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Book Review: *Galway: Making A Capital of Culture* (Patrick Collins: Orpen Press, 2023)

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Abstract

Patrick Collins' recent book details the development of the cultural industries and placemaking in the Galway region over the past century or so. Focusing on the "peripheral" position of the region, its long relationship to film making, and informed by Galway's successful application for the European Capital of Culture in 2020, Collins argues for the unique nature of the region as a site of cultural production and consumption. While the book offers moments of insight, particularly in its discussion of 'festivalisation', it ultimately lacks the analytical depth and coherence needed to fully capture Galway's complex cultural identity. No sustained critical framework, cultural ordinance and geographical map of the region is provided. As such, the book demonstrates that Galway is significant within broader debates on cultural policy, decentralisation, and the creative city model, but fails to tease out how the 'festivalisation' of Galway relates to national and international trends.

Keywords: cultural policy; Ireland; Galway; local policy, European Capital of Culture.

Book Review: *Galway: Making A Capital of Culture* (Patrick Collins: Orpen Press, 2023)

Patrick Collins' recent book focuses on the evolution of the cultural industries in the Galway region through the lens of placemaking. Aimed at a broad academic audience, Collins' research can be best described as occupying a place at the intersection of cultural policy and social geography. In Galway he rightly identifies the paradox of how this 'peripheral' region has punched above its weight in a variety of cultural fields such as theatre, film and festivals. Across 11 short thematic chapters Collins explores the interconnected and 'wondrously ever-changing nature of culture and creativity' (p. 11) of Galway.

For any reader with a passing interest in the Irish cultural imaginary it is undeniable that that the Galway region has stood as a potent beacon. Most notably during the Gaelic Revival and within the broader international Celtic Twilight, the domestic politics of cultural nationalism valorised the promise of a pre-colonial west. This rugged and romantic imaginary was exemplified by Patrick Pearse's cottage, Éamon De Valera's speeches, and Robert Flaherty's film *Man of Aran*,1934. In contrast, foreign, tourist and diasporic audiences were drawn to a sort of postcard picturesque vision of the apparent ancient authenticity of Connemara. The classic document of this vision, which Collins' recognises, is John Ford's film *The Quiet Man*, 1952, which itself, in no small part, hastened the American tourist's attraction to Ireland's west coast. Thus the 'Galway Gaze', to coin a phrase, involves a fixation with the 'savage beauty of Connemara' (a phrase routinely attributed to Oscar Wilde). Such beauty points both to the apparent unspoilt wilderness of the West as well as an image of a violent and uncivilised nature. The aesthetic valorisation of the rural, rough and untamed western idyll, devoid of large-scale commerce and industry, remains a potent figure in the national aesthetic. This is exemplified today in the promotion of the Wild Atlantic Way tourist trail because as has long been argued: 'If the Irish Investment Board promotes Ireland as an attractive site for heavy industry

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and the Irish Tourist Board advertises Ireland as an unspoiled land of leprechauns and magic, the two pictures collide.' (Kotler *et al*. 1993, p. 162)

Capitalising on its natural harbour, from the 15th century Galway developed trading links with the growing Portuguese and Spanish Empires. 'The erection of the town wall was one way of protecting the prosperity [and made] Galway down to the mid- or late sixteenth century a safe and "civilised" place to trade' (Prunty and Walsh, 2016, p. 2). The renaissance-era façade of the city's buildings still dominates the image of its architectural ensemble. Following the Cromwellian siege (1651-52) the city suffered sustained centuries of decline and was overshadowed by ports on the east coast.

Echoing the dereliction of the Cong Canal almost a century before (1854), the continued economic abandonment of the region post-independence was embodied by the closure of the Galway to Clifden Railway in 1935. It was at this time that the city acquired the moniker 'graveyard of ambition' particularly in business and banking contexts (Turley, 2016). From the mid-20th century however, Galway developed an alternative image as a bohemian/heritage destination.

