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# **Voluntary Gravedigging in the West of Ireland**

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**Doctor of Philosophy**

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**August 2024**

## **Abstract**

This study considers the unexamined tradition of men voluntarily digging the grave when a neighbour dies, focusing on four separate rural communities in the West of Ireland. It investigates why this practice, associated with a former agrarian society where people had high levels of dependence on one another, is still commonplace in communities where they no longer need to practically rely on their neighbours. Now most earn their living in the wider post-industrial economy, but still live in close-knit rural communities. To understand how and why this practice persists, the author observed one grave being dug by volunteers, took part in helping to dig two others, and interviewed 26 volunteer gravediggers, analysing their practical, social and personal motivations for doing so, within the context of modern-day Ireland. This study demonstrates how social and economic development in the rural West of Ireland has taken place in a manner that enabled this tradition to survive while participants simultaneously earn their living in the burgeoning Irish economy. The author argues that while it is unclear if it will survive as a distinct tradition, the continuance of this custom demonstrates how deep-seated cultural practices can flourish, even in the face of rapid social and economic change. Furthermore, this work also makes the case that voluntary gravedigging should now be recognised as a significant Irish death practice, like the Irish wake.

## **Acknowledgements**

This study has involved many people: my parents, Annie and John Conway, who took me on my first visit to Ireland in 1957; my son, Dr Steve Conway, and a chance conversation with him in 2016 about how to properly record this practice; my supervisors, Professor Louise Westmarland, Dr Sharon Mallon and Dr Teresa Willis, who have been my critical guides for the last four years; all the people in Mayo and Galway who so generously agreed to explain how and why men get together to dig their neighbour's grave; Maya Cowin for her technical support in compiling this thesis. Outside all these people, a special thanks goes to my wife and deepest friend, Lindsay Conway, who has supported and encouraged me every inch of the way, to bring this study to life.

Also, in memory of my dear sister Eileen Barber and her support for my continuing and higher education.

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## 1. Introduction

In this introductory section I start by outlining the background to this study of voluntary gravedigging (VGD) in the West of the Republic of Ireland (hereafter referred to as Ireland). I then go on to give a concise and practical description of what happens over three days when men dig the grave of a deceased neighbour. I then give a summary of the remaining eight chapters. I conclude with my research questions.

### Background to Study

The origins of this thesis lie in a chance encounter in 2011 with a group of men in County Mayo, Ireland, who were voluntarily digging the grave for a recently deceased neighbour. Details of this encounter are outlined in Chapter 2, *Methodology*. My initial thought, given that VGD seemed to be a significant cultural practice, was there was bound to be much written about it, both in general and in academic literature. When I started searching for accounts of the practice in Ireland, I found just two. First a part comic play, entitled *Dig*, by Irish playwright Seamus O'Rourke (2006) and a passing account by the American folklorist Ray Cashman (2008) of VDG in Northern Ireland.

After continuing to search for both academic and general literature about VGD over the next four years I became concerned that what seemed to me to be an important cultural practice might disappear without ever having been recorded, as Ireland continued to modernise (see Chapter 4, *The Development of Modern Ireland*). I therefore decided to try to develop a privately funded study that might at least record what was entailed when neighbours got together to dig a grave, what it meant to them, including the future of the practice and what it might say about modern Ireland. It was at this point I approached my local university, The Open University (OU) to explore if they could help me design this study and ensure it complied with ethical standards. Over a two-year period (2017-2019) they kindly agreed to support me by making me a visiting fellow. This then gave me access to the OU

library and its online search facilities. The OU also ethically assessed and approved my research proposal (HREC 2619, 27 October 2017) before I began interviewing VGDs in April 2018.

In 2019 and following on from conversations with the OU it was jointly concluded that the best and most reliable way in which I could record, analyse and archive this practice was by making it part of a PhD study. In September 2020 I enrolled as a PhD student at the OU.

## **A Practical Outline of VGD**

In this section I provide a practical and concise overview of what happens when neighbours get together to voluntarily dig the grave for a deceased neighbour. This account is based on what the 26 participants in this study told me and my direct involvement in VGD, between April 2018 and September 2019. A fuller practical account of VGD is outlined in Appendix 1. All 26 participants are referred to by pseudonyms. Please note, the 26 participants in this study lived in one of four rural areas in County Mayo and County Galway: Area 1 (N= 13;); Area 2 (N=3); Area 3 (N=5) and Area 4 (N=5).

On day 1 people hear that a neighbour has died. This happens in various ways, the chief one being by tuning in at 10am to *MidWest Radio*. Every morning at this time it broadcasts details of who has died in the area, as well as details about funeral and wake arrangements. Once it is known that a neighbour has died men will start to organise the gravedigging for the next day. In three of the areas, there are usually three to four men who will take it upon themselves to offer to dig the grave. Others may intend to just turn up to help dig the grave, or simply to join in telling stories about the person who has died, or take part in the general conversation and socialisation as the grave is being dug. This last element is usually referred to as *having the craic* (see Chapter 2, *Data analysis and footnote*). Later that evening, at the house wake, other men may offer to help dig the grave. This is also a time when arrangements are made about when the digging will start the next morning and any specialist equipment that might be needed. For example, boarding to protect adjacent graves or

shuttering to prevent a sideways collapse as the grave is being dug. In Area 1, only people who have been invited to dig the grave turn up. Here the rule is you do not volunteer, you are invited by the bereaved family to do so.

On day 2 the grave will be dug. It normally takes between two and four hours depending on ground conditions and whether it is an old or new grave<sup>1</sup>. A relative of the deceased will bring food and drink to those who are digging the grave, although in Areas 3 and 4 arrangements might be made for the gravediggers to go to the local bar after the digging for a drink and sandwiches. On day 3, the day of the burial, the gravediggers will inspect the grave prior to the funeral attendees arriving at the graveyard to make sure it has not flooded or collapsed. After the funeral the mourners will leave and the gravediggers will backfill and shape the finished grave, net down any flowers to protect them from the wind and generally tidy away the area affected by the digging. In Area 3 most mourners, including close family, will stay until the grave has been completely backfilled. Anyone who would like to do so, are invited to help with the backfilling. This practical account of VGD is supplemented by a more detailed one that can be found in Appendix 1. It includes a timeline and details of who is involved and local variations.

## **Outline of chapters**

This study consists of nine main chapters and Chapter 10, detailing the Covid-19 pandemic in Ireland from March 2020 to May 2022 and its effect on VGD. This has been included because it was thought that what developed into a world pandemic might substantially alter the practice of VGD. In Chapter 2, *Methodology*, I outline how I went about studying VGD in these four areas and my use of thematic analysis to assemble and order the main findings from my research. Included within this chapter is a

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<sup>1</sup> An old grave is one that has been used before. It will be easier to dig but will usually contain human and coffin remains that will carefully be put to one side to be reinterred later. A new grave will be harder to dig and may contain large and small rocks. (see Chapter 5, *The Digging*)

section dealing with my personal history and prior involvement with participants in Area 1 and whether this may have influenced the results of this study. In Chapter 3, *Literature Review*, I review the literature on death practices, examples of VGD in Ireland and elsewhere and ethnographic and historical studies of rural Ireland. Chapter 4, *The Development of Modern Ireland*, explores the wider social, economic and religious context in which this traditional practice, with its roots in an agrarian Ireland, takes place. It considers whether people can be both engaged in a modern economy whilst at the same time living in small and close-knit communities where people care about their neighbours - with VGD being an outward show of their extreme neighbourliness.

The next three finding chapters explore the main thematic explanations that emerged from the data collected for this study. Chapter 5, *It's Normal*, sets out the participants' ostensibly very practical reasons for digging graves for deceased neighbours. Chapter 6, *We Do It Because*, follows on from this discussion, exploring participant's feelings on what it means for them to join with other men to dig their neighbour's grave. Chapter 7, *I Do It Because*, explores the private and sometimes deeply personal reasons participants gave for their involvement in VGD.

Chapter 8, *Discussion*, places these findings in a wider body of existing knowledge. While many of the explanations for VGD chime with or add to what has already been written, some of the findings from this study challenge existing positions in relation to how societies respond to death, the importance of Catholicism and the relationship between community cohesion and modern capitalism. In Chapter 9, *Conclusions and Recommendations* I present my six main findings, three areas for further research and my final thoughts on the future of the practice of VGD.

## **Research Questions**

This thesis seeks to answer two questions about voluntary gravedigging (VGD) in Ireland

- why are men still voluntarily digging graves, a practice associated with a preindustrial/agrarian society, when they are living and working in a modern post-industrial economy?
- what do the views, experiences and explanations of the men who carry out these practices, tell us about modern-day rural Ireland and its potential direction as a society?

## **2. Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This thesis explores why neighbours in certain communities in the rural West of Ireland still took it upon themselves to voluntarily dig the grave when a neighbour died. My aim was to establish what social meaning they attached to this practice, its continuity and what it might say about social life in these communities. In this chapter I start by outlining my research method, theoretical approach and research philosophy. I then go on to describe my starting point when I encountered a surprising paucity of literature on voluntary gravedigging (VGD). In the section on data analysis, I describe my use of thematic analysis. Because of the nature and context in which this research has been conducted I consider how I might have influenced the results of this study. Finally, I conclude with a discussion on the ethical considerations that arose in planning it.

### **Research method**

In total, I have used a cluster of four different research methods to collect data. My main method was 26 semi structured interviews. These usually started by me asking participants for basic factual information and then an initial 'starter' question about the first time they had dug a neighbour's grave (see below). To my surprise this always worked and seamlessly led into practical, personal and social explanations for their involvement in VGD. Alternative prompt questions were prepared but never needed or used (see appendix 4). I kept a detailed research log (outlined below). Sometimes my dialogue with participants was via 'walking conversations' (Penfold Mounce, 2023) where participants explained about VGD and how it fitted into the social, physical and historic context of the study area - as we walked (see for example Chapter 6, *Reciprocity and Obligation* and the walk with James to the local graveyards).



On two occasions I was a participant observer at grave diggings (outlined below). Both times gave me an opportunity to gain a physical, technical and social understanding of what was entailed when a grave was dug, something that could not be gleaned entirely from an interview (see below).

Although I drew on my direct experience and knowledge of the study areas, gathered over 67 years, I do not claim this was an ethnography (see below, *My effect on the research*). Nevertheless, I have had an autoethnographic 'presence' in the research because of my background and the emotional and social ties to the communities being studied (Dixon, 2024), but without the study becoming autobiographical and about me (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis 2015; Reed-Danahay, 2020). By collecting data and interviewing in four different communities I have been able to triangulate for consistencies and inconsistencies in this practice. By drawing on all four data sources I have woven together a holistic account of a practice that held underlying and complex meanings for the participants, and the communities in which they live.

The research method was qualitative. It included interviews, a reflective and reflexive research log kept over 7 years and participant observation arising from attending one voluntary gravedigging and taking part in two more. Most of the data was generated from semi structured interviews with 26 male participants who had been involved in VGD and lived in one of the four research areas as specified in Chapter 1, *A Practical Outline of VGD*. The oldest participant was 78 and the youngest 36, with a mean average age of 62. Only 9 participants were solely farmers and therefore living and working in the countryside. Interviews were usually conducted in the participant's home. However, two were conducted in private spaces in public houses and one at the participant's place of work. Interviews usually lasted around 45 minutes, ranging from the shortest at 17 minutes and the longest at 75 minutes. One participant had never dug a grave but had been involved in backfilling graves and was also the local undertaker and supportive of the practice. All interviews were audio recorded on a *Zoom 200*, to a professional broadcasting standard so that the recordings could be held as an historic archive by the Irish National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin. This arrangement was

agreed with all participants, prior to recording their interview and was included with their written consent.

