence are still there, and my encounter that night made me think more about the nature of the pub in the North of Ireland and to question some of what I had taken for granted about the pub as a space. I did not realise at the time, but the bar I was in was the target of loyalist violence during the Troubles, when it was bombed by the Ulster Volunteer Force in May 1974, an attack which killed five people, with another dying from his injuries several days later. This was part of a spate of loyalist attacks on Catholic nationalist spaces in the wake of the Sunningdale power-sharing agreement.

During this period, three additional assaults on Catholic-owned pubs in Belfast and Armagh resulted in the death of six civilians, underlining the frequent targeting of pubs in both England and Ireland throughout the conflict. Pubs were also the sites of some of the conflict's most devastating and infamous acts of paramilitary violence: the 1971 McGurk's bar bombing, a UVF [Ulster Volunteer Force] attack that claimed

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[19] O'Brien, O., Joanna Purdy and Helen McAvoy, *Alcohol-related Harms in Nightlife Settings on the Island of Ireland*. Dublin/Belfast: Institute of Public Health, 2021. https://www.publichealth.ie/reports/alcohol-related-harms-nightlife-settings-island-ireland.

[20] "Minister McEntee to reform Ireland's antiquated licensing laws" *Merrion Street* [Irish government information service] 25 October 2022. https://merrionstreet.ie/en/news-room/news/minister_mcentee_to_reform_irelands_antiquated_licensing_laws.175068.shortcut.html

[21] In the volume under consideration

fifteen Catholic lives; the 1993 Greysteel massacre where UDA members opened fire at a Halloween party, resulting in eight civilian deaths; and the Ballykelly bombing where the INLA targeted a British soldiers' pub, killing seventeen people. Outside Northern Ireland, Irish pubs also faced violence during the Troubles, such as the 1975 UDA attack on London's Biddy Mulligans, the setting for Edna O'Brien's short story "The Shovel Kings," and the infamous Birmingham and Guildford pub bombings, wrongly attributed to the Provisional IRA's "Mainland Campaign," leading to wrongful convictions and prolonged justice campaigns.

Davies refers to several Northern Irish writers who talk about pubs in their responses to the ongoing violence. For example, Ciaran Carson's 1987 poem, "Belfast Confetti," which lent its title to his 1989 compilation of poetry and prose, features several poems that confront the tangible danger associated with socialising over drinks. Here are a few lines in "Last Orders':

> a penny drops: how simple it would be for someone
> Like ourselves to walk in and blow the whole place, and
> ourselves, to Kingdom Come.

In "Barfly," the politically tense geography of Belfast's drinking establishments is highlighted:

> Maybe you can figure it, why The Crown and Shamrock and
> The Rose and Crown
> Are at opposite ends of the town

Actual violence occurs in this poem – "from the horse's mouth" – rather than just its threat, again with the imagery of punctuation. "Two punters walk in" and "punctuate the lunchtime menu."

Similarly, as a chapter (Moonyoung Hong's work on pubs and theatres) in the book under consideration argues, the tropes of pub dramas – the storytelling, performances, monologues – take on a different meaning and resonance in the context of Northern Irish politics, highlighting the complexities and tensions that underpin the region's historical struggles, while engaging with themes of identity, family and belonging. In Owen McCafferty's play *Quietly* (2012), Ian and Jimmy meet in the pub to discuss an event from their teenage years when Ian, a member of the UVF, threw a bomb into the pub, killing Jimmy's father who was watching a football match. The pub is a setting scarred by its past and memories, but the play hints at the possibility of reconciliation and peace through these characters. The story of pub bombings during the Troubles would have been familiar to the people in Northern Ireland, just as the pub in *Quietly* reflects these real conflicts.