From the late 1960s both a cultural revival and language rights movement would also become fundamental elements of Galway's life and identity. Impressively realising a primary ambition of the cultural democracy 'movement' of cultural decentralisation, the campaigning of Gluaiseacht Chearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta contributed to the development, by the state broadcaster RTÉ, of Raidió na Gaeltachta (1972), a regional development agency Údarás na Gaeltachta (1980), and sowed the seeds for the Irish language television station TG4 (1996) (see Walsh, 2022, and Mac Con Iomaire, 2024). In parallel, and just as significant, was the cultural revival, what might be called 'Galway Renaissance,' which saw the touring theatre company Druid founded in 1975, the Arts Festival formed in 1978, and the Cúirt festival of literature begin in 1985. Today, Galway is not only the *de facto* capital for the national infrastructure of the Irish language (in theatre, radio, television and higher education) but also proudly presents itself as a major capital for festivals. Other notable annual festivals include the Galway Film Fleadh, Galway Cartoon Festival, Misleór Festival of Nomadic Cultures, Baboró International Arts Festival for Children, Galway Theatre Festival, TULCA Festival of Visual Arts, Architecture at the Edge, the Galway Races and the Galway Folk Festival.

Nonetheless the 'graveyard of ambition' nickname persists. Tellingly, Galway was at the heart of a rare recent popular expression of pride in receiving welfare. In conversation with a suspicious Ted and Katie Walsh, the host of one of RTÉ's most successful television programmes of recent times, the comedian Tommie Tiernan remarkably declared to the jockeys that the 'freedom' of 'six years on the dole in Galway […] was the making of me' (RTÉ, 2020). If the space afforded by the 'graveyard' of Galway was the fertile ground for Tiernan, amongst others, it is certainly worth investigating why that was the case and asking what kind of ambitions there should be for places such as Galway.

As any student of Galway today knows, the housing crises and transportation misery dominate life in the region. The *Clear the Streets* documentary (Kennedy & Hughes, 1994) vividly captured both the vibrant street culture alongside the homelessness crises of the city in the early 1990s. The neglect of today's city prohibits the freedom that Tiernan described. The city is one of Europe's, if not the world's, most traffic congested cities (Carroll, 2024). Galway is often a difficult city to even walk or cycle in. Instead, it is wracked by suburban sprawl and the ongoing saga concern the construction of a ring road versus light urban rail (the so-called GLUAS).

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These factors render Galway ripe for a deep critical analysis of regional cultural development in contemporary Ireland. Collins, unfortunately, while providing passing mentions of some of this history, specifically the growth of media infrastructure and the festival scene, does not capture the rich and complicated nature of the region's cultural life. Instead, Collins starts by pointing to the soil and the stone of the county: '[…] culture acts as nothing less than a fundamental building block in the economic, social and psychological success of a place.' (Collins, p. 23) This geological context is certainly the bedrock of any fertile (agri)culture and life, see for example Robert Caro's detailing of the soils of Texas in his epic biography of Lyndon B. Johnson (1982) or the mapping of the 'genius loci' or *dinnseanchas* of Connemara in the work of Tim Robinson (1990). However, Collins' point is not made in any deep or sustained way. It is not clear how, for example, in the folk memory of a certain canal the enterprise was doomed to failure due to porous limestone rock or how the Atlantic salt water seems to corrode the buildings of the city in a specific Galway fashion. Or, how, as the local joke goes, you don't need to worry about the rain in Galway as the wind will soon blow it away!

Missing here is a crucial beating the bounds of the object of study. There is a confusion between the city and county throughout. This ambiguity extends to the city limits and county boundary. In practice, Galway's cultural hinterland clearly constitutes a commercial 'macroregion' (Miller and Hochberg, 2007) that extends as far south to include North County Clare, North to Ballinrobe in County Mayo and East to include parts of South County Roscommon. For example, with key members from Ennistymon, The Stunning are surely as much a Clare export as the Galway product that Collins describes. In any case, their song 'Town for Sale' is about the Clare town and not Galway. Here the book would have benefited from a more chronological, or even spatial, rather than thematic structure as the focus on Galway is somewhat lost at times.

If the past two centuries of cultural life in Ireland can be read in terms of the accretion of certain logics (roughly in order: British Imperialism, Gaelic Resistance, Nationalist Independence, Catholic Dogmatism, Economic Commercialism, Individualism and Americanization, and European Integration) then Galway presents an interesting challenge. How does Galway, as a counterpoint to the capital, differ from or exemplify the national trends?

While Collins compellingly claims that this commercial and cultural region is marked by the 'stubborn fact of peripherality' (p. 6), the cultural life of this peripheral place in an ever-globalised world is less clear in this book. Claims like '[…] the Galway story is best told with reference to the absence of any physical infrastructure to support its cultural development' (Collins, p. 21) are valid to a point, but they overlook the alternative infrastructure that was constructed. After all, the connotation of institutional violence lingers over the region as the names Letterfrack (site of a former Christian Brothers' Industrial School) and Tuam (site of a former Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home) testify. Indeed, the church did not just define the silhouette of urban Ireland, but its cartography of sites outlined the psychogeography of the nation and equally contributes to the 'peripheral' image of Galway in the minds of many. Collins does not explore these ghosts. Equally absent is any account of Irish language summer colleges, housing (see Sirr, 2025), sport, newspaper circulation and reach, and of the links between 'town and gown' (see Ó Cearbhaill, 1984).

