



THE
BEST TEXT
WRITTEN ON
BANTRY
AGRICULTURAL
SHOW

OR HOW NO
PROD

TICISE CRAFT
ELAND

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THE BEST TEXT WRITTEN ON BANTRY AGRICULTURAL SHOW:
OR HOW NOT TO ROMANTICISE CRAFT PRODUCTION IN IRELAND



The view from the Show, Bantry Agricultural Show 2022. All images in text taken by author.

We drove down a narrow lane sheltered by trees and lined with banners with the writing “Bantry Agricultural Show 2022”, they directed us behind a line of slow-moving traffic meandering down the hill. The view of the bay slowly began to open up through the trees as we travelled further down the road. The sun was reflected in fragments over the sea, and just at its edge sat a green airfield with a concrete runway, looking almost like an aircraft carrier docked on the water. The carrier, however, was not holding planes but rather a line of white marquees, market stalls, temporary wooden structures and cattle trailers. They spanned the length of the concrete runway. The men in high-vis jackets stopped us and we paid for the fair through the car window, they then pointed for us to park right in front of the water that

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edged the side of the field. As dad turned off the car engine we sat and looked through the front windscreen at the view across the bay, with the grass of the fields and rolling hills opposite separated from the bold open sky by a line of white clouds. I don't think I had ever sat in a car park with such a beautiful aspect of landscape as this before. Myself, my sister, mum and dad all sat for a moment to take it in and let the excitement of the day build a little (We were conscious we could have just spent twenty euros on seeing farm animals stood in metal pens).

There was a buzz in Bantry when the show was approaching, we were asked multiple times if we were going by locals we spoke to. Being a rural area with a widely spread population there isn't much happening day-to-day for tourists. As regular visitors we utilise and fully appreciate this opportunity of quiet to spend the time we have in West Cork relaxing and taking everything slowly, usually spending full days on the beaches or on walks on the headlands. However appreciative we are of this slow pace, when the opportunity to attend an event like the fair did crop up, we eagerly jumped on it - it felt like a special opportunity to spend a day with some sort of intention and promised a glimpse into the realities of how community life functions in this beautiful part of the world.

This text is being written as a reflection of my experience at the fair; I will objectify moments and aspects of the Show in order to analyse the significance that the event has to the community and the landscape that surrounds it. Naturally, as it is being written from my

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perspective as an outsider this text mainly covers how the fair is perceived by people external of the community. In order to analyse the show's importance, I will attempt to contextualise it within its histories and social situation. I am going to use the handmade, homemade, handcrafted, hand-produced aspects of the show. The reflections they provide will help me gain insight into the identity of parts of the community. I am extremely cautious here that I could be using the fair as a romanticised insight into Irish life. I grew up hearing nostalgic tales of Ireland, my grandparents recounted tales of 'home' both conversationally and musically. Even when stories spoke of poverty or difficulties experienced growing up in Ireland, they were discussed with a sensitivity and sentimentality. The show gave me an opportunity to feel closer to an Irish community, to my own Irish identity, and provided a space for me to think about the diaspora experienced in my family.

As a family we travel from where we live in the midlands of England to holiday in West Cork most years. My mum was born in Cork and her mother grew up in a small town just outside of the city. We only recently discovered that one part of our ancestry comes from the place in which we usually stay, a seaside town called Schull, my mum's Grandmother was born in the area. With a steady caution here to not overly dwell in a romantic notion, we feel we have a deeper pull to the area than just the simple reason of it being a beautiful place. It's an area that is special to us, it feels like an alternate home and is always extremely welcoming. There is something about the environment and the people of West Cork that makes it a comforting place to be. My Grandparents moved from Ireland to England in the 1950s and decided to build their lives here, this was a difficult and brave thing to do in a time

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of major hostility towards the Irish in the UK. After marrying and staying in England to have children it was important to my grandparents to instil a strong identity and pride of being Irish into my mother and her sister. This has then been passed down to me and the rest of my generation in the family.

West Cork is a windswept and unsheltered landscape. The harshness of the weather can be seen in the physical attributes of the area; large expanses of gorse-land, wide fields of exposed bedrock and a distinct lack of trees. If you do see a tree it's unlikely that it would be growing upright, most seem as though they are cowering away from the battering of the sea. The weather's harsh treatment of the land can be attributed to the fact it is the most westerly point in Ireland, and simultaneously, the edge of Europe. Next stop, America! The coastline of West Cork is the first target for the Atlantic Ocean's violence. Only occasionally does the region get limited breaks from the rain and wind - and only occasionally does this fall on the time we are on holiday.