The setting of *Quietly* was modelled on the original design and décor of the Rose and Crown Bar that McCafferty's father regularly visited. Like many pubs in Belfast, it was reduced to a charnel house when in 1974 the UVF bombed it in a sectarian

attack. In the 1971 McGurk's bar bombing, families had to suffer from police and government officials attempting to cover up the incident, with the RUC misinforming the public that it was an accident caused by the IRA. In 2011, John McGurk, a victim in this case, describes how he confronted the man who killed his family. The murderer kept refusing to talk about any details of the incident and could only offer an apology for what he had done. Nothing much had progressed politically and the pub on stage replicates this political reality that is still ongoing.

Mark Phelan[22] explains that the McCafferty play focuses on "post-conflict" Northern Ireland, dealing with the aftermath of violence rather than the acts themselves. The ordinary pub space in the theatre provides an alternative way to address the political stalemate that remains unresolved in the broader government sphere. The audience revisits the pub as a site of memory, attempting to address past tragedies as a lived experience. The debate within the play as to whether the reconciliation process should proceed in private or public becomes important, as it addresses how to deal with a past that is personal and yet political. The play's audience, as well as the characters, become part of the "peace process," making the performance a public occasion as they become witnesses to the whole scene.

The trauma of the Troubles and of broader patterns of division in the north of Ireland are also confronted by the Array artists' collective in their 2021 Turner prize winning installation *The Druthaib's Ball*.[23] The installation features an imagined *síbín* or unlicensed drinking establishment, of a type common in urban areas of the North during the Troubles. Banners and posters reflective of politics and social movements, and expressions of Ireland's mythic past, surround a commonplace pub setting. The aim is to challenge the sectarian geography of the north – expressed, as outlined, in its institutions including pubs. It is also to confront the collective trauma of northern Irish society and to agitate for change, for example in the areas of reproductive rights and mental health services. It makes use of the traditional setting of the pub to raise urgent contemporary issues for Irish society.[24]

Tradition: (Re-)writing history?

As the "Guinness Irish Pub Concept," Roddy Doyle's plays and novels, or the contested meanings of pubs in the North of Ireland suggest, pubs have been and

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[22] Mark Phelan, "From Troubles to post-conflict theatre in Northern Ireland," in *The Oxford handbook of Modern Irish Theatre*, ed. Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 372-388.

[23] "Array Collective Win Turner Prize 2021." Tate Gallery, 1 December 2021 [media release] https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/array-collective-win-turner-prize-2021.

[24] Liz Gorny, "Winner Array Collective brings political charge to Turner Prize conversation." *It's nice that* [blog] 8 December 2021 https://www.itsnicethat.com/news/array-collective-turner-prize-art-081221

continue to be packaged, exported and reappropriated, based on selective history. The traditional image of the pub expresses various dimensions of community, belonging and authenticity; however, the so-called "traditional pub" is in fact a relatively recent invention. Historian Elizabeth Malcolm[25] notes that contrary to the idea of a timeless traditional pub, retail drink outlets have always been in a state of flux. Shops selling alcohol have taken many different forms in the past and, reflecting this, they have been known by a variety of names. These include ale or beer houses, taverns, inns, tippling houses, dram shops, tunable houses, tap rooms, vintners, coffee houses, shebeens, spirit-grocers' shops, refreshment rooms, drinking booths, gin palaces, public or lounge bars and hotels. Such names refer to different spaces, often selling different types of alcohol, to different sorts of people, at different times in the past. The licensed pub, as we currently know it, is not the product of a continuous tradition that has evolved seamlessly.

The term "public house" first appeared in the late seventeenth century, but what is now considered the traditional Irish pub, in its legal and physical form, only emerged during the late nineteenth century, having taken over some — although by no means all — of the functions of these earlier liquor retailers. Examining the various liquor licensing laws in 1630s, 1660s, 1790s and 1830s, Malcolm argues that it was the state's active control of the drink shops that has led to this particular invention of the pub. A further aspect of invention (or discursive repression) is the neglected roles of female publicans, rarely mentioned in history books or pub guidebooks. Malcolm excavates their stories from the late mediaeval periods and onwards, challenging the notion of the all-male (and male-produced) pubs.[26]

It might be argued that in some ways the pub acts as a microcosm of Irish life, reflective of both its conformity and diversity. In historiographical and literary terms, the pub has been strongly identified as a masculine stronghold, even a refuge, yet this is challenged by accounts of female agency and participation on both sides of the bar. Women have been and continue to be brewers, pub owners, barpersons, mixologists and pub designers, as well as customers and critical analysts. While some individual female publicans and drink industry entrepreneurs are achieving recognition, and women (as a key market segment) are increasingly represented in alcohol advertising and promotion, the dominant image of the Irish pub remains a staunchly masculine one.