In conducting these interviews my intention was to create an atmosphere where the participants felt relaxed in 'telling their story' about how and why they had been involved in VGD. I tried to keep my interventions to a minimum and so allow them space to both describe and analyse their involvement in this practice. Normally the interview would start by me asking them to tell me about the first time they took part in digging a grave for a neighbour and what happened. This usually resulted in the participant starting off with a practical description of what was entailed in digging the grave. This then led to me asking them about why they and other people were still doing it, given that in nearby towns and larger villages gravedigging was now left to a paid gravedigger. This then led to whole series of practical, social and personal explanations that are outlined in chapters 5, 6 and 7. Looking back on these interviews, I can see this method resulted in findings that were co-produced between me and the participants, as they explored (often for the first time) not just what they did but the wider social and personal meaning they attached to it (Blaxter et al., 2010; Westmarland, 2011). In their guidance to first time researchers (which I am) about how daunting this task can feel, Braun and Clark (2006) refer to the challenge novice researchers face trying to: '...interact with research participants in such a way that they generate rich and complex insights' (p98). My intention was that by adopting a very loosely structured interview style and simply letting participants talk about the what and the why of VGD, I would capture at least some of their rich and complex insights.

In September 2017 I began a research log that throughout this thesis is referred to as 'My Research Log'. It measures 21cm x 13cm and as of June 2024 runs to 159 pages. Many of the entries are practical records of people I met, dates of interviews and contact details. In addition, it contains many accounts of things people told me that were connected to VGD and more generally to rural Irish culture. These accounts were all recorded contemporaneously. There are 18 times when I cite My Research Log in this thesis. They are all offered as my recollection and/or interpretation of what

was said. Sometimes the entries are my musings about what I am learning about the practice of VGD and the possible wider social meaning of anything I have observed. On two occasions I was invited to help dig a grave and this was an opportunity for me to see (as a participant observer) in much finer detail what occurred when a grave was dug by neighbours. For example, how the finished grave is 'polished' with the back of a wetted spade and finished with chamfered corners. On two occasions I attended local wakes and was able to record and reflect upon the connections between these occurrences and other parts of rural death and dying practices, including 'sitting' with a dying person and VGD. Sometimes the entries were recorded because they sounded significant for my informant. It was only much later in the writing of this thesis that their significance to the general practice of VGD become apparent.

## **My Theoretical Approach**

According to some classical sociologists (Tönnies, 2001, originally 1887; Durkheim, 1976, originally 1893), a traditional agrarian cultural practice like VGD, should not exist in a modern-day industrial country like Ireland. Here all families have access to paid professional gravediggers, and this is the default choice in towns and cities throughout Ireland. But the practice of neighbours digging graves for deceased neighbours is still widespread throughout rural Ireland (see Chapter 8, *Discussion*). In trying to explain the continuity of rural VGD my theoretically my starting off point was not to abandon classical sociological theory, but to try to apply it to the 21<sup>st</sup> century rural West of Ireland. Tönnies (1887) argues that in preindustrial communities (*gemeinschaft*) there is a high level of interdependency and concern for your neighbours, motivated by an underlying 'natural will' (*Wesenwille*) and concern for others. Here he is describing an attachment to those who live around you that is a deeply held and emotional relationships, beyond purely instrumental ones. However, this concern for other people disappears as they become workers in industrialised societies. Then people switch to living in association (*gesellschaft*) and the underlying motivation for interaction with others becomes rational and goal specific (*kürwille*); that is the relationship with people (who are not

your immediate family) is seen as a form of transaction with them, based on what the actor is trying to achieve.

Similarly, Durkheim (1893) argues pre-industrialised communities with low levels of specialisation are held together by a mechanical solidarity and a collective consciousness. Industrialised workers are described as specialists, living in functional interdependence and in organic solidarity with one another. Like the industrialised workers Tönnies describes, these relationships with other people are instrumental for people who are trying to survive in large and often impersonal communities. Here it is not possible or practical to have the kind of close and emotional connected relationships with their neighbours as it was for the participants in this study.

My working hypothesis was: it was possible for people like the voluntary gravediggers in this study to still live in traditional *gemeinschaft*-like communities and so maintain traditional practices, even while working in modern industrial settings. I would argue that Tönnies and Durkheim had not been able to anticipate future iterations of modern capitalism, or what Kerr et al. (1973) refer to as 'pluralistic industrialism'. Therefore, I assert participants in this study could at least theoretically be living lives in both mechanical and organic solidarity with neighbours and fellow workers respectively, as they daily move back and forth between these two worlds.

To understand the personal and social meanings attached to VGD, I 'drilled down' beneath social structures, to the social meaning(s) participants attached to their actions (Weber, 1978), and 'filtered' the data via a thematic analysis, the details of which are explored below. This entailed participants initially simply explaining their involvement in this practice, often resulting in them self-analysing (often for the first time) why they voluntarily dug graves for neighbours. Sometimes this occurred when I asked them why families didn't instead just use a paid gravedigger. I also tried to understand their underlying or latent reasons for doing so. Often these latent meanings only became discernible when I noticed common accounts and perspectives about death practices. For example, I noticed that the most passionate advocates for ensuring the continuance of VGD were amongst

those who had lived and worked away from rural Ireland. They were also the participants who had the most firmly stated positions about how a grave should be dug and an abhorrence for the use of a mechanical digger to either dig or backfill a grave. Similarly, I noticed those participants who were most critical of how the Catholic Church had conducted itself in the past (see Chapter 4, *The Catholic Church*) were those who also spoke of a member of their family who had to be buried in unconsecrated ground, in Ireland described as a cillín.

I accept that all the participants in this study had freely decided to take part in VGD, that is they had individual agency, but would also argue that they had done so within the context of shared knowledge, experience and values, or what Berger and Luckman (2011, [1966]) refer to as intersubjectivity. Therefore, I believe that it is important that the practice of VGD is explained by both the individual choices actors made and the wider community and societal forces acting upon them. Giddens (1984) was amongst the first sociologists to offer a way of unifying structure and individual agency into one theoretical framework that he termed 'structuration'. As Giddens concedes (1992) 'It is unlikely that this controversy will ever be fully resolved...' (p705), but for this study, structuration best encapsulates how I have theoretically framed VGD: as a practice influenced by individual and conscious choice and by the social structures of rural Western Ireland. If there is a weakness to structuration theory for the purposes of this study, it is that it assumes actors are influenced by a unified force that we can call social structure and sees individual agency as a constant. For the participants in this study (see Chapter 4, *The Development of Modern Ireland*), this is not the case. They are living in a country that was until the 1990's dominated by Roman Catholicism in every part of daily life. Now this is gone people are confronted with multiple ways to structure their society (Inglis, 2017). Individuals are now faced with choices, and therefore agency, that they were not brought up to expect. In terms of VGD, structuration theory, in spite of its limitations, does work. It accounts for participants involvement as both structurally derived (see Chapter 5, *It's Normal*) and as behaviour that springs from individual agency (see Chapter 7, *I Do It Because*).

In exercising individual or community agency, many of the participants were aware, sometimes painfully so, that they were doing so within the gravitational pull of wider and dynamic social structures (see Chapter 4, *The Development of Modern Ireland*); that VGD was also occurring within an historic and economic context. Mills (1959, p5) argues that this 'quality of mind' to see both individual agency, history and wider social forces is at the centre of what he refers to as the sociological imagination. When applied to death, Penfold-Mounce (2022) describes this as the 'thanatological imagination', when it involves non sociologists, such as the three participant undertakers who are also involved in VGD and I would argue many of the other participants, who Mills describes as the publics (sic).

## **Research philosophy**

This thesis seeks to understand and explain the declared and subjective meanings that individuals and groups of individuals gave for their involvement in VGD in four communities in the West of Ireland. I decided an interpretivist approach (Weber, 1978; Braun and Clark, 2006) would be the best way to make sense of what was occurring, including identifying possible latent meanings. For example, some participants' immediate given reason for their involvement in VGD was that it was neighbourly or just practical. However, after settling into the conversation and sometimes with gentle probing, much deeper motivation became apparent to the participants, sometimes for the first time. Weber (1978) and van Heerikhuizen (2016) refer to this approach as trying to bring understanding (*verstehen*) to the interpretation of social conduct, rather than reaching for explanation (*erklaren*). Blaxter et al., (2010) contend that interpretivist approaches are essentially culturally derived and historically situated. This is demonstrated by how participants understand and then link their involvement in this practice and their national history, as a former colonized nation. This connection between culture, history and economics, is considered in detail in Chapter 4, *The Development of Modern Ireland*.

## Starting point

With the exception of one American study of the Muscogee Creek First Nation people, my literature review (Chapter 3) showed that (so far) VGD had never been part of an academic study. When I started this research, I assumed the practice was particular to communities along the Western Seaboard of Ireland. I have since established it still occurs in rural areas, across Ireland, including those close to its larger cities, although it is a fading practice (see Appendix 3: *The Irish Association of Funeral Directors, 2022*). This should mean this study is replicable across the whole of the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland (Cashman, 2008) and later, further inferences and possible theoretical explanations could be drawn from a wider knowledge base, including from this study. With this single example of the Muscogee Creek First Nation People, it is difficult to make any meaningful comparison. Perhaps the most important finding to emerge from the absence of other studies about VGD in Ireland, is to highlight the gap in our previous knowledge of this important death practice. It is hoped that this study will go some way to filling this void and encouraging other researchers to add to the body of knowledge about this practice, given it is now known to occur throughout rural Ireland.

## Sampling

Of the twenty-six participants I interviewed for this study, the first twelve were people I knew personally. I approached them directly, explained about this study and requested they grant me an interview. There was also a thirteenth person I approached, who although supportive of the aims of the study, did not want to be interviewed. A further twelve participants were recruited using snowball sampling, that is through onward referral from other participants. I was put in contact with one participant by a bereaved family member who was impressed by the practice and wanted me to interview one of the voluntary gravediggers who had dug the grave for their family member. Just one person contacted me because of an article published in the local newspaper, the *Mayo News*. No one

came forward to be interviewed following my interview about this study on *MidWest*, the local radio station. I think the poor response rate via local media is indicative of the difficulty of making a first contact when the subject of the research is sensitive and personal. Without either being known by potential participants as a trusted person or being personally recommended by a trusted third party, my judgement is this study could not have attracted enough participants as the basis of a study.

My recruitment of participants through personal contacts might be seen as problematic. This is because many of the participants had pre-existing relationships with me as the researcher and this will have influenced what I was told and perhaps not told by the participants. Alternatively, a complete stranger researcher would have faced other barriers and may not have gained the level of access I was able to gain as a trusted outsider with pre-existing practical and cultural knowledge of this practice. A further weakness of this sampling was that with two exceptions, all the participants were in their 50's or above. I do know from personal experience digging a grave (My Research Log, September 2019) and from what participants reported, that younger men in their 20's and 30's do take part in VGD. If this study is replicated, the researcher should consider including men in this younger age group.

## **Data analysis**

All 26 interviews recorded for this study were analysed using a thematic analysis approach as originally outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Braun, Clarke and Hayfield (2022). Braun and Clarke's method starts with coding, or attaching labels to text that can be both semantic and/or latent. Semantic meaning within data, refers to the 'explicit surface meaning', while latent meaning is described as below the surface of explicit meaning and involves interpretative work by the researcher and is therefore not 'just description but is already theorised' (Braun and Clark, 2006, p84). In the process of thematically analysing the researcher is looking for patterns that will bring related codes together into overarching themes that relate to the research question(s).