The intermittent fury of the weather has a sense of being part of the physical environment. Prayers of good weather on fair days and throughout the whole summer can only do so much; it is well-known that fair days unwantingly attract blustery downpours of rain, almost as if the weather sets it's watch to the date of the yearly show (the first Sunday of September). We were questionably optimistic that the weather would reject these traditions and the perfect blue sky would see us out until the end of the day. Having been to many a fair in my time I

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know that the rain often attempts, without constraint, to wreck the crafts and pies housed precariously under the white vinyl of the marquees or to make the animals more miserable than they already are exposed to the elements in their temporary metal pens all day. Feeling somewhat to be an accomplice to the rain's attempts to ruin the fun, the wind usually also makes attempts to disrupt; often successfully opening up the door flaps or pulling up deep tent pegs and pushing over gazebos. However destructive it can be, the bad weather can often make the region of West Cork look as beautiful as when there's a bright open sky. The dramatic landscape of the area was formed in the Ice Ages. Rivers of ice carved tumultuous topographies into the substructure of the land, creating ridges, mountains and valleys. Many of these scars and evidence of the ice are still left bare, bedrock pokes out sporadically through the surface of grass fields and giant misplaced rocks carried by the masses of ice can be seen littered on flat open spaces, often disrupting the full potential of a farmer's fields. The 'erratics' as they are known are most noticeable in the north side of Bantry Bay. In local mythology the area has been referred to as 'the playground of the gods', the gods playing catch with boulders as if they were the size of footballs.¹

¹ Michael J. Carroll. *A Bay of Destiny: A History of Bantry Bay and Bantry*. (Bantry: Bantry Design Studios (Publications), 1996), 20. Quote was taken from Carroll's text. The information in the paragraph preceding the quote was also taken from Carroll.

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The rugged landscape of West Cork bore witness to a brutal history of famine, epidemics, poverty and emigrations. As with the history of the Ice Ages, the landscape's topography has also been altered in connection to human histories. An initial example being the change of farming introduced by the English in 1829. The majority of the landscape before this period was built up of small holdings and small-scale tenant farms of a couple of acres intended to be self-sustaining for the family or group that lived on the land. The landowners made a move to physically change boundaries between smaller farms, to open up concentrated fields and to create bigger spaces in order to make land more suitable for larger scale grain production or for big herds of cattle. At the same time as the boundaries of the fields being removed, so too were the tenants who lived in and worked these spaces. 'In order to rid themselves of small tenants, cottiers and so forth, they [landowners] contracted with shipping agents and companies for passage to the Americas for the unfortunates, on a 'lump sum' basis (passage only).'² The broken remains of walls, shallow ditches from forgotten hedgerows and large open fields scar the landscape in a lasting memory of this displacement of people which is all too common in Irish history. The inhumane treatment of the Irish by the English here is blatantly similar to the merciless treatment received during the famines.

In 1822, over twenty years before the Great famine, the local area of Bantry experienced a failed potato crop. At this point in time the local population had been increasing massively

² Michael J. Carroll. *A Bay of Destiny*, 260.

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and there was already great levels of unemployment and poverty, much of the population lived in hunger and squalor. The fishing and fish curing industry just about kept the town afloat from this point to the start of the Great Famine. In 1832, Bantry and the local area was hit by a Cholera epidemic which killed around ten percent of the town and surrounding areas population. Michael J. Carroll's books *A Bay of Destiny* (which I have already made reference to) and *A History of Bantry and Bantry Bay*³ have been vital to my understanding of the history of Bantry and the local region. I have used both books as reference for this section of the text and for all references to the history of Bantry throughout. According to Carroll, in 1845, when the potato blight first hit Ireland, the harvest was one of the best on record, however most of this harvest was shipped to Britain and the warnings of famine were ignored by the British parliament - Westminster held absolute power over Ireland at this point in time. When the famine took full effect in 1846 and 1847, pitiful efforts were made by the government to relieve suffering, at points during the famine up to 95 per cent of Irish produce was exported. In the unsettling words of Carroll, 'Bantry was fortunate in that the building of its workhouse had commenced in 1842, under the direction of the Poor Law Union... With a capacity for about nine hundred inmates'⁴. As was the case with the rest of Ireland, Bantry and its local region was in such a dire situation that the building of a workhouse was a fortunate thing, throughout most of the famine it was full to capacity. Disease became

³ Carroll, Michael J. *A History of Bantry & Bantry Bay*. (Bantry: published by author, 2008).

⁴ Michael J. Carroll, *A Bay of Destiny*, 197.