As Malcolm provides us with a fresh insight into the history of the pub, challenging the idea of a traditional pub largely unchanged for centuries, Sam

[25] In the volume under consideration

[26] In the volume under consideration. In another chapter of the book, Tom Spalding and Gwen Scarbough discuss more contemporary aspects of women's experiences on both sides of the bar.

McGrath[27] showcases an alternative oft-neglected history: the central role of certain pubs and bars in the gay social scene in Dublin over a fifty-year period from the founding of the Irish Free State in 1923 until the formation of the first Irish gay rights group in 1973. Again, this aspect of Irish pub history has not attracted much attention but has been highly significant for the formation of LGBQTIA+ identities in Ireland. These private stories themselves constitute a public history, one that deserves serious scholarly exploration.

The increasing cultural diversity in Irish society is beginning to be reflected in pub culture with, for example, several Central European and Brazilian-associated establishments emerging in larger urban centres, as well as a broad variety of LGBTQIA+ friendly pubs. Less positively, the Traveller community continues to experience discrimination in many pub settings, reflecting the broader societal picture.

Pubs are also crucial to the development of music in Ireland, across genres from traditional/folk to rock, electronica, pop and jazz. Bringing together issues of diversity and of musical performance, Katie Young[28] shows how Black-and-Irish and Afro-diasporic musicians have turned some pubs into significant hubs for musical interactions and collaborations. Focusing on musicians and musical collectives in Cork and Galway and their experiences in the pub, Young examines the different musical styles and influences as well as the political dimension of musical activism. For such musicians the public and accessible aspects of the pub facilitate access to performance space; at the same time to add (for example) African musical forms to the repertoire of Irish pub entertainment and artistic expression is an extension of Irish pub tradition into new areas and dimensions, with new audiences and publics.[29]

Conclusion

In Ireland, as small, often family-owned and operated businesses, pubs have shared in the fate of many other similar enterprises: such as hardware shops, newsagents, petrol stations, greengrocers and video stores. Powerful forces of technology, urban planning, consumer tastes and regulation have combined to reduce the attraction of going out to a particular location to consume alcohol and to socialise. In some urban areas, pubs may increasingly become controlled by hospitality corporations and pub

[27] In the volume under consideration

[28] In the volume under consideration

[29] David Knight and Cristina Monteiro identify similar extensions of the "traditional" pub, especially amongst Afro-Caribbean and Indian ("Desi") pubs in their excellent study of London pubs: *Public House: A Cultural and Social History of the London Pub* (London: Open City, 2021).

chains. The Covid19 pandemic of 2020-2022 only served to intensify these trends: for example, hastening many rural publicans into retirement.[30]

Do these economic and organisational shifts, in combination with the increasingly recognised ethnic, cultural and gender diversity, increasingly render the traditional Irish pub an empty signifier? Between the commercialised pub-as-product that appeals to an invented or simulacra of "tradition," and the actual traces and trauma left by the violence committed in some of the pubs, we can question whether pubs can still function as "real environments of memory" and a living tradition, rather than mere "sites." Increasingly, suggests some recent anthropological research, the coffee shop is coming to replace the pub as a site of personal and community interaction, at least during daytime hours.[31] If the role of the pub shrinks towards no more than a semi-staged tourist product, or an element of the alcohol-based "night-time economy," does its "traditional" place at the "heart of the community" disappear?