Although the process of formally coding this study did not properly commence until I started to transcribe all 26 interviews (from August 2019), themes started to emerge much earlier. For example, in my first interview with Liam on 4<sup>th</sup> April 2018: I note in My Research Log that he talked extensively about his different experiences of how death was dealt with in England compared to Ireland. Codes and possible themes therefore emerged early on in this study and I was alert to them occurring during subsequent interviews and was able to draw upon them when coding the transcripts of the interviews.

My formal coding entailed first transcribing each interview and then reading through it, looking for text that related to my research questions. After all the interviews had been coded, I ended up with approximately 150 separate codes, which were combined to form seventeen overarching themes. This process was iterative and gradually resulted in groups of codes being combined under a common theme. For example, this included kindness, friendship and expression of love being included under the theme of *Expressions of esteem: honour and regard*. Braun and Clarke (2006) point out that in making these choices you are also theorising; also, that this process will be influenced by the perspective of the researcher and if themes reside anywhere, they reside inside the researcher's head. I agree with this view. I accept that another researcher reading through these same 26 transcripts might have identified different codes, depending on what they were looking for, and may have grouped these into slightly different themes and chapter headings. For this study it has resulted in three themed chapters looking at: the ostensible practical reasons participants gave for their involvement in VGD (Chapter 5); the wider social reasons (Chapter 6) and the personal reasons (Chapter 7).

The themes that emerged were latent as well as semantic. For example, a latent theme that emerged from the individual codes was belonging, a theme I felt was present throughout the interviews, although only two people specifically made the connection with VGD. Braun and Clark (2006) also argue that it is important to code accounts that '...depart from the dominant story in the analysis'

(p89). An example of this came from just one participant who mentioned VGD had sometimes demonstrated community conflict rather than cohesion. This was initially coded as social disharmony but was eventually subsumed into the theme of neighbours, which is mostly an account of harmony and interdependence.

Connected to this, one of my initial concerns in conducting this research was that participants might want to give me an account of their motivation for being involved in VGD that was sanitised, so as to show them and/or their community in a best light. Bergen and Labonté, (2020) refer to this tendency as social desirability bias (SDB). I knew I had no certain way of controlling for SDB other than to build a rapport with participants that felt respectful and demonstrated a genuine interest in VGD, and so to encourage honest rather than socially censored accounts of VGD. I was therefore reassured by what my data told me: how many participants challenged the notion that what they were doing was purely noble. So that for instance, they also spoke about the social benefit they got from digging a neighbour's grave and *the craic*<sup>2</sup>. In this instance *craic* included the pure pleasure of just getting together with a group of other men and sharing stories and having maybe a drink of beer or whiskey, and time away from the normal routines of life. In addition, initially, many of the participants couldn't see there was anything remarkable and socially desirable about what they did. It was for these participants primarily a practical task: their neighbour had died and their grave needed to be dug. Given this variety of explanations, that included personal benefits, I was reassured that this added to the validity of research.

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<sup>2</sup>The *craic* is a fluidly used term and encompasses people coming together for fun and conversation, and is often but not necessarily associated with drinking and the pub. It also includes people coming together for friendly gossip (McMahon et al. in Brewer's Dictionary of Irish Phrase and Fable (2010)).

## **My effect on the research**

I did not arrive at this study as a neutral observer. My mother was from Area 1 and I had been a regular visitor there since 1957, then age four. From the very start I have been aware I was both intellectually and emotionally invested in why people in these communities were involved in VGD. My first direct contact with this practice happened by chance in 2011, when attending the gravedigging of my favourite uncle. It occurred because I had been asked by my cousin to accompany him to take food and drink to the gravediggers, who I assumed would be paid gravediggers, but turned out to be five of his neighbours, all men I had known since childhood. I was struck emotionally by the kindness of what they were doing; by the hard grinding work of digging a grave with just shovels and a pick; by their sensitivity when they gathered up the remains of our mutual grandfather who was buried in this grave 58 years before; by their sharp humour with each other about how to dig the grave; and stories, stories about the person whose grave they were digging and accounts of diggings he would have 'been at' over the years – all rounded off with food and drink supplied by the deceased's family. Intellectually I was also questioning how was it that this practice that I associated with an older and agrarian Ireland was still taking place in modern day Ireland. I wanted to know why were neighbours still invested in this practice, what was it saying about these communities and how people related to one another?

At this time, I assumed there would be many documented accounts of why such a strong cultural practice persisted but instead I only found one brief modern academic reference to the practice of VGD in Ireland (see Chapter 3, *Death Literature and VGD*). By this point I was concerned this practice might quickly disappear as Ireland continued to modernise. As outlined above, I felt personally invested in at least recording and archiving that VGD was still happening and the social meanings it held for its practitioners. As someone who had regularly visited the area since 1957, and had personal experience of VGD, I held a kind of outsider/insider status both in the community and where my research was located. The concept of insider/outsider is borrowed from criminology and specifically researching

modern policing and the position of the researcher in relation to those being researched. Brown (1996) and Westmarland (2016) identify several positions the researcher might occupy on an insider/outsider continuum. This ranges from the 'inside insider' and 'outside insider' to the 'inside outsider' and the 'outside outsider'. For Brown, the challenge for the researcher is to be cognizant of what status you are given by the community you are studying and the limits this will place on access and what your research can realistically expect to achieve. Based on Brown's (1996) original typology I was given inside outsider status by most participants, as someone who lived externally to their culture but was positively interested in understanding VGD and why they were doing it.

In some ways this outsider/insider status has both helped and hindered my research. It has helped me gain access to the first community (Area 1) who were willing to talk about this sensitive cultural practice and led onto contacts in the other three study areas. During the interviews my prior and longstanding contact with these communities enabled free flowing and what felt like relaxed conversations. Also, the mere fact of noticing the importance of VGD meant participants were aware of the implied regard in which I held the practice and therefore of what they were doing.

However, I identified three challenges arising from my embeddedness. Firstly, I think there were times when it lessened my sensitivity to see the potentially negative side of studying a strong cultural practice in close knit communities. For example, when relationships broke down, or when no one came forward to dig the grave, or the oppressive power communities could hold over individuals by their potential to exclude a person from a cultural practice. Secondly as an outsider, with insider contacts, people sometimes tell you less than they would to a fully outside researcher, because of their concern that what they confide in you gets back to someone else you are connected to. I think this must have occurred to some degree and is potentially evidenced by just one participant talking about situations when neighbourly relations broke down and another when neighbours failed to volunteer to dig the grave of a deceased former volunteer gravedigger. Had participants been totally

open with me, I would have expected to hear more about times when relationships were conflictual and graves were not dug by volunteers.

Thirdly, in sampling people you already know or whose lifestyle you are personally aware of, means you bring factors to the interview relationship that cannot be controlled for or avoided - and perhaps should not be. Oakley (2016) positively argues for this position. Based on researching women's experiences of becoming a mother (from a feminist perspective), her argument is that as a mother and a woman she brought experiences to the relationship with her participants that aided communication and built rapport. Similarly, Ochieng (2010), as an African woman, researching African women's experiences of the impact of the English education system on their children's life chances (from a feminist and black perspective) found a shared background encouraged participants to readily share with her their candid experiences of the education system. Like Oakley and Ochieng I found there was a valid purpose for bringing parts of my personal biography into the relationship with participants, where it enhanced the purposes of the research and helped to build a genuine rapport. For example, mention of my Irish heritage (both my parents were Irish) and my pre-existing knowledge about local customs and practices. I found with each additional interview, it helped that I knew more about what digging a neighbour's grave entailed, and participants knowing I understood empathically the level of responsibility and complication this task involved (see Chapter 5, *'It's Normal'*).

Although this study has not been conceived as an ethnography, or autoethnography, I now realise that it would not have been possible for me to 'culturally spot' VGD, had I not had some level of unconscious embeddedness in Area 1 (Reed-Danahay, 2020). By this I mean that this locality was a place that I would visit for weeks at a time, as a child and adult (and continuing to the present day) and always feel welcome and drawn into what happened to be going on at any time. For example, helping to stack hay bales, stack turf or helping when a calving was proving difficult, by helping to 'pull the calf'. In addition, there were many people in the area who were my aunts and uncles, first

and second cousins, so therefore I was also viewed as kin. This then meant that when I started to interview men about VGD I could draw on the openness and complexity of existing relationships, something most anthropologists might view as standard (Miller, 2024), while sticking to the confines of what can be achieved in a loosely structure interview format.

On just one occasion, I suddenly and unexpectedly found myself visibly upset. This occurred when I learnt that one of the participants I had interviewed, Cillian, had suddenly and unexpectedly died and his grave was then dug by a paid gravedigger, using a mechanical digger, rather than by his neighbours. Looking back, I have tried to reflect on why I was so upset. My conclusion is that I was by that point, ten months after the first interview, becoming unconsciously invested in VGD as an expression of uninterrupted community cohesion (My Research Log, 10 March 2019). What happened when Cillian died, painfully and helpfully, it turns out, challenged that illusion. It helped me realise that what originally brought me to and partly motivated this study was the emotional experience of the evident kindness of VGD, as I first witnessed in 2011. That VGD broke down on this occasion, has not changed my initial view that when men get together to dig a neighbour's grave, they are doing something that is very special and holds multiple positive meanings for them. But it has also made me more objective about these four communities, without denying I was and probably always will be emotionally invested in what goes on there, even when trying to be objective and detached.

## **Ethical considerations**

Ethical permission to proceed with this research was granted by The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 2619, 27 October 2017) in September 2017. They raised two possible ethical issues. Firstly, it was suggested I seek permission from the nearest relative of any deceased person mentioned by participants. It was subsequently agreed with the HREC this was unrealistic as potentially this would mean going back to seek permissions for people who had died

decades before. Instead, it was agreed that where the deceased had died in tragic circumstances (see Chapter 7, *Compassion and tragedy*, for a definition of a tragic death) I should always try to gain permission to use the relevant entry from their nearest living relative. Where this was not possible or realistic it was agreed I would consider if the account could be sufficiently anonymised to be used.

Secondly the HREC was concerned about the welfare of participants and emotional support for me, resulting from any upset that might be triggered because of talking about VGD. To address these concerns, it was arranged (via a local GP) that participants could in the first instance self-refer to their GP or the out of hours service. Details of this service were included in my *Participants Information Sheet*. I made arrangements for a local academic colleague to be available to support me, if needed. In the event neither arrangement was, to my knowledge, called upon.

All interviews were conducted to ensure informed consent. This meant ensuring participants were aware of the purposes of this research as outlined in the participants consent form and participants information sheet (see appendix 5 and 6). They also agreed their recording would be kept in a non-anonymised form by the Open University and the National Folklore Archive in Dublin (if accepted), an archive that is open to scholars and the general public. As soon as possible after the interviews participants were given an audio copy of their interview and then subsequently contacted by me to check if there was anything they wanted to change or amend. (see also Chapter 9, *Final thoughts*)

## **Summary**

My research design is based on a broadly interpretive approach, although with recognition that there are important cultural, historical and economic factors that may have influenced the outcomes. The study design reflects the paucity of existing studies about this practice, although this does help to underline the importance of recording and archiving this practice. In the next chapter, *Literature Review*, I go on to consider what has already been written about VGD, the related death literature and connections to this study.