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uncontrollable within its walls. Fever, typhus, dysentery, diarrhoea and cholera were rife.

“...more people died from cholera in the Bantry region than from starvation. Deaths averaged about 20 per week in the Workhouse.”⁵

‘With funds for the soup kitchens running low, Lord Berehaven, heir to Earl of Bantry donated the ‘magnificent’ sum of £20 towards the soup kitchens in his domain while those who could afford it, financed their own soup kitchens. At about this time, the Labour Relief Act, at sessions in Bantry, granted the sum of £3,540 to the Barony of Bantry in November 1846. This money was used on the drainage of the Bantry Estate, work on the Square, road works on the approaches to town and a section of road the present West Lodge Hotel and Gearhies.’

It is not known exactly how many died during the famine in Bantry and the surrounding area, but estimates are made at around 2,000. The above quote defines the attitude of the British government and the English landowners of the region towards helping the starving in Bantry. The people who were ‘luckily’ housed in the workhouse slowly returned to the land. Due to cautions surrounding crop reliability and the ruthless actions of the British, the raising of livestock became a more prevalent part of local agriculture, rather than grain or vegetables.

⁵ Michael J. Carroll, *A History of Bantry*, 213.

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Carroll mentions that because of the major increase in livestock in Bantry, the local fairs became known countrywide.⁶

In the book *Irish Folk Ways*, E. Estyn Evans evocatively describes the many aspects of Irish history. The quote below gives grounds for the social importance of fairs and gatherings in rural Irish communities,

‘That the remarkably large attendances at rural churches and chapels owe something to the social needs of a scattered population is suggested by the phrase, applies to someone who arrives late at chapel: ‘he missed the mass but hit the gathering’ – he had something worth while for his trouble.’⁷

The fairs in Ireland hold a similar significance for a sparsely spread population. As with Bantry, fairs across Ireland built in popularity alongside the increase in numbers of cattle. In *A History of Bantry*, Carroll describes the history of monthly Bantry fairs. With such a widespread population, people used to travel from across the region, up to 40 or 50 miles

⁶ Michael J. Carroll, *A History of Bantry*, 194-198.

⁷ E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways*. (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1957), 253.

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away, they often started travelling days before to arrive promptly on the morning of. The fairs traditionally took place within the town, first being held in a place known as 'Pigs rock' off Bridge street. This space became too small for the ever more popular fair and the growing population of Bantry, and so a new market space was built at the end of Main Street. The market space was further expanded and for the century leading up to 1950 the fair was one of the biggest and most popular in Ireland. Carroll mentions that 'In addition to the activity of trading livestock the fair was also the occasion for the monthly excursion into town for the country folk. It was a time to meet relations, renew old acquaintances, encounter distant relatives and pass on news of important events.'⁸

Although the monthly fairs are history, there are weekly markets in the town and the yearly agricultural show is still strongly attended by what seemed to be the entire town. The fair in its current form was established in more recent years, 1996, however, the significant traditions that it upholds and the importance it has within the rural community is blatant. Even in an age of communicative technology such as video calling and instant messaging, social aspects of events like this seem just as important nowadays as they were in the past. Walking around the fair it was clear to see that people had come to talk to one another. From my perspective as an outsider to the agricultural world, the economic side of things seemed to act as a catalyst for a lot of people to come together socially. The fair's existence was once

⁸ Michael J. Carroll, *A History of Bantry*, 217.

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crucial to the success of Bantry's agricultural industry and was the purpose of the fair itself. However, with new ways of communicating, buying and selling in the agricultural industry the purpose of the fair has evolved over time. The fair's central concern has shifted somewhat from trade to socialisation, this can be analysed within the history of what I will refer to throughout the text as the 'craft tent'. In *Racing Pigs and Giant Marrows*, a non-fiction book exploring agricultural fairs of the north of England, Harry Pearson refers to the space as the 'industrial tent',

'The industrial tent was an early addition to the agricultural societies' shows. Initially it was a place where rural firms could show off their wares – glass, carpets, poetry and the like – a trade marquee. Soon the professionals were joined by members of the public engaged, often fiercely, in a variety of craft competitions[...]Entries and categories gradually increased, and soon there was no room left for the tradesmen. The industrial tent has been the stadium, the field of dreams, for generations of stick-dressers, embroiderers and holiday-snappers ever since.'⁹

⁹ Harry Pearson, *Racing Pigs and Giant Marrows: Travels Around the North Country Fairs*. (London: Abacus, 1997), 41-49.

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The thought of amateur, fun-loving makers colonising a space initially intended for serious trade purposes is a distinct example of the shift in the central concern of the communities who run events like these.