It is difficult to answer this question. As Malcolm has shown, the Irish pub has always been in a process of invention and reinvention. The current iteration of the pub, or rather the existing diversity of pubs, can be seen as the latest version of this phenomenon. There is no doubt that the "gastropub,"[32] deriving much of its income from food service, is on the rise and the fortune of the traditional "wet pub"[33] looks precarious, particularly as rates of alcohol consumption decline, especially amongst younger Irish people.[34] Further threats come from patterns of urban development: pubs may, as in the UK, succumb to the forces of property developers as they can occupy plum sites for the development of apartment blocks or hotels.[35] New

[30] Jim McCauley examines the past, present and future of rural publicans in his chapter of the book.

[31] Pauline Garvey and Daniel Miller, *Ageing with Smartphones in Ireland: When Life Becomes Craft* (London: UCL Press, 2021); Daniel Miller, *The Good Enough Life*. (Cambridge: Polity 2024). Both studies reference the decline of pubs in the town of "Cuan" (Skerries, Co. Dublin) at the expense of coffee shops and home drinking.

[32] Drinks Industry Ireland "Food-led pubs a growing necessity." July 2018. https://www.drinksindustryireland.ie/food-led-pubs-a-growing-necessity/

[33] A designation for a pub that focuses on sales of drink, rather than food: an industry term that entered the public consciousness during the Covid19 pandemic.

[34] There is evidence that per capita alcohol consumption in Ireland has declined, but such figures are difficult to assess and there are multiple ways to measure consumption. What is clear is that there has been a significant shift towards "at home" consumption, rather than in the pub setting. This trend, accentuated by regulatory forces and improvements in domestic facilities, may constitute the biggest threat to the "traditional" pub. See: https://www.drinkaware.ie/research/alcohol-consumption-in-ireland/?a=adult-per-capita-alcohol-consumption-in-ireland

[35] Such proposals (averted for now) have threatened celebrated Dublin pubs such as Nealon's of Capel Street and the Cobblestone of Smithfield, perhaps Dublin's best-known traditional music pub. The Marble Arch in Drimnagh has been purchased for

suburban or apartment developments rarely include pubs as part of their facilities offering: a coffee shop or restaurant is far more likely.[36]

A possible scenario is a thriving pub scene in large urban centres, based on a food and drink offering significantly targeted at tourists, and a night-time entertainment offering supported by recent changes in licensing laws. This will continue to be supported by the mythology of the Irish pubs, sustained in the media and popular culture, and in the physical form of landmark pubs ranging from the Gravediggers in Glasnevin, Dublin 13 to the Crown Bar in Belfast. Rural pubs will continue to see a dramatic thinning out of numbers. Landmark tourist pubs (such as the Beach Bar, Aughris, Co. Sligo) will survive, as will many of those in urban-driven tourist centres such as Westport or Dingle. Ordinary pubs in ordinary rural towns and villages will continue to close at pace, until some optimal ratio of pubs to population is reached. Roadside pubs, apart from those that effectively act as destinations in themselves (e.g. Horse and Jockey, Co. Tipperary) will most likely disappear – severing the connection with the inns of the past.

In popular and "serious" culture there is no reason to believe that pubs will not continue to act as symbols of community and conflict. After all, from Pat Cohan's of the *Quiet Man* to McCoy's of *Fair City*, there is no better location than the pub to site dramatic interpersonal communication. Certainly, if recent Irish best-selling novels (see the *Bee Sting* by Paul Murray as one example) are any guide, the place of the pub in Irish literature is secure. But the underlying reality is - not for the first or last time - a significant change in the landscape of the Irish licensed industry - and one that may come to be represented in the cultural representations of the future.

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conversion to a six-story apartment complex by mixed martial arts star Conor McGregor https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/conor-mcgregor-proposes-new-six-storey-apartment-block-at-marble-arch-pub-site-in-dublin-after-earlier-plan-rejected/a2031460665.html

[36] The previously cited Health Research Board report indicates a comparative dearth of pubs in many rapidly growing "new" urban centres, such as Celbridge, Carrigaline and Balbriggan (2024, 63).