### 3. Literature Review

#### Overview

When I first encountered voluntary gravedigging (VGD) my expectation was that there would be an extensive body of literature, given that it seemed to be an important Irish cultural practice. However, when I conducted literature searches for any material relating to VGD in Ireland or elsewhere, my searches revealed only a few documented accounts of the practice. I was advised by staff at the 'National Museum of Ireland - Country Life' in County Mayo there should be a massive amount of recorded material held by the Irish Folklore Commission (1932 to 1971); and material held by the National Folklore Collection and the Irish Schools Collection (1938-40) - archived at University College Dublin. In reality (as set out in *The National Folklore Collection* below), there turned out to be very little material relating to VGD, which in part encouraged me to undertake this study in order to further our knowledge of this practice.

Again, in the wider academic literature, there are few accounts of gravedigging in Ireland. Where found, they predominantly relate to archaeological studies, such as that by McSparron (2021) of the late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age or those associated with clandestine burials of 'disappeared people' connected to 'the Troubles'. For example, Ruffell's (2005) study of people who were killed and secretly buried by the Provisional IRA and the use of modern techniques to locate their remains. A recent exception to this paucity of modern studies of gravedigging is that by Brown, Frisby and Prior (2024). Again, this an archaeological study. It is based on interviews with 16 paid gravediggers in the Bristol area of the UK in order to inform and seeks to understand how the way they go about their work, may affect archaeological sites by disturbing human remains or inadvertently leaving behind items, such as coins. Like this study they note that there is a sensitive and respectful relationship between the (paid) gravediggers and the bereaved. They speak of them being involved in

‘emotional management’ (Brown, Frisby and Prior, 2024, p110), especially where the death involves a child (for comparison, see Chapter 7, *Compassion and tragedy*)

The only study I found that gave extensive details of VGD in a modern industrial nation was amongst the Muscogee Creek Nation. These people are located in Oklahoma, USA and accounts of their voluntary burial practice is outlined in papers published by Walker and Balk (2007) and Walker and Walker (2008; 2019). Outside of the United States I have found just two modern accounts of VGD as part of wider studies. In the first, an academic piece by Cashman (2008), an interesting but fleeting mention of the practice is included as part of his wider ethnographic study of storytelling and its social significance in a rural Northern Ireland community. In the second, Toolis (2017) in a biography about his father, also briefly describes how neighbours on Achill Island dug his father’s grave and how people attending the burial helped to backfill it. In both cases the references are incidental, rather than detailing or analysing the practice, as this study will do.

In the absence of an extensive and direct literature to draw upon, this chapter will situate my study by presenting a general review of death literature that can be connected to VGD. I will then go on to consider two accounts of VGD, first the Cashman ethnography of rural Northern Ireland and secondly the Walker and Balk study of the Muscogee Creek Nation. I then consider the results from my *Archival Search* on VGD material held at the National Folklore Collection in Dublin. As a background to understanding the recent social history of rural Ireland and how much it has changed compared to what my study found, I review the Arensberg and Kimball social anthropology study (1940; 1968) and Brody’s ethnographic study, based in the West of Ireland (1973). These accounts then link into Chapter 4, *The Development of Modern Ireland*.

## **Death literature and VGD**

The literature on, and study of death and dying, thanatology, is vast and attracts contributions from all the major disciplines including history, social anthropology, sociology, psychology and philosophy.

This is unsurprising as the subject matter is one that is tied to all these disciplines and each of us. Studies vary from how students respond to and are affected by the death of a colleague caused by suicide (Mallon and Smith, 2021) to the hospice movement (Gill, 2007) and the commercial motivations of the funeral industry (Fletcher and McGowan, 2024). Given this, my review of death and dying literature will necessarily be limited and connected to those parts of the literature that are germane to my thesis. They are linked to what participants had to say about their relationship with and attitudes to death and support for the bereaved. In her wide-reaching account: *Death and Dying: A Sociological Introduction*, Howarth (2007) asserts that although death and dying are universal forces, our responses to them are embedded within our particular social and cultural worlds; that how we respond as individual nations will be complex; that our responses will reflect the cultural and social diversity of each country and this in turn will give people a range of acceptable responses to death. What emerges from this study, is participants in this rural West of Ireland culture have a seemingly relaxed relationship with death that includes: ongoing relationships with former and now dead neighbours; with comforting and practically supporting bereaved neighbours and handling the remains of the dead when they re-use old graves. These attitudes and responses to death are often distinctly different to the death practices in many other Western European countries.

Within the debate about death there is a wider structural discussion about the culture of death. The debate centres around whether it is predominately collective and Eastern (Watson, 1993), meaning death is experienced/mourned with other people, beyond the individual family unit. Alternatively, if the culture is Western and individualistic (Aries, 1974; Blauner, 1966), then death is experienced mostly in isolation from the wider community. Walter (2012) challenges this simple East and West divide by his description of those occasions when English people can flip from being emotionally restrained about the outward expression of grief, to mass mourning when the death is seen as disastrous. He cites the example of the 1989 Hillsborough football stadium disaster (Walter 1991b), as does, Brennan (2008) in his analysis of books of condolences arising from Hillsborough and the death of Princess Diana in 1997, as unexpected examples of collective mourning. Walter (2008) also

notes that Irish people, although living in a Western economy and society, have no difficulty in regularly mourning people beyond their immediate family. This complication is important for my thesis because in later chapters I describe communities that do not fit neatly into either a collective or individualistic lifestyle in relation to their responses to death, dying and expression of grief. Grainger (1998) in his exploration of how differently Irish people face the stark reality of death, compared to his English congregations (he was an Anglican Priest), attributes much to the collective support the bereaved family receive from the wider community when they gather for an Irish wake. I think this then supports the argument that even though Ireland is geographically and economically a Western nation, in the collective way in which people address death it shares characteristics with an Eastern perspective. Walker and Balk (2007) and Howarth (2007) argue that regardless of how culturally individualistic or collective your society may be, the individual will be corralled by wider social forces in how they express grief, this seemingly most personal emotion.

Perhaps the person who best captures the breadth and depth of the literature on this subject is Tony Walter. First as a freelance writer from 1984 and then as a fulltime sociologist from 1994 (Jacobsen, 2022). Since this beginning he has been writing about a range of issues connected to death and dying and its importance in the UK and around the world. His 2012 monograph: *Why different countries manage death differently* best illustrates the overarching importance of this subject area. In this account he identifies that much of the writing does not make clear the extent of their wider applicability, as often they are the findings of just one country; furthermore, they pass by the opportunity to compare and contrast how nations respond to matters concerned with death and dying. Surprisingly, Walter does not use this occasion to point out that even within nation states death practices can also vary considerably, as this study will demonstrate.

Two studies looking at the disposal of the dead have illustrated this disparity of death practices within nation states and how what is a constant, a dead body, is treated and seen so differently (Warpole, 2009). Watson (1993) writing about China notes there is considerable variation in burial

practices and the final disposal of the dead. He records that in the Southern provinces of Guangdong and Fujian, secondary burial is commonplace, with the exhumation of the remains after seven to ten years, when the remains are transferred to a large pot and then reburied in a tomb. In Northern China, Watson comments this practice causes people to recoil in horror. Here they instead practice simultaneous burial. This can mean storing the deceased above the ground for decades, until say a spouse or parent dies, when both can be interred together. Similarly, Danforth (1982) records secondary burial in Greece, a practice that is exclusively performed by women, but is now unknown outside rural communities. This happens approximately every five years, so the graves can be re-used but also so that the remains can be 'taken back into the light' (Danforth, 1982, p9) momentarily. They are then handed back to the family for reinterment in the village ossuary. One of the photographs in this book shows a woman being handed back a skull, that Danforth assumes to be the skull of this women's husband. This issue of significant differences in the burial of the dead within the same jurisdiction is a key theme of this study.

A study by Kelleher, Prendergast and Hockey (2005) of people who were cremated, looks at the motivations of their families for claiming and disposing of ashes; how these have changed, and perhaps changed back to a connection with traditional burial. They note in the 1970's around 10% of ashes were reclaimed, but by 2004 this had risen to 56%. Their study suggests there is a motivational overlap with traditional burials, but avoiding what their participants described as the undesirable parts, like slow bodily decay, but the desire to bury or scatter ashes in a way and in a place or places that hold long-term meaning for surviving family. In contrast, this avoidance of contact with the dead body is not shared by the participants in this study (see Chapter 5, *The Digging*). Warpole (2005) records 8.13% of Irish disposals were in 2005, by cremation, compared to 72.35% in the UK. By 2018 these rates had changed to 21.16% and 78.13% respectively (The Cremation Society of Great Britain, 2018). How people in Ireland will in the future choose to dispose of ashes may be less of a dilemma because graveyards will, according to Warpole, remain a natural point to inter remains because graveyards in Ireland are still seen as vibrant community spaces. Here

family plots are re-used over several generations and human remains are simply reinterred, with the latest person to occupy the grave (see Chapter 5, *The Digging*). This contrasts with many of the cemeteries and graveyards in the UK that are closed to future burials and so have become non-community spaces. This finding matches how some participants in this study referred to their local graveyard, as a place to visit or view from a window, to see former neighbours, who now reside there.

Walter's (2012) main argument for national differences in our views about death and dying is, they are a function of social and economic structures, history and the culture of each country. He identifies six structural and pivotal variables: urbanisation and the extent of division of labour; migration (internal and external); rationality, in relation to rational and scientific systems that improve life chances and life expectancy; risk and its management; information technology and history and institutions. For this study migration, and especially emigration and emigrant return, are important factors for explaining how people perceive death and dead people (see Chapter 7, *Living away from rural Ireland*). It also connects to his contention that a nation's history will play a large part in shaping its death practices. Within history, Walter includes the responses of a people who have been colonised. He cites the example of Poland and its rejection of cremation due to the association with Soviet Union death practices. Colonisation is also a factor that will be raised by the participants in this study in relation to the English (former colonial masters) way of responding to death, and their way as being specifically, not English. Under culture Walter emphasises: the importance of religion; secularisation; boundary regulation (between the living and dead); expressivism (that is free from the control of, for example, doctors or undertakers); the extent of status differentiation (say between men and women) and death practices and global flows of ideas connected to death, such as the hospice movement. This list of variables confirms Howarth's (2007) observation mentioned above, that the study of death and dying is far from being a unified body of knowledge with a common theoretical framework; that how individuals and whole societies view

death will be determined by overarching social, economic and historical factors. For this study, these factors are considered in detail in Chapter 4, *The Development of Modern Ireland*.

For the participants in this study, their relationship with and attitude to death and the dead is a key factor in explaining their social involvement with VGD. These relationships are also reflected in the literature on death. Durkheim (1915) was one of the first sociologists to point to the direct relationship between the living and the dead, as expressed through death rituals (Walter, 2008). In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915) Durkheim argues that what he suggests applies to Aboriginal People in Australia applies to all human societies.

When someone dies, the group to which he belongs feels itself lessened and, to react against this loss, it assembles. A common misfortune has the same effects as the approach of a happy event: collective sentiments are renewed which then lead men to seek one another and to assemble together. (Durkheim, 1915, p399)

In rural Ireland this 'assembling' will include the pre funeral wake and men gathering to dig their neighbour's grave. On a national scale it will entail national acts of remembrance. In Ireland this would include the annual commemoration of the Easter Rising, symbolising the historic pathway to Irish independence and the throwing off of centuries of foreign domination. In the UK, the state funeral of Queen Elizabeth II in September 2022 was an important point of marking both her death and the loss she represented to many British people, as a kind of 'mother to the nation'. It also served as a sign of national and royal continuity, with the presence of Charles III, the new king. In the recent Covid-19 world pandemic lockdown (2020-2022) the former Queen ironically came to symbolise what it feels like not to be able to follow Durkheim's dictum and mourn with others. She exemplified the personal and national loss people can experience when they are blocked from being able to do this. Consider her, the solitary figure in St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, in April 2021: wearing a facemask, mourning her husband of 74 years, Prince Philip, alone.