Central to the peripheral reality is 'the perception of the periphery as the remaining habitat of traditional cultural practice (ranging from craft production to traditional music).' (Collins, p. 24) This intimate modern association of the periphery with authenticity is Galway's problem and opportunity

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all at once. Should it be approached as requiring the intervention of state welfare or could it retain what in other contexts has been called the 'poor but sexy' (Pyzik, 2014) atmosphere? It is precisely this economic backwater/cultural capital opposition puzzle that makes Galway so intriguing as a proposition to consider under the lenses of placemaking and place branding.

Galway has long been recognised as a city with 'festivalitis' (Fahy, 1991). Collins rightly understands though that to capture an account of place(making) in Galway today is to reckon with the role of the festival. Accordingly, the strongest chapter details the 'festivalisation' of Galway's cultural life and how it reflects the long-established failure to develop a cultural policy at a national level. '[…] the fact that 46.3 per cent of [Galway City Council's Culture budget] goes directly to festivals and events while 22 per cent goes to producers is evidence of an absence of longer-term thinking in the development of a cultural economy that a city intends to make its name on.' (pp. 158-9) Given the contested nature of 'festivalisation' it would have been invaluable here to plot the stages of the process in the Galway region.

Overlooking Galway's Quincentennial celebrations in 1984 (which specifically marked the establishment of Galway's local government) is a significant omission. This event initiated a raft of culture-led celebrations/fabricated commemorations throughout the country over the following decade and coincided with the long overdue development of local authority cultural policy (the first Local Authority Arts Officers were appointed in 1985). Such celebrations and the emphasis on festivals suggest that Ireland, and particularly Galway, is better at hosting and selling events than developing a cultural policy and establishing cultural infrastructure.

What then are we to make of the internationalisation of the festival in Galway in recent years? Is it representative of changing tastes, local discontent with traditional images of Ireland's West or is it simply a sign of healthy ambition, economic commercialisation, commodification, homogenisation and gentrification of the local or all at once? The region undoubtably continues to be successful in its efforts at place branding and 'designation chasing' (Collins, p. 163). And in detailing the efforts to capitalise on culture as an economic resource Collins illustrates some of the key issues facing the creative economy beyond the major urban centres. 'The rate at which Irish cities and regions have chosen to use place branding is the result of poor spatial planning and the centralised nature of the State, but also owns much to the ease at which Irish policy, more generally, conforms to a neo-liberalist logic.' (Collins, p. 58) The effects of this inadequate administration can equally be looked at from the opposite perspective, festivals are not only place makers, but places make festivals (see Lynch & Quinn, 2022). Regions with weak local government, housing and transport issues will inevitably produce precarious festivals.

The book developed from work supporting Galway's successful application for the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) in 2020 and reveals some of the limitations of such projects and the investment by invitation model as cities battle in the so-called 'place wars' (Kotler *et al*., 1993). As in Limerick (see NicGhabhann *et al*., 2022), whose bid failed to win the ECoC in 2020, the frustrations of this project stem not only from the failure of cultural policy but also communication and narratives, or as Collins put it: the 'mismatch between the public perception of what wining such a designation means, and the reality.' (p. 175) When culture is primarily conceived at the service of the economy (as in the 'creative cities' model) as opposed to nationalism or placemaking it is worth asking what sense of place is constructed by arts administration (see, for example, Durrer, 2023). As per the title, the book

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would have been better focusing on the pros and cons of European Capital of Culture designation throughout. Then it may have been a valuable contribution to illuminating some of the other failures of corporate governance in the cultural sphere in Ireland that have come to light in the intervening years. This would include considering the overreliance on external consultants, centralisation and lack of trust in local government.

When the city is no more than an identikit venue for international events it is worth recognising that there is more to place making than festivals. Given the quality-of-life issues facing the region mentioned above, it could be argued that the failure to develop GLUAS is of more significance to the cultural life of the city than any number of designations achieved. In short, place branding is not placemaking.