Although in the section of text previously Pearson is discussing the evolution of the craft tent within a British context, I find the discussion of its history to be very relevant. When the British controlled Ireland they regulated every aspect of Irish society, including agricultural fairs. You can find a book of all the fairs registered across England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland from 1859 to 1860, titled *Owen's New Book of Fairs To Be Held In England, Scotland, Wales & Ireland*.¹⁰ The Earl of Bantry took control of the local market by building the 'English Market' in the centre of the town. 'He had the authority to do this as a result of an Act passed in 1431 whereby control of all fairs was passed to the local English landlord.'¹¹ He had toll and tariff collectors positioned on the main roads that entered the town and kept the profits for himself. The power the English landowners had over local Irish populations was significant at this point of history. To control the fairs was to control both people's trade and the monthly social gathering.

¹⁰ John Donaldson, *Owen's New Book of Fairs, to Be Held in England, Wales, Scotland & Ireland for the Years 1859-60 / Corrected to the Present Time*. (James Cornish, 1858.)

¹¹ Michael J. Carroll, *A History of Bantry*, 216.

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From car to craft tent

Setting off from where the car was parked, we walked across the grass, clambering over temporary rope fences that divided the car park from the epicentre of the fair. The posts stood so far apart, and the rope was hung so slack, that in places it was brushing against the long grass of the unmown field. Finding these parts to step over we somehow ended up staring straight at the opening of the craft tent. It was the place I had been most excited to see. While on holiday in the area over the years we have been to many other fairs and I always enjoy this space the most. I have an admiration for the confidence or unselfconsciousness that people have to present what they produced with their own hands; submitting a handmade item into a competition like this suggests a pride in self and one's identity. From my experience the craft tent is usually an eclectic mix all things homemade, handmade, handcrafted. There is usually shelves or folding tables lined with jams, pies, scones, knitted crafts, fruits, vegetables, bouquets of flowers, crafts by children, photographs; all seemingly being taxonomized and categorised as if in a museum. It's a mix of items that you would never usually find collated in one room in other times of your life. The authenticity of each item allows reflections into the maker and their processes of production. Seeing reflections of the person who made an object is often completely unintentional on the maker's part, this unconsciousness allows the space to be filled with completely evocative items that hold histories and personal identities.

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Arts and Crafts sign. Bantry Agricultural Show 2022.
Image by author.

Although a large part of the text will focus on the craft tent, I will be referring to many aspects of the day under the term of ‘craft’. In my mind many things are craft, including the tea and cakes stalls, tug-of-war competition, biggest egg and the digger game. These things have all been thought up and brought into reality, they involve an act of creativity and process of production. They bring a visualised form into fruition.

Pulling myself back in time to the door of the craft tent, I want to explore my assumptions of what I would find on the shelves inside. In turn, these assumptions shall act as hypothesis for what the main body of my text will be discussing. From my position before I entered the tent;

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I was physical outsider of the tent and also to the community that puts on this show. At this moment I sensed the desire to be an insider to the community, to feel closer to my ancestry and identity. Would stepping into the tent help me achieve this? The propositions I am about to make are from a fabricated and a reflective point of view – taking myself back to being stood in front of the entrance of the tent (I am aware this is impossible to do entirely authentically).

1. Submissions will be completely varied, the different categories will offer a wide variety of objects, from jams to children's drawings. Within these categories will also be a wide variety of styles of making. This is the beauty of the handmade, it offers so much potential of variation. The people who make the objects and produce are all different and so then too will be the objects.
2. There will be a certain anonymity to these spaces, at other fairs I have been to the most you know about who has made an object is the maker's name on the label. These spaces are therefore not representative of individuals but rather of a whole, a wider unit of collectivity.
3. Different categories will be dominated by different groups of people. The main divide being gender, with most crafted or baked items being produced by women and the vegetable categories most likely by males.

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4. The submissions will be representative of the locality. Fundamentally objects will be representative of the local environment and the contexts in which they were made, it is almost impossible for them not to be. I'm expecting photographs of the landscape, bouquets made from locally picked flowers, pies made using a recipe passed down generations of a local family.

5. Amalgamating all the above points I am expecting insight into the region that is not usually experienced in other ways. Through this I think I will inadvertently make assumptions about the community and its structures (whether this is right or not is to be questioned)

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Going into the Tent



Competition Shelves, Bantry Agricultural Show 2022. Image by author.