Becker's (1973) perspective on death departs from Durkheim's collective way of viewing death. It is his contention, speaking from a Freudian perspective, that our response to death has become fearful, arising from the unconscious realization that we all must die; that this worry begins in childhood and is repressed in adulthood. He theorises, but the evidence he presents seems limited, that in the past this fear was displaced by religious beliefs that life continued after death; that as society becomes secular, we no longer have the comfort of believing human life never ends. To protect us from the anxiety of the loss of everlasting life, he suggests we have invented three different strategies: a kind of immortality project, of making something of our life so that we leave behind a contribution to human society that lives on, even when we do not; secondly we may instead choose to lead a hedonistic life that blocks out the anxiety of the pointlessness of a life that will end; thirdly we can choose a life of trivia and things that do not matter like fast cars, career progression and consumption for its own sake.

The weakness of Becker's death anxiety argument is that it is closely tied to Freudian analysis that relies on analytical assertions that may be true, but are not falsifiable (Popper, 2002). For example, his contention that people try to make their life meaningful is connected to a fear of the death that awaits us, or alternatively and not considered by Becker: it could also simply be because a person wants to lead a life that makes a difference. In his thesis he leans heavily on the loss of the belief in eternal life for the existence of death anxiety. He does not, as other writers who have written since, take account of how other non-Abrahamic religions conceive of life after this one (Woodthorpe et al., 2022). This is a significant omission in relation to the millions of people in the world who are for instance Buddhist - and therefore have never viewed the individual life as something that persists after death, but rather a point of merging back into the oneness of all life. Similarly, Walker and Balk (2007) record that some First Nation People in the United States do not accept the notion of individual people having separate souls, even while appearing not to be concerned at the thought of their death. Interestingly Becker (1973) ends the final chapter by making what is a mystical, semi religious appeal for people to step away from the anxiety of the individual and just live a life in



harmony, in one with the rest of creation and not to cause harm to it. In the Preface he records, like Durkheim, that anthropologists note that primitive people were not afraid of death and instead saw it as an... 'occasion for celebration rather than fear – much like the Irish wake' (Becker, 1973, p.ix). It is not clear if this comment suggests he saw the Irish as still in touch with and not afraid of death, or primitive and therefore not afraid.

In 1974, the same year that Becker was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Nonfiction for *The Denial of Death*, the French historian Aries began a series of lectures at John Hopkins University, Baltimore, later published as *western attitudes toward DEATH (sic)*. At the time it must have appeared to scholars of death and dying, like a strong challenge to the Becker thesis. Aries argued that people were not frightened by death, the dead or of dying. Put simply, they just didn't care, because they, people in Western Europe and North America had been conditioned by the market economy not to care. He dates this deterioration as developing between the 1930's and 1950s when he claims death was being medicalised. He described how dying had become a 'technical phenomenon', how families no longer stayed with their dying relative and death in his view had become 'a silent thing'. In terms of the outward expression of grief, he claims this has been shuffled into private space. That all this has happened to death he contends is because of an interdict to be happy and avoid anything that causes unhappiness, and at least appear to be happy. His most biting comments are reserved for undertakers who he sees as having morphed into funeral directors and 'doctors of grief' with a mission akin to that of doctors and priests: to return us to 'normalcy'.

Although adopting quite different explanations from one another as to what has happened to death in the West, both Becker (1973) and Aries have created an image of so-called death denying societies. Why then do neither of them cite Blauner (1966) in these works? This is surprising as he offers a much simpler explanation for our relationship with death and how we treat the dying and the dead. It also fells the argument that modern societies are death denying. His contention is that in the past, (and this would include the recent past that Durkheim was writing about) death would

involve the loss of key social and economic members of a community and family members, such as infants, children and parents - so threatening the whole future of the community. Now, he argues death is mostly confined to older people who are being cared for up to their death within various specialist facilities. This means that when they die, their loss is expressed as private grief by family and close friends, rather than a mourned loss by the whole community. In effect death and grieving has largely become invisible, rather than denied. The research later presented in this thesis, demonstrates that whole communities in the West of Ireland still mourn the death of almost anyone who dies in their locality (My Research Log, 1-12 September 2019), including old people. It therefore casts doubt on the sweeping assertion that the wider community no longer mourn the loss when a member dies and the expression of loss is now just confined to private family grief, as claimed by Blauner (1966) and above by Aries (1974).

Seale (1998) argues we should neither deny death or diminish its importance, because it awaits us all. But he accepts people are understandably frightened of the inevitability of death and its connection to our sense of embodiment, and all bodies die. His claim is this knowledge does not necessarily lead to hopelessness but can lead to human social bonds and society, acting in opposition to, but not in denial of death. Seale's perspective closely matches some of the observations and reflections of the participants in this study, while digging graves or exhuming human remains: the realisation that the grave is your final destination but the abiding social importance that it should be your neighbours who knew you, who will comfort your family, dig your grave and leave you gently down into it (Dara) (see Chapter 7, Neighbours).

Bradbury (1999) arguably takes our concerns about death and dying to a more basic level. She reiterates Seale's (1998) observation that at some level most of us are frightened of death, but she argues this includes those who are professionally engaged with death, such as doctors, morticians and undertakers, professions that were key parts of her ethnographic study. Speaking as someone who is studying her own society and therefore immersed in its cultural values, she challenges the

notion that we (I assume she means the English, or possibly the British) do not know how to speak about death, but rather ‘...we know only too well’ (Bradbury, 1999, p 142). Included within this observation is an embedded understanding about how we can talk about death and how we may not. Bradbury’s observation may be a point of comparison with the participants in this study. They also knew ‘only too well’ how to speak about death and specifically the dead, but possibly drawing from a larger reservoir, because of their direct relationship with the dead (via the Irish wake and open coffin) and their responsibility to bury the deceased (see Chapters 5, 6 and 7).

When considering our death, Bradbury claims most of us are focussed on ensuring a good death for ourselves and the people we care most deeply for, and to avoid a bad one. She notes the confusion arises when different participants describe the same type of death as a good or a bad death. For example, someone with religious faith could die in a state of spiritual grace but in terrible pain and still describe this as a good death; for people hoping for a natural death this could mean they have been able to subvert medical intervention, even if they suffered a more painful death. A good medical death is simply according to Bradbury a pain free one. The difficulty with these three types of hoped for death, valid as these categories may be, is that Bradbury is describing linear choices. Kellehear (2014) in *The Inner Life of the Dying Person* argues that dying is more complicated and the accounts of what dying people go through are typically garnered from the perspective of friends or family members. Instead, he claims dying is an oscillating journey that can flip from for instance despair and anger to hope and transcendence. For this study Kellehear’s observation became important when participants talk about how people died, especially in cases where the death was considered to be a tragic one (see Chapter 7, *Compassion and tragedy*). Regardless of what kind of death we seek, a common thread that runs through Bradbury’s (1999) analysis and perhaps all the literature on death and dying is, ‘the attempt to gain control at this most disturbing and potentially chaotic moment in our life histories’ (Bradbury, 1999, p146).

The Irish poet John O'Donohue, (2009) has a poem entitled *the dead are our nearest neighbours*. In this poem he describes the dead as nearby, he talks of them being just over the horizon. This view that those who have died are not far away, are within 'talking distance' is reflected in the wider death literature. This direct relationship with the dead is a theme that will be considered later in this study. Howarth (2007) suggests it is most prevalent amongst the elderly and recently bereaved and this may also be accentuated if the surviving partner is socially isolated (Howarth, 2000). She identifies three factors that influence our relationship with the dead: the religious perspective of the community; how the corpse is seen - as a friend, foe, or someone who should have left this world (as also reported by Walker and Balk, 2007), and of course, the prevailing practices around the expression of grief.

Woodthorpe et al. (2022) bring the literature on death and dying up to date with the concept of the unemotional funeral. They describe a recent trend for people in the UK to completely bypass the cremation service and for the dead to go straight from the undertakers to be cremated. The claimed benefits, based on in depth interviews with 17 bereaved families who had opted for a direct cremation, is that it offers: compromise over the exact details of how and if a commemoration is to be held; control by being able to filter who will be invited to attend any after funeral wake and consistency, with meeting the expressed wishes of the bereaved family and those of the deceased, rather than those of the funeral director. This study identifies new possible patterns around the disposal of the dead which may hint at a different, more private future around death, a future that writers on death and dying have been suggesting for over 60 years, starting with Blauner (1966). Woodthorpe et al. (2022) suggest this has already happened to weddings, that over the same period have become smaller and increasingly private. They speculate whether this is now happening to funerals. To truly test the robustness of this study would require a much bigger follow on one, especially as publication of this paper occurred during the period of a Covid-19 worldwide pandemic, a period when all funerals were very restricted. This study was only able to survey 17 families out of an approximate 600,000 people who die every year in the UK. At this time, we do not have enough

information about why more families are opting for direct cremation. The desire to have smaller, more personal after-funeral gatherings may be just one explanation. Woodthorpe et al. do not explore whether this trend for direct funerals could also extend to direct burials. Critically their findings are based on just one small UK study. They mention direct cremations are already established in the United States and Australia but do not cite international comparisons as recommended by Walter (2012).

## **Accounts of VGD**

To date, I have only been able to identify two modern day accounts of VGD in Ireland: on Achill Island, County Mayo and another in Northern Ireland. Toolis (2017) in *My Father's Wake*, describes his father's return to retired life on Achill Island in Mayo, having spent most of his working life in London. Subsequently he died on Achill and was waked by his family and neighbours. Toolis describes how a group of local men voluntarily dig his father's grave because there is no paid gravedigger in the area. He outlines that this is a tough job and experienced as an honour. For the men who dig the grave their only reward is a few pints at the nearby local pub. Toolis goes on to describe his father's burial where the same men are standing by to help lower Sonny Toolis into his grave and help with the backfilling. He relates how some families leave the backfilling of the grave to gravediggers (and I assume then leave) but the men in his family decided to backfill the grave themselves. Toolis says: 'And the grave filled and Sonny's dying over. Finished' (Toolis, 2017, p259). What Toolis describes conforms closely to what I have been told and observed about VGD, except for two details. Participants in this same area told me that backfilling while everyone is present was now unusual and most voluntary gravediggers prefer to do the backfilling when everyone has left the burial, including close family. Just one participant told me that the old way of backfilling while the family was present was psychologically healthier, cathartic and helped with the healing process, even if it was a little brutal to observe. Toolis also assumes that the reason the gravedigging had to be undertaken by volunteers is because there is no paid gravedigger on Achill Island. I am informed by

participants I interviewed from this area that there are paid gravediggers in the area but they are only used for people without connection to Achill. People who have left the area because of economic necessity and returned to retire and die in the area, as Sonny did, are still considered local and therefore neighbours would expect and want to dig their grave.

Ray Cashman (2008) also describes VGD. He is American folklorist who during 1998-99 conducted an ethnographic study in Aghyaran, a rural community near Castlederg in County Tyrone. Aghyaran is situated in Northern Ireland, close to the border with Donegal, in the Irish Republic. The study focused on the significance of storytelling as a mode of transmitting and maintaining local culture. In 2008 this was published as *Storytelling on the Northern Ireland Border*. Most of his group observations are derived from attending ceilidhs, that include people just visiting one another and funeral wakes. Ceilidhs can include larger and formal gatherings such as live and traditional Irish music, singing and dancing. On one occasion Cashman fleetingly describes how he takes part in a VGD with five of his neighbours. He relates how having been at the wake for John Mongon all night, he agrees the next morning to make himself useful (just in the way I did, see Chapter 2, *My effect on the research*) and to bring food and drink to the five local men who are digging John's grave. He notes how in this area the normal practice is for neighbours and more distant relatives to undertake this task, rather than employ professional gravediggers.