The persistent confusion of reality with authenticity in the case of Galway is due not only to the romantic imagery of the West, but also the processes of 'relentless centralisation' (Ferriter, 2001, p. 23) and economic neglect that the first century of independence wrought. It is increasingly recognised that centralisation is a major problem in contemporary Ireland. The authors of *Irish Cities in Crisis* (Browne, Coady and Pollard, 2024) go so far as to argue that it is the biggest problem facing Ireland. Despite the over-reliance on economic growth in the Dublin area as regional cities are too small for Foreign Direct Investment, the question of decentralisation really is nowhere near the political agenda. Centralisation is particularly visible in cultural funding. 'In 2024, Galway and Limerick both received just 6% [of the Arts Council's €50m strategic funding] compared to Dublin's 70%, Cork received 5% and Kilkenny received 3%. Eight counties didn't receive any Strategic Funding at all: Cavan, Kildare, Laois, Mayo, Offaly, Roscommon, Tipperary and Wicklow.' (Quinn, 2024)

Standard explanations for such place based cultural revivals, be they Baggotonia (Dublin's Bohemian quarter in the mid-20th century), the Harlem Renaissance (c. 1918–37), Madchester (Manchester's music scene from the late 1980s to early 1990s), have focused on factors such as migration patterns, cheap rent, supportive institutions, technological innovations, network effects of success, localised tolerance for novelties etc. as the bases on which to build cultural capital from economic deprivation. If Collins' aim was to capture an aetiology of what could be called the 'scenius' (Eno, 1996) of Galway, he surely should consider some of these. With film in mind a focus on tax avoidance may have been productive. After all, the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre memorably noted of the filmmaker John Huston: 'He settled not to contemplate the state of his soul in the Irish countryside but to evade taxes' (O'Riordan, 2009). If Galway's USP is the landscape or the tax incentive, a combination of both, or something else, the reader of this book is none the wiser.

Collins fails to develop a theorical framework to analyse Galway in a way that could be then brought to other locations. In contrast, the somewhat equivalent port city on the neighbouring island, insofar as it shares a marginal, peripheral and romanticised mythological and exceptional position (Swift, 2025) and was also a European Capital of Culture, Liverpool, has recently attracted such analysis of its cultural and political economy. Galway, like Liverpool, exemplifies both the promise and complexity of smaller cities. Wetherell (2025), for example, uses the framework of 'obsolesce' of Liverpool to see how the city's 'crumbling infrastructures', urban regeneration and local cultural resistance tell a larger story about the history of Britain. Liverpool has furthermore been analysed under the framework of 'persistent creativity' (Campbell, 2019) to reveal the problems and

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contradictions encountered by the city in the face of governmental creativity agendas such as place marketing. Disappointingly, Collins misses the opportunity to develop something like a 'periphery creativity' lens from Galway to explain larger trends in Irish cultural policy and the limits of the creative city model. And as such there is no consideration of whether the city would be better off having a mayor with more than ceremonial power.

The text's referencing system is difficult to follow with many cited authors not included in the chapter bibliographies and there is no index, no timeline or catalogue of cultural infrastructure, and scant reference to the images included. Figure 12, a key visualisation of the city's ecosystem is shorn of labels. Purporting to illustrate how the city has moved from a cultural producer to consumer, it is devoid of explanation, contextualisation or interpretation. The text is further spoiled by errors. For example: *Sit Down and Be Counted* by Jack Dowling, Lelia Doolan and Bob Quinn which criticised the commercialisation of RTÉ was published in 1969, not 1967 and did not 'lead to' the authors' resignation from RTÉ. Rather, the book followed their resignation. Galway has been a UNESCO City of Film since 2014, not 2013. *Teilifís na Gaeilge* (later TG4) was established in 1996, not 1997.

With the obvious exception of the status of the Irish language it is difficult to see how many claims for the uniqueness of Galway could not equally apply to Cork, Limerick, Waterford or even Kilkenny. Surely these cities and counties have been equally as capable of developing festivals and in producing 'anti-capitalist […] cultural output […from] a periphery-based perspective […]' (Collins, p. 78) Where Galway may claim a special place in film, Kilkenny may do so in design and animation, Cork in food and sport, etc. Collins correctly points to the pubs and bookshops as sites of 'cultural commune' (p. 78), but these clearly exist in other cities also.

While it offers moments of insight, this book falls short of doing the topic justice. Nonetheless, this it is a useful introduction to some of the key issues facing cultural life in contemporary Ireland outside Dublin.

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