Walking into the tent I was hit by the scale of the shelves that housed the submissions. They stretched along three walls of the marquee and were confined behind metal fences, protected from visitors like a room in a National Trust. They struck me as a landscape; horizontal contours of a hillside spanning the borders of the tent. The items on the shelves looked like cottages, barns, groups of trees and electricity pylons dotted throughout the landscape.

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Because of the bright sunlight hitting the white tarpaulin of the tent, the space was diffused with light similar to that of a white cube gallery, the grass being an important reminder we were stood in the middle of a field. There was a prestige held for the displayed items, they felt monumental because of the way they were being held within the space and their being behind protection. In a similar sense there was intense care taken in the categorisation of the competition classes at the fair, separating scones from tomatoes, and knitted crafts from models of a farmyard scene. The sheer breadth of produce and craft showing the wealth of culture and tradition in the community. The wide variety suggested a wide representation of the social make-up of the local community. The feeling of celebration also came to mind, potentially harking back to historical foundations of fairs like these being a celebration of a productive harvest and surplus produce.

Judging the importance of craft or produce in representation of community and landscape

The next section is the categories or specific submissions from the craft tent shelves which hit me as having the strongest connection to local community or environment, and also for their objective beauty. I have awarded them in a personally derived order of preference of 1st, 2nd, 3rd and Highly Commended.

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1st

Children's Section:

Class 158 Design a Farm Yard, not exceeding 50 cm

(confined to children U 14 years)



Under 14 farmyard models, Bantry Agricultural Show 2022. Image by author.

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This category is the epitome of an unconscious reflection of self and the context that the creators presumably inhabited in the making process. Children who live in the local area and who submitted to this category obviously have a vast knowledge of the subjects they presented here, seemingly making work about their own lives and their own situations in the world. Just by looking at the models you can deduct that agriculture is a central or a highly important part of their lives - the models have a remarkable resemblance of a farming environment and show a broad knowledge of agricultural landscape and practices. All this being concentrated into a 50 cm square is a remarkable feat for a basic use of materials; lollipop sticks, string, tinfoil, toy models (tractors and cows), paint, dry grass and plasticine. Straightforwardly, I find them to be beautifully made and deeply evocative objects. They hold an emotion that is not so directly found on the rest of the shelves.

Out of the tent and along the concrete runway was a game being run by teenage boys. Digger Trials, €3.00 for 3 minutes. The intention of the game was to get the weight attached to the end of the digger arm into poles stood upright in the grass in front of the digger, the fastest to put the weight in and out of each pole, wins. The digger was contained within a small section of the field behind temporary metal fencing, in the same way as the sheep and cattle at the other end of the fair. To me, the game held a similar poignancy to the farmyard models. The skill the people who were participating and running the game had with the digger seemed to be reflective of their familiarity and understanding with agricultural processes, namely the use of heavy farming machinery. From a wholly presumptive point of view, it seems as though this sort of machinery is used by these boys in day-to-day life while helping on the

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family farm. The confidence in the handling and the seeming lack of thrill about the chance to use a machine, which to me is completely alien, shows a familiarity. For all we know, they may even practice this game throughout the year in the farmyard. From what I witnessed it was only teenage boys who were playing or organising the game. Is this a reflection of structures of gender and age within the community? The topic of gender roles is something which will be discussed further in the next section.



Digger Trials, Bantry Agricultural Show 2022. Image by author.

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2nd

Flowers Section:

Class 142 Foliage plant in a pot 8"

Class 143 Decorated Hat using Fresh/Dried or Artificial Flowers

Class 144 Succulent cactus plant

Class 145 Flowering house plant, including geranium

Class 146 Flower Arrangement in Boot

Class 147 2 largest blooms of hydrangea

Class 148 Small Arrangement in an egg cup



Flowers section 1, Bantry Agricultural Show 2022. Image by author.

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Flowers section 2, Bantry Agricultural Show 2022. Image by author.

As mentioned earlier, the structures of the shelves and the objects placed on them had a distinct visual relationship to the structures of the landscape of West Cork which sat just outside the tent. Thinking about the shelves in the context of the topography of the landscape of West Cork, the flower classes of the craft tent are the hedgerows, the gorse-lands and meadows. The hedgerows of the area are a distinctive part of the landscape, they draw lines across vistas and divide fields into segments. The bouquets that were displayed were created almost entirely from locally found wildflowers that are extremely prolific at this time of the year, with many of these varieties of flora being native and appearing heavily in the hedgerows that stand either side of narrow lanes. Some examples of flowers I spotted on the

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shelves that are also prominent in West Cork are Montbretia (Irish name: Fealeastram dearg), Fuchsia (Fiúise), Water Mint (Mismín mionsach), Buttercup (Fearbán), Oxeye Daisy (Nóinín mór)¹², this list goes on. I have a sense that I could have held my hand out of the car window on my way to the fair and pulled these flowers from the side of the road; they'd have been a bit more battered than the perfect examples you can see on the shelves, but you get the idea. This direct link from locally sourced, locally grown flora being displayed on the shelves gives a great sense of place and local identity. There is a detectable sense of pride in the region in these bouquets, both in the blatant beauty of the flowers but also through the poetic nature of using flowers that are of native significance to the area.