In my email correspondence with Cashman (5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> February 2021) he confirms his understanding that VGD is commonplace but undocumented. Cashman is primarily interested in the storytelling that routinely happens in social situations such as VGD, wakes or ceilidhs; about individual characters and how this portrays the wider community, its values and concerns. As with my study, he sees this as an opportunity for actors to do more than complete an activity, but also an opportunity to share wider thoughts and reflections about the person and their place in the community. His contention is the story seems to be about the individual, but there is a deeper reality, about its importance as a carrier of social values the wider community wishes to embed or possibly to jettison or mock. While

this may be true, he does not consider the opposite argument as outlined by for example, Walter (2012) that increasingly, stories about the dead are a celebration of the individual and reflect the atomised lives we live, before we die. Also, when he recounts stories, he tells them as separate accounts. He does not consider that story telling may be a time of compilation and community curation (see Chapter 6, *Telling the stories of the life*) when the disparate tales about the individual come together to tell a whole story of the person, for possibly the first time.

The Cashman study took place in a part of the island of Ireland which has only recently emerged from a period of civil unrest, known as 'The Troubles'. He notes that while neighbours with both unionist and republican roots come together around death practices, such as VGD and wakes, at the same time, they harbour suspicion of each other, but agree that 'political anger must be held in check among the neighbours' (Cashman, 2007, p.21). Given that the participants in the Cashman study and those in my study were both in geographical Northwest Ireland, and barely 100 miles apart, the impact of religious and sectarian difference on VGD and wider relationships will be an interesting and later point of comparisons. In particular, I will analyse whether religious differences play an important part in relationships between VGD who are members of the Catholic and Church of Ireland (Protestant) faiths.

Cashman contends that while these communities are holding onto traditional values and practices, he insists 'modernity and globalisation are realities in felt presences' (2008, p10), although he does not go on to theorise how this co-existence can be explained. But citing Edwards (1996), he argues that we are unwise to assume that what happens in rural Ireland is not affecting the rest of the country.

Bridget Edwards shares my discontent with the effort of those who in studying Ireland "link what is modern with what is urban, and what is urban with what is relevant" because they can lead to new narrow orthodoxies and reductionist approaches. Paying attention to the forms of expressive culture in the rural West of Ireland, Edwards helps us reconsider the supposed

dichotomies of the urban and of the rural and of the modern and the traditional, while demonstrating the continued relevance of ethnography in rural settings. (Cashman, 2008, p257)

My study will later consider, as argued by Edwards (1996), how much of what is happening in rural Ireland reflects a dying and irrelevant past, in practices such as VGD - and how much it represents a new accommodation, whereby traditional practices and a modern economy can exist in tandem.

Just one study that I have located illustrates how VGD and a modern economy can exist side by side.

In 2007, Walker and Balk published *Bereavement Rituals in the Muscogee Creek Tribe*, a self-governed Native American tribe in Central and Eastern Oklahoma. The study involved 27 in depth, qualitative interviews with tribe members concerning death and funereal practices. The study identified a number of rituals that include: conducting a wake service the night before the burial; never leaving the body alone before the burial; enclosing personal items and food in the casket; digging by hand both at the burial and the closing of the grave; a final *shaking hands* with the deceased (by throwing a handful of dirt into the grave) and adhering to a mourning period, usually four days. Apart from placing food in the casket, which I am not aware of happening in my study areas, these practices can be regularly observed in the West of Ireland, and as such provide common points of comparison with this study.

Amongst Muscogee Creek Nation people Walker and Balk note the heavy responsibility of the next generation to carry on reciprocal arrangements relating to the burial of the dead, with obligations extending over considerable periods of time. Participants in this study report a similar responsibility to hand on and not 'drop the baton' in their generation. The Walker and Balk study does not explain why it is important to the group for the grave to be dug and filled by hand. I have assumed this relates to the very personal, ritualistic and non-mechanical relationship between the person who has died and their kin:



... that morning they have to get up at sunrise. And they have to also fast, and they stay at the gravesite the whole time. They don't come up for the services or anything. (A 36-year-old woman) (Walker and Balk, 2007, p642)

Once the person has died, they are not seen as having left the community. They are rather seen as residing in another place. This place can be a traditional graveyard but may also include a building with a permanent roof-like structure that corresponds to the size of the grave, but spans it, so encompassing the dead person. It is suggested by the authors this practice relates to a time before European settlement of North America, when the Muscogee Creek Nation's dead were buried above the ground in domed graves.

Their study is based on interviews with Muscogee Creek people living on tribal lands. It is unclear if this community's way of life directly compares with the everyday experience of other Muscogee Creek Nation people in the United States. Also, it is not specified if the values and practices of these people are continued when living outside tribal areas, in American towns and cities, or even if this is possible. But some participants in this study do describe how sometimes when attending funerals outside the Nation it can be distressing for them when required to comply with American funereal practice. For example, when told to leave a dead person who has been lowered into the grave, but uncovered, and for the backfilling to be done using a mechanical digger, after all the family and kin have left.

We were not allowed to cover the grave or congregate. It left me feeling very incomplete. I told my son that he better make sure that I am completely covered at my burial service! (A 53-year-old woman) (Walker and Balk, 2007, p642)

The authors report that there is no definite demarcation between the dead and living in the Muscogee Creek Nation. The view that the dead are not entirely gone from their communities, is also present in the communities in my studies and will be considered at length later on in this thesis.

In conducting their study Walker and Balk (2007) recognise there are major ethical and cultural challenges in understanding the Muscogee Creek Nation people when viewed from a Western industrial position. They note their position as white researchers studying indigenous people who have been oppressed, deposed and 're-settled' by white settlers for hundreds of years, raises considerations about a power imbalance between the researched and the researchers. In studying a tribal group's most sacredly held beliefs they are aware some people may simply not want to share these with outsiders or see them written down. Further, if you are granted access to important customs that may be sacred or very sensitive, you must realize this is an honour and should be treated as such. One participant expresses this sentiment as not wanting to make their life into a "science project" (Walker and Balk, 2007, p650). To a lesser extent this association with oppression was possibly an unconscious power imbalance I carried as a researcher from England (even with Irish heritage), given the still recent oppressor to oppressed history between the British and the Irish (see Chapter 4, *Recent History*).

Walker (2018) notes both the Muscogee Creek Nation and Lakota Sioux tribes place a greater emphasis on a collective way of seeing and living, compared to other people in the United States. They claim this way of seeing also informs their spiritual perspective, including questioning the concepts of separate souls – and instead viewing themselves as being part of one great genderless spirit or *Ibofanga*, (citing Chaudhuri and Chaudhuri, 2001). This perspective extends to religion and prayer that is seen as part of their culture, rather than something separate and experienced individually. This is something that will also be explored later in this study.

## **The National Folklore Collection**

When I first heard of the Irish National Folklore Commission (NFC) and its extensive back catalogue and ambitions as an institution, I was hopeful it would provide a baseline for any research I might subsequently conduct. It was established in 1932 and ran until 1971 before being subsumed into a

successor organization, The National Folklore Collection. The NFC was set up partly as a response to the mass emigration that was taking place during that period. Successive Irish Governments were concerned that as so many adults left the country numerous aspects of its traditions and folklore would be lost (Briody, 2008). The Commission employed several full and part time collectors under the direction of its fulltime Archivist, Seán Ó Suilleabháin. He compiled a handbook to guide and prompt the fieldwork of collectors entitled *The Handbook of Irish Folklore* (1963). The guide is 699 pages long and broken down into 14 separate categories, such as settlements and dwellings to folk medicine.

In February 2018, in response to my enquiries about parts of the archive containing material about VGD, I was invited to visit the National Folklore Collection based at University College Dublin. I was advised to allow three days for my visit to go through the parts of the Archive that pertained to my area of study, *Human Life*. This part of the archive includes six sub-categories: death; funerals; graveyards; the dying person; digging the grave and the burial. All these sections were identified by the archivist as potentially containing information connected to the practice of neighbours digging graves for deceased members of the community.

Upon detailed inspection I found that none of the material addressed the practice of VGD. This was a surprise to me (and to the staff at NFC) given the detail found in the field guide, the six areas dealing specifically with death and funereal practice and the length of time (39 years) during which field work was undertaken. The only area where there was a large amount of data concerned cillíni. Cillíni were places reserved for children who had died before a Roman Catholic baptism or for others who were thought to have taken their own life. Here the issue was whether a person should be buried in a cillín or in a consecrated graveyard. None of the accounts involved VGD.

On my final afternoon at the Collection, I was directed to the Sound Archivist, who identified three possible sound recordings that might include mention of VGD: NFC ref UPP0277; NFC ref OT0045A; NFC ref OT0066B. The first two references were very brief and respectively concerned details of

reciprocal gravedigging in Dublin recorded in 1980 and gravediggers digging the wrong grave and 'drink being taken' in West Meath. The third was a fuller account from Mr Kenny John from the Westmeath/Roscommon area. During a wide-ranging interview, Mr John spoke for seven minutes about community gravedigging. He mentions that the practice normally involved second and third generation cousins; how a husband or wife would watch the digging but play no part in it; how neighbours carried the coffin to the burial on a specially constructed poles, usually using only green roads and avoiding metalled ones; once at the graveside, the poles were destroyed so they couldn't be used again; how it took between two and five hours to dig a grave (depending on whether it was an old or a new grave respectively); how a 7 foot scraw was cut before the burial so the grave could be returned to green as soon as possible; how any previous human remains were reinterred in the middle of the newly dug grave. (NFC, ref OT0066B, 6<sup>th</sup> April 1970). Although some of the details have changed, what Mr John describes around the digging, dealing with human remains and the burial, was what participants in this study told me was involved in VGD (see Chapter 5, *the Digging*).

The lack of references to VGD within the NFC was a surprising omission and demonstrated there is a gap in our knowledge about this practice up to 1971 and since, both in The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. This will be addressed by my study. However, it seems only fair to acknowledge the National Folklore Commission was at the time of its inception breaking new ground in Ireland and in Europe in gathering a wide-ranging exploratory archive, during a period when Ireland had only recently emerged as an independent nation. In doing so it was operating at a time of severely restricted resources, so that limited oversight of how comprehensively all the sections in the field guide was addressed might be expected. Additionally, the focus of the archive was to capture the authentic voice of Irish people, their folklore and beliefs (Briody, 2008). If at the end of this process there are incomplete parts or unconscious omissions, surely this is to expected especially for such a new and groundbreaking organisation, operating with severely restricted resources and within what was a newly emerging independent nation.

My lasting impression from reading and listening to many entries over three days at the NFC is that the intention of those who compiled the data was to record what the participants wanted to share, with gentle prompting. It was not to interrogate what they might know about a particular subject or to interpret what a tradition, superstition or practice meant. The interview with Mr John from 1980 vindicates the approach taken by the archivists and their field collectors. It illustrates how much can be gathered merely by letting the participant speak in their own voice (Westmarland, 2011). In just seven minutes he describes a complex and remarkable community, where its members were taking great care of their dead. His description of neighbours carrying the coffin on poles and only using 'green roads' hints at a high level of community cohesion and mutual concern, qualities and values that will be considered in detail in this study, based on what the VGDs reported. In retrospect, the approach of just letting participants speak and being as unobtrusive as possible did influence how I conducted my interviews with participants. This is discussed more fully in Chapter 2 (*Research method*).