Unlike other shows that I have been to in the local area, the Bantry Show doesn't display the names of the makers alongside items on the category number cards. At the Schull Agricultural show (a smaller scale fair that we have visited many times in years prior, which happens around 25 km away from Bantry) names were displayed next to submissions and you could clearly see divides in gender of participants across different categories. For example, female names were dominant in baking, jams and floral classes, whereas men's names dominated the horticultural sections of biggest marrow or best four potatoes. This

¹² Zoë Devlin. "Plants by Colour". Wildflowers of Ireland. Accessed January 20, 2023.

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transparent display of gendered divides of makers acts as insight into the structures of gender roles within the community.

An important point to highlight here is that, as someone who is not involved in the community, I can only compare it with experiences within my own life that have similar constructs of gender; being careful not to overly delve into a subject on which I know little about. This is an important point to reflect on throughout the text, and something I am very aware of as an outsider. I only see the surface of these events, the objects on the shelves are only objects. Speaking from my own experiences of gendered divides in my own family (as is the same in many others) it is the women who cook, clean and run the household. It is from this point of view that I make the assumption that this is most likely the case within the communities in West Cork.

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3rd

Baking Section:

Class 129 Round brown soda bread

Class 130 Six white sultana scones

Class 131 Coffee Cake

Class 132 Cold tea brack 8" round

Class 133 Porter Cake

Class 134 Tart any variety

Class 135 Biscuit Cake



Baking section, Bantry Agricultural Show 2022. Image by author.

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When looking at the baked section I found myself repeatedly returning to a romanticised notion that the goods here were made with recipes handed down through the generations of family before them. I would have bet my raffle tickets on this being the case with at least some of the submissions. Although potentially not being a reality within this space, it felt like a very prominent point to dwell in. Even without proof of things such as inherited recipes it would be hard to not see the rich culture of this category. Food is such an important part of a heritage of any place. Ireland specifically has such a traumatic history surrounding famine and controls of food exports by the British government that it is a beautiful thing to see strong traditions within this part of the culture.

Through an opening from the craft tent was the tea and cakes tent, rather than being filled with shelves this tent was full of folding tables and stackable grey school chairs. Freshly baked cakes, scones and sandwiches were being sold opposite urns of steaming tea. The women serving the tea were all in tabards clad with the words 'Bantry Show Tea Ladies'. Although only furnished with austere folding tables with paper tablecloths, this was a warm, comfortable space. There didn't seem to be any difference between the cakes housed on the display shelves in the craft tent and the ones on offer to buy here apart from the opportunity to eat. In a strange way this space activated the baked goods competition shelves, illustrating the role cakes play in the community and community events. We had fruit scones with homemade golden raspberry jam we had bought at a stall just before. In my eyes, the scones

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we ate could have very easily won first prize in the scone class. Others clearly agreed with me, rarely was there an empty seat. The tables were always full of intergenerational groups of men, women and children. It was a family space and a space full of conversation and chat.



Tea and Scones, Bantry Agricultural Show 2022. Image by author.

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Highly Commended

Horticulture:

Class 149 3 heaviest potatoes

Class 150 Best 5 potatoes (kidney)

Class 151 6 tomatoes homegrown with stems

Class 152 Best 3 onions. (from sets)

Class 153 Best 3 beetroot

Class 154 Best 3 sticks of rhubarb

Class 155 5 Cooking Apples

Class 156 Collection of home grown herbs. (5 named varieties)



Horticulture 1, Bantry Agricultural Show 2022. Image by author.

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Horticulture 2, Bantry Agricultural Show 2022. Image by author.

There is something striking when thinking about the relation the fruits and vegetables of the horticulture category have with the environment in which they were grown. There is a directness in the fact they were picked, dug or pulled out of the local earth; it creates an inherent connection to the very ground on which the display shelves were sat. It is a similar discussion of locality that was written about the flower class and involves a connection to traditions of agriculture and farming that reach back hundreds, if not thousands of years.

Along the main strip of the fair was a man selling handmade walking sticks out of the boot of his car. In between sales he sat and carved new ones, each had their own distinct character - some had sheep horns attached to the top, others had a V shaped handle, many were made from the root ball of a sapling. They all differed in height, wonky-ness and tone. The man

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explained that for maximum ergonomics, where your hand sits comfortably on the handle should be level with your hip. There was constantly a crowd of farmers trying out the sticks, striking poised poses and asking the opinion of people around them. These sticks are a traditional implement that have been used by farmers in Ireland for hundreds of years, they help to negotiate across rough, rocky land and to prod the behinds of cattle to convince them to keep moving. As well as traditional, they are still a functional part of the working landscape. In a similar way to the horticulture category, all of these sticks grew in the local environment, were crafted by someone from the local community and will go on to serve a function for other members of the community.



Walking Sticks, Bantry Agricultural Show 2022. Image by author.

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The Downpour

As mentioned at the beginning of the text, fair days always unwantingly attract the rain. The good weather dissipated and the rain battered the fair in holy magnitude. The weather held a god-like power over the event, scattering folk into the marquees and cattle trailers that were free of their intended occupants – while the animals stood unhappily out in the elements. During the research for this text I found multiple references to the magnetic attraction that fairs have with the bad weather.

“There is a widespread belief, by no means confined to Ireland, that fair days are always rainy days. This belief may well be justified by climatic averages, but I have heard it as consequence of the lies and profanity, the fights and the pagan ways of the fair. Many an ancient fair has become extinct, no doubt because it no longer fulfilled its economic functions, but the explanation usually given is that it was abandoned ‘on account of the fighting’.”¹³

- E. Estyn Evans

¹³ E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways*, 254.

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“Bantry Fairs always seemed to be damned by inclement weather, either heavy rain or gales. This was something ascribed to the time when these gatherings or the accompanying patterns (dancing) were banned by the local Catholic clergy as they were occasions of ‘profanities, fights and lewd pagan customs’. Some of those who came to town for the fair only used the excuse to drink spirits or stout. Drinking on an empty stomach all morning they would emerge on the streets arguing and fighting.”¹⁴

-Michael J. Carroll

The rain felt like a closing curtain at the end of a performance, the show was coming to an end, the unmarked car park was slowly disappearing car by car and the ferry over to Bantry town was full to the brim with people and ready to depart. Those who had decided to shelter in the bar tent were the only people still enjoying the festivities. We took shelter under an agricultural equipment stall, but soon decided the weather wasn't going to be changing any time soon. We made a run for the car and as we got in, dripping wet, we sat and looked out the front windscreen, the view that we had seen when we arrived to had now been completely covered by a monotone sheet of clouds and mist. Water dripped down the windows like we were sat in a film set.

¹⁴ Michael J. Carroll, *A Bay of Destiny*, 278.

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After getting back to the holiday cottage and drying off by the fire I instantly began dwelling in the deep-rooted significance that the fair holds. It had given me the insight into the community that I had anticipated, and it made me feel like I had a deeper understanding of the area and the people who call it home. I felt closer to my own histories. Being a joyous event, it felt like a familiar tale of Ireland that I have heard from my Grandparents, a beautiful place with kind, friendly people, I fully absorbed myself into the romantic notions of Ireland that they instilled in me. The accessible, comfortable and domestic environment of the show, with its intimate insights of the community, felt like a safe space in which to think about my own cultural identity, my family's history and the diaspora of my grandparents from their home country.

The List

While researching for this text and building my understanding of the significance that craft holds I studied the work of Julia Bryan-Wilson, *11 (Contradictory) Propositions in Response to the Question: What is Contemporary Craft?*¹⁵. Her 11 propositions contradict one another and don't cohesively form a single body of opinion but rather allow an open discussion of different viewpoints and possibilities of what contemporary craft is. As an art historian Bryan-Wilson could have formulated solid expressions of her beliefs and opinions from an authoritative position. I enjoy the openness, the chance for a wider audience to find points of agreement within the body of work. From my own position as someone who has been found guilty of romanticising an idea of Ireland and, similarly to Bryan-Wilson, as someone who is studying Fine Art, I need to be careful of my biases. The opportunity to use a template similar to Bryan-Wilson's, whereby she doesn't inflict her own position onto her readers seems important to allow a flexibility of understanding. I want to keep my eyes open to as many different facets of thinking as possible. This list will conclude the text.

¹⁵ Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Eleven (Contradictory) Propositions in Response to the Question: What is Contemporary Craft?* // 2013. In book *CRAFT: Documents of Contemporary Art*, edited by Tanya Harrod, pp. 64-68. (London: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2018).