Although it was a disappointment to only find one entry about VGD, it does confirm one of the findings from this study: that community gravedigging has to some extent always been considered to be culturally normal, and therefore remained socially invisible (Alexander, 2003) even to those tasked with documenting traditions. However, there is an alternative explanation for this omission. Briody (2014) cites the Irish novelist Máirtín Ó Cadhain and his assessment that the NFC were not really interested in living folklore (Briody does not say whether he concurs with Ó Cadhain) and traditional practice (and there is no way of knowing, if perhaps, this might have included traditions like VGD), but merely interested in it as the fossilized remains of medieval culture, or what Ó Cadhain describes as 'dead clay': In his opinion (Ó Cadhain's), Irish folklorists were 'embalmers and entombers' of tradition (Briody, 2014, p61).

This may be an overly harsh explanation for the omission of VGD from this folklore collection. I include it here because it is one repeated by Briody (2008) who has written extensively, respectfully

and with authority about the NFC. Perhaps his observation is at least, a general reminder for any reader/researcher to be aware of the possible significance of what might to be left out, as well as what is included in a text. For this study it has meant I have tried to remain aware of what participants and other informants have told me about VGD, and may not have told to other researchers with less personal contacts in the area, and of course vice versa. I suspect, but have no way of checking, that critical views about dead people and their families were largely held back by most participants. This matter is discussed more fully in Chapter 2, *Data analysis*.

The National Museum of Ireland and the NFC also recommended 'the Schools Collection' as a possible source of accounts of VGD. It is also held by the NFC at UCD and is a digitalised record of 18,000 senior primary school children's accounts of local history and oral traditions, collected between 1937-1939. Entries cover a wide range of accounts of cultural practices and folklore traditions. The Schools Collection also contains 226 transcript references connected to either graves, gravedigging or burials, although there are no actual accounts of specific graves being dug. When children are writing about graves and gravedigging it is usually in the context of telling stories related to customs, buried treasure, mythical figures (frequently giants) and ghost stories. Some of their accounts are linked to historic events like the location of sites of mass burials connected to the 1845-51 potato famine or cholera epidemics and pit graves. There are three occasions in which children give detailed accounts of things that should or should not happen in relation to VGD. For instance, that any persons who are going to help dig the grave should leave the wake by the rear door (CBES: 0033B/p05\_043); that close family should not be involved in digging the grave of their deceased member (CBES:0770/p153) and that food and drink is brought to the volunteer grave diggers. All the accounts suggest a child population who are comfortable reflecting on death and the dead from an early age as an accepted part of everyday life, including references to adults handling and reburying human remains. This theme of early exposure to matters to do with death is explored in more detail in Chapter 5, *Reared to it*. Although there were no direct references to VGD, many of the entries within the Schools Collection portray children with extensive knowledge of farming, rural life and an

appreciation of the changing patterns of the seasons. The two studies that follow on from this section are also examples of a disappeared rural Ireland and an account of what remains unchanged.

## **Social and historic studies of rural Ireland**

The *Harvard Irish Study* (1930 to 1936) although not specifically addressing the practice of VGD, did attempt to encapsulate everyday rural life in the West of Ireland via a social anthropology study led by Arensberg and Kimble that took place from 1932 to 1934. Up until the 1970s, it was seen to define all the sociological and anthropological studies of rural Ireland which followed it (Byrne, Edmondson and Varley, 2015). The *Harvard Irish Study* consisted of a three-part research programme centred on County Clare. It looked at the physical anthropology of the area, its archaeology and social anthropology. The study that concentrated on social anthropology was led by Arensberg and Kimble (2001 [1940]). It entailed a two-year study of six rural communities in County Clare and the town of Ennis in County Clare (the County Town). Their analysis found that community and families, with close kinship ties with their neighbours, are the key drivers and source of social cohesion for people in their study areas. Arensberg and Kimball claimed that this resulted in stable rural communities, guided by a self-regulating social system that would naturally return to equilibrium, even in the face of massive social pressures. It is worth noting that at that time, rural Ireland was facing population loss, poverty and high levels of emigration that had continued unabated since the 1847-51 potato famine (see Chapter 4, *The Potato Famine*) and high levels of bachelorhood, and therefore unsustainable communities.

Like Arensberg and Kimble, this thesis will also record the importance of neighbours (see Chapter 7, Neighbours). They also describe these relationships with neighbours as being strengthened by ties resulting from marriage and kinship. This study did not consider kinship connections in any detail but in Area 1 (an area I have visited since 1957) most people are related through marriage to their neighbours. It would therefore be unremarkable for a neighbour to be a first or second cousin.

Arensberg and Kimble note the importance of cooring (the sharing and returning of labour and skills) and *the meitheal* (people coming together to help at times of pressure, like gathering and reeking the hay). Over 90 years separate this study and theirs. It will therefore be interesting to compare how much has changed in this social and rural landscape, especially the significance of neighbours and possible connections with VGD.

Despite the range of the Arensberg and Kimble study, there are shortcomings. This is mainly because of its reliance on structural functionalism, a theory that assumes that in each society there are key social structures that hold it together and individuals are bounded and controlled by these structures. This now appears to be idealistic as it assumes these communities are harmonious and everyone knows and accepts their place in the social structures. It also denies the possibility that societies, even ostensibly close-knit ones, can be oppressive and in conflict, especially with any individual who steps outside rigorously enforced social norms. For example, one of the *five frameworks of relationship* that they claim knits together rural Ireland and so keeps it stable is *the relationship of sex organization*. They say of this system and its stabilising effect on the community:

They make up an organisation of behaviour canalizing the sexual drives in the direction of family life and forming a common attitude towards sexual behaviour and a common norm of conduct and standard sexual morality. (Arensberg and Kimble, 2001, originally 1940, p302)

This claim now reads as unsupportable when you consider the whole network of places of correction and confinement for girls who were even suspected of breaking sexual norms or boys who were considered unruly (O'Toole 2021, McAleese Report, 2013 and Ryan Commission of Enquiry 2009).

One of these places of correction was the Industrial School for Boys at Letterfrack, barely 30 miles from Arenberg and Kimball's study area in neighbouring County Galway.

It should also be noted that this study was just one part of a wider study that included archaeology and physical anthropology, under the direction of Earnest Hooton, the Curator of Somatology at the Peabody Museum at Harvard University. This physical anthropology entailed the physical



measurement of 10,000 Irish men and 1,200 Irish women and their classification as 'racial types' – including their head circumference. Byrne, Edmondson and Varley (2015, and citing Bell and Newby, 1974) speculate whether these scientists viewed themselves as representative of a 'master system' making comparison with a peasant race. They wonder whether the percentage of people of Irish origin in the American population, then at around 20 percent, was a worry for some members of the *Harvard Irish Study*. Of itself, this association should not rule out the Arensberg and Kimble study which was claimed by its authors, was conducted in a non-judgemental way, with the aim of understanding the details and meanings of social life in rural Ireland. If there is a lasting criticism, it was rather, they set out to study functioning communities and inevitably ended up describing charming, cohesive, functioning - but not totally real communities. Their descriptions are devoid of conflict that must have been present in these communities, evident for example in the network of industrial schools and Magdelene laundries, outlined above. Inglis (2017) describes this tendency to idealise Irish society as a kind of mythical trap every sociologist has to a duty to steer clear of when studying this society. This is something I consider in greater and personal detail in Chapter 2, *Data analysis*. There I also conclude it is easy to idealise rural Western Irish communities and so fail to see these are complex and real places, where social relationships can be contradictory and conflictual, even while being generally harmonious, for most people, most of the time (Miller, 2024).

In the year that Ireland joined the European Economic Community (EEC), 1973, the anthropologist Hugh Brody took up the challenge of publishing an account of a more complex and nuanced rural Irish community, *Inishkillane: Change and Decline in the West of Ireland (1973)*. This was his account of rural life in West Cork, coastal West Clare and Galway (Connemara) with passing references to Donegal, as he found it in the late 1960s. His study is focused on an anonymised village in coastal West Clare he refers to as *Inishkillane*. As the subtitle suggests, it is mainly a study of rural decline. His central thesis is that as the rest of Ireland had begun to modernise, people living in rural Ireland were more exposed to the wider industrialised world, and this undermined fundamental rural life and its values. These values included long term commitment to the family, subsistence farming and

neighbours. He describes communities where most young women were leaving to find more secure employment in the UK and the USA. Of the young men who remained, and he doesn't explain why they were more reluctant to leave in the same proportions, most were destined to become isolated, and in some cases, mentally depressed and despondent bachelors.

In terms of livelihood, Brody claims people had moved away from a stable, if poor, lifestyle, guaranteed by subsistence farming and fishing, to a less stable dependence on regular remittances from those who had left the community and welfare payments. In effect he describes whole communities in a state of anomie (Hocking, 1973) which I take to be a breakdown in the social bonds that hold communities together and in individuals is manifested by a sense of hopelessness and a lack of purpose (Durkheim, 2002). Brody documents massive economic change, with communities moving away from a system of giving their labour and being owed it by neighbours, known as *cooring*, to a money economy where you no longer need your neighbour or kin. These findings are not confirmed by this study. The qualities, values and traditions he assumes were draining away, were still present in all four areas included in this study, even if expressed in new ways. (Please see findings Chapters: 5,6 and 7.)

In many respects this study was, as Brody declares, an equal and opposite reaction to the Arensberg and Kimball (1968, originally 1940) study. The core of his criticism is against Arensberg and Kimball 's unquestioning theoretical reliance on structural functionalism, leading to the false perception of Irish rural culture as an 'integrated whole', so ruling out any judgement that might question this (Brody, 1973, p5). But in his response to them, he seems to have swung to an opposite position, viewing rural Ireland as dysfunctional and disintegrating (Schmitt, 1974). In adopting a 'dysfunctional' perspective he looked for, and found, examples of rural Irish life not working, rather than viewing it as a society in social and economic transition (see Chapter 4, *The Development of Modern Ireland*).

My argument is not that Brody was wrong to challenge the notion of rural Ireland as a perfectly happy and always functioning place, rather that he was unbalanced in his criticism. I would instead

argue that Brody did not recognise Ireland was already on an economic trajectory that would mean an end to dependence on remittances from those who had to leave and mass migration (Bartlett, 2010) - although not all migration. He also failed to foresee that much of Ireland's development would also be on its Western Seaboard. Later this thesis will consider these ideas and argue that residents in small rural communities where VGD is still commonplace, are part of a modern and affluent economy, where the traditional values Brody assumed were dying, persist, even if expressed slightly differently. Furthermore, his finding that rural people were uncertain about the value of their lifestyle and so sought reassurances and affirmation from tourists that their way of life was a valid one will be considered in detail later in this study. It is not substantiated by what participants reported, although his concerns about rural depopulation and an ageing population are reflected in their accounts.

## Summary

The literature on death and dying demonstrates there is wide variation in how individuals and whole societies address human mortality. While the choices individuals make about how they deal with death and dying are diverse, it does not follow that these choices are made independently of other people (Howarth, 2007) and this I would argue includes the participants in my study. People living in the rural West of Ireland, together with the Muscogee Creek Nation, are both death outliers in Western individualised countries, with the former more so in relation to their English and urban<sup>3</sup> Irish counterparts and the latter compared to most people living in American urban areas. Their common distinguishing quality is that both appear to be collective cultures in predominately individualised nations. The Irish National Folklore Commission collection and to a lesser extent the

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<sup>3</sup> Where the term urban is used in this document it refers to both towns and cities. Most people in Ireland who do not live in rural areas live in small towns and villages. Ireland has only one city, Dublin, with a population of over 1 million (1,024,027). In my study areas, the largest city is Galway City (70,686) and the two largest towns are Castlebar (12,874) and Westport (6,200) (World Population Review, 2024)

Cashman study demonstrate how a significant cultural tradition like VGD can be hidden in plain sight. It seems this can happen for a variety of reasons ranging from something being so normal (see Chapter 5, *'It's Normal'*) to Briody's (2014) query as to whether culture is seen at all, unless it is considered to be high culture. The two sometimes opposing studies by Arnsberg and Kimble (2001, org 1940) and Brody (1973) were, when first published thought to be important measures and predictors of what rural Ireland was and might become. This study will situate itself between these positions. It will show the rural West of Ireland is both a part of a developed industrial nation and a place that holds tight to its traditional practices that include VGD. What Ireland has become and is becoming is considered in detail in the next chapter, *The Development of Modern Ireland*.

## 4. The Development of Modern Ireland

### Introduction

As mentioned earlier, I first encountered a group of men voluntarily digging a neighbour's grave in 2011. I was surprised to see that a practice associated with an agrarian Ireland, still existed in a modern economy and society like the Republic of Ireland (hereafter referred to as Ireland and not including Northern Ireland, which is outside the scope of this study). What I had not appreciated was how recently Ireland had become a 'modern' and developed Western European nation and therefore how it was possible for the traditional and modern to seemingly exist side by side. In this chapter I will therefore consider in some detail several themes that are illustrative of the momentous changes Ireland has gone through in comparatively recent times, in which both these imperatives seem to exist: to be a modern and industrial society and to retain traditional practices, like voluntary gravedigging (VGD). These changes are considered via five main themes. I note that while the practice of gravedigging might have remained the same physically, the context in which it occurs has changed considerably, as Ireland has modernised.

### Recent History

Ireland has a long and ancient recorded history, dated from the fifth century (Davies, 1999). Its re-emergence as a sovereign nation is a comparatively recent event. In 1171 Ireland was invaded by a force led by the English King, Henry II (Bartlett, 2010). He then claimed Ireland as part of his kingdom, declaring himself and his successors, Lords of Ireland (Davies, 1999). Although there would be periods of Irish rebellion and situations where British control was more declarative than actual (Bartlett, 2010, p79) Ireland would remain part of the English Kingdom and later British Empire for 751 years. In 1922 it became the Irish Free State, a Dominion of the British Commonwealth, with its own government and policies, but with its elected representatives still swearing allegiance to the

British Crown (represented via a Governor General). It was not until 1948 that Ireland self-declared as a sovereign independent country, becoming the Republic of Ireland. This historical background is important and, in this chapter, I consider whether this period of enforced occupation has had the effect of making Irish people want to hold onto cultural differences, including its death practices, in order to distinguish themselves from the British.

One area of recent Irish history that has a direct connection with VGD is the Potato Famine (1845 – 1852). It is still remembered by Irish people today as something shocking and deliberate that happened comparatively recently, to people who are their ancestors. This memory is both historic and material. It is present in memories but also in the tumbled down homes of the people who perished during the famine, or had to leave. It can still be seen along the roadside and in the fields in all the places where the participants in this study live. Bartlett (2010) described the Potato Famine as having ...'burst on Ireland with all the impact of a nuclear explosion' (p285).

In 2022, the population of the Republic of Ireland was just over 5 million, its highest level since 1841 (CSO a, Census 2022) when the population was much larger. In 1845 it is estimated the population of Ireland was circa 8.5 million people, with most living in the countryside (Bartlett, 2010). At this time nearly half the population were dependent on the potato as their main source of sustenance, and for the next seven years the potato crop would be severely affected by a potato blight, *phytophthora infestans*. By 1852 around a million people had died from a combination of starvation and disease, and another million fled the country, mostly emigrating to North America and the UK (Barlett, 2010).

The purpose here is not to enter a historical/political debate about who, or what, was to blame for so many people dying or leaving Ireland, but to note that this one event has had a lasting effect on the psyche of the Irish people, especially in relation to the burial of the dead, and the future independent development of Ireland as a post-colonial people. Moane (2017) has recorded that the lasting legacies of having been a colonised people can be both positive and negative in their impacts on populations. For instance, the sense of courage people experienced from having broken free from

the coloniser, may contrast with a lasting sense of oppression of having been dominated by an external force. Bartlett (2010) notes several long-term changes resulting from the potato famine that include population decline and rural land use. The most immediate was that Ireland became and remained an emigrant nation, and this pattern continued into the 1970's. Barlett records this massive decline continued in the period after the famine and up to 1921, when a further 8 million people who were born in Ireland left and rarely returned.

The famine also had lasting effects on the Irish language, which was and continues to be, a kind of survival vessel for Irish culture. Whelan (2022) notes that up to the time of the potato famine, Ireland was a bilingual country, but post famine the Irish language virtually disappeared and today, Irish culture is almost entirely being expressed via the English language. His contention is that when Ireland lost its language, resulting from the social dislocation of the famine, it became and perhaps still is in his words, 'marooned' - because the vehicle to express those values and beliefs, the Irish language, is gone. My research (see Chapters 5, 6 and 7) suggests that where the Irish language is extant (people in these areas commonly refer to it as 'not gone'), it may be a key element in upholding traditional practice by its capacity to express meanings and sentiments that the English language cannot convey. In my study areas of Galway and Mayo, the 2016 Census revealed that 49% and 43% of people respectively claimed they were Irish speakers. These counties also contain five of the twenty-six Irish *Gaeltacht* areas where the Irish language is spoken daily, in the community and/or people's homes (CSO b, Census 2016). Watson (2008, citing Herder, 1767) argues an indigenous language can enable linguistic communities to maintain their own mode of thought and defend them from a uniformity that might otherwise be imposed by a more dominant culture. Herder and Forster (2002), also citing Herder, explains that thought is bounded by language so that:

...one can only think if one has the language, and one can only think what can be expressed linguistically (Herder 1767-8, in Herder and Foster 2002, p.xv)

Backing up this claim, I note in My Research Log and during interviews, how frequently people 'reached for' encompassing Irish terms where the English language would not do. For example, they did this to explain why people chose to dig their neighbours' graves, citing *nádúr*, a word that describes the nature of neighbourliness. In referring to the *meitheal*, they describe people getting together on a community wide basis to achieve a task, such as gathering in a crop or digging a neighbour's grave. *Muintir* was used to explain a level of commitment that was stronger than just a sense of community and that would apply even when there is no blood connection. *Pisreogs* describe a range of superstitions. When connected to gravedigging, they include: a grave must never be started on a Monday, so a single sod is turned on the Sunday and the turf must be laid upside down on the finished grave.

The use of the Irish language in this context serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it provides a way of describing actions and possible underlying motivations and ways of thinking that are unique to a culture. Secondly it brings the participants together and reinforces an Irish language culture that is distinct and separate from the more dominant and everyday English language culture. Watson (2008) observes that Irish has also been used to construct a separate linguistic and therefore political and national identity, by reference to a 'them', usually meaning the British and more particularly the English - against whom Irishness could be compared. My own research backs this idea up as many of the participants in this study explain the importance of gravedigging by contrasting it with what it is not, such as an English or even a Dublin burial, that can appear 'foreign' to some people in the rural West of Ireland.

## **The Path to Modern Ireland**

To understand the kind of society Ireland is today, in which traditional practices such as VGD still persist, it is necessary to reflect on the forces that have shaped this society. It is a country that emerged because of revolutionary struggle against its coloniser and neighbour, Britain, that was at



that time a major world power. Part of the process of establishing an Irish identity was to distinguish Ireland as different to the Britain, and especially England (Watson, 2008). Although Ireland was founded as a result of revolution, until comparatively recently it has been a socially and religiously conservative country in which traditions connected to the importance of the community and the family have been stressed. Part of this struggle for the new state and the Catholic Church was how to stress and maintain a collective vision, without becoming a socialist society (Delaney, 2011; Inglis, 2017).

The path to Ireland having complete control over what sort of nation it should be has been tortuous. Following colonisation there were several full-scale Irish rebellions and sporadic uprisings, but none overcame the military might of the English and later British Empire (Davies, 1999). The last of these was the *1916 Easter Rising*. Those who had fought in this uprising and the War of Independence (1919-21) were united in a common cause of establishing Ireland as an independent nation. The leaders of the rebellion were however, divided by the terms that resulted in the British leaving Ireland, set out in the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1921). This then led to the Irish Civil War (1922-23), between pro anti treaty factions, fought on 'a scale and level of viciousness', well beyond what had occurred in the War of Independence (Dolan, 2018, p324). The Irish Free State came into being on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1922. Two political groupings emerged from this time, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil (from 1926), who were respectively pro and anti the Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921) that had led to the setting up of the Irish Free State in 1922 (Farrell, 2020). The two parties would, between them, dominate Irish political life up to 2020, and directly and indirectly influence the cultural direction of Ireland, and then through their policies reinforce the importance of traditional practices.

What was unclear was what kind of nation those involved in the revolution wanted Ireland to be and the kind of culture they should retain, reject or build. Some leaders, like Patrick Pearse (Commander of the 1916 Easter Rising) and Eamon de Valera (future Prime Minister/Taoiseach) were socially, religiously, and economically conservative in the kind of Ireland they envisaged arising from the

rebellion. In contrast, James Connolly (leader of the Irish Citizen Army in 1916), Winifred Carney or Constance Markiewicz (both members of *Cumann na mBan* [*Women's Council*]) hoped for a socialist Ireland. These competing visions of what a sovereign Ireland should look like continued to challenge the new state that was about to emerge and are still evident in modern day Ireland. From 1922 until the early 1990s the vision that won out was of a socially, religiously and economically conservative country. This was a vision conducive to the maintenance of traditional practices, that would include VGD. This is discussed further below (see below, *Ireland Today*).

The political landscape in Ireland has been largely stable since the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. It was rooted in the centrality of the family and the wider supportive community (Doyle, 2018). Byrne (2012), in her description of the political and religious culture of Ireland, emphasises:

...the acceptance of hierarchy and espousal of conservatism, the expression of public trust though (sic) the prism of familial values and finally the blanket emphasis on loyalty which embraced deference as a core virtue. (Byrne, 2012, p225)

Whether this was always true or just a political ideal, it would appear this belief has influenced how Irish people have lived and shown regard for their political and religious leaders and one another, especially in rural Ireland. Inglis (2017, pp223-4) considers this through the prism of identity. He asks whether Irish people have absorbed 'a way of seeing and being in the world', a habitus of what it means to be an Irish person, as distinct from other nations. Later in this study participants explain their ways of seeing the world. They reflect on why it is 'I' and 'we' have such regard for neighbours, to an extent that would seem excessive or unreasonable in many other countries. In many rural areas in the West of Ireland I will argue this sense of what it is to 'be' can include an expectation that when a neighbour dies, you will join with others to dig their grave and then bury them.

This stability in social expectations is mirrored in the political stability of the Irish State. From 1926 and up to 2020, Ireland had two main political parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. It was not until 2011

that the latter suffered a major defeat, when its vote catastrophically collapsed in the wake of the 2008 world financial crisis (see below, *Economic Change*). Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are described as moderate, right of centre parties who have until recently: campaigned against one another on economic and social issues; challenged the competency of each to govern Ireland and existed as outliers in Western European politics by operating in a context where there was no effective left-wing choice for electors (Green-