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8 (Contradictory) Reasons Why or Why Not the Bantry Show and the Homemade, Handmade, Handcrafted, Hand-produced Aspects of it are Important to the Local Community and Landscape.

1

Fairs in Bantry are part of the bloodstream of the local community. Although the show in its current form was only established in 1996 it is derived from a history of fairs in the region that spans over half a millennium. Fairs and markets were economically vital in the sparsely populated area; for the dispersed community, these events acted as one of the only opportunities to buy and sell to one another and to people from further afield. Lines of the same families will have been attending the fairs for generations, there is a deep-rooted sense of events like this being long-lasting and significant for the old community. The Bantry Show comes at the end of the summer, just after the harvests and before what traditionally would have been a time of preparing for winter. This gives the show a sense of celebration of the year and its abundances. The cakes, flowers and crafts are traditional examples of people in the community using the abundance of produce which is not a common opportunity throughout the rest of the year. People have the chance to make indulgent things, not things only for necessity. The fair is a traditionally integral part of the community's annual calendar.

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For tourists, to whom the agricultural economic aspects aren't important, the show is an accessible space to learn about the community. However positive learning about a community is, the fair runs the risk of being aestheticized by outsiders who don't have a full understanding of what the fair means to the local community. We bumped into the owner of the holiday cottage that we were staying in, they said to us in a hushed tone, "It's all a bit *Father Ted* isn't it?". They were fully aware that the image that some people have of rural Irish life is based on media portrayals such as *Father Ted*. The low budget aspect of much of the fair sometimes have an uncanny or humorous edge which can sometimes align themselves with representations of rural Ireland on television and films - the welly-wanging style games and the egg competition displayed on a pile of pallets seems to have a direct correlation to the fairs seen in the show.

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3

The opportunity of making and exhibiting craft is rarer in rural communities that have less access to arts organisations in comparison to populations living in big towns or cities. The craft tent gives opportunity for individuals to share and have pride in their own creativity. Most of the items produced were made with massive skill and high levels of self-confidence.

4

The respect held for craft is built on the romanticisation of its histories and of folk life. With mass production and industrialisation, crafts no longer hold such high importance or necessity in our lives. Traditions and histories of crafts aren't a relevant part of present-day life. Craft was traditionally part of the show in the form of a celebration of abundance, in a world with regular supplies of food and products in supermarkets and shops the seasonality of the fair and craft is now redundant.

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5

The show only takes place because of a consciousness of holding onto cultural heritage. The show's long history and many traditions make it outdated and irrelevant for a community in the 21st century. With advances in technology, both communicative and vehicular, people have much more opportunity to communicate with one another in other ways and don't rely on the show to see one another and do business. The decline in numbers attending church in rural Ireland could be because of similar reasons, people don't rely on traditional forms of social gathering anymore.

6

Crafts and processes of handmaking are extremely important as they are drenched in history that cannot be lost to new generations. Many crafts are handed down through generations of makers using skills and techniques that have been practiced for thousands of years. These inherited skills physicalise themselves into final forms of objects or produce that we get to see at events like fairs or craft sales. In the craft tent at the Bantry Show examples of handmade objects are set on the shelves for others to judge and admire. According to one proposition made by Bryan-Wilson in her text, craft 'maintains its tactile, bodily component

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in the face of computer technology. It connects people in the flesh and provides a much-needed alternative to the incessant push of digital interfaces, mediatisation, and screen culture.’ ‘craft facilitates face-to-face encounters that are not transacted via the internet’¹⁶. This is definitely the case at the Bantry Show.

7

There was a constant buzz of conversation over the whole site. This is a place for people to come together and meet one another from across the region. People use the show as a place to come together and socialise, and, importantly, to have a fun day out. The enjoyment people experience at the show is a valid enough reason for the show to be seen as a significant to the community.

¹⁶ Julia Bryan-Wilson, 11 (Contradictory) Propositions, Proposition Seven.

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8

The objects submitted to the craft tent undeniably hold intrinsic links to their surroundings and the contexts in which they were made. A clear sense of pride was upheld through their unapologetic use of local materials, reflections of local imagery and the fact they were physically made in the local area. Because of links to the locality, they undeniably reflect the local people. They provide insights into the identities of the makers and therefore the structures of the community. People who make crafts (consciously or unconsciously) reflect on their own position in the world. High levels of self-awareness and self-identity are portrayed through the crafts. The identities that the objects held often show social structures that are present within the community. Divides in gender of makers is one of the most prominent forms of evidence. Handmade objects physicalise social structures and gives opportunity for them to be put into question.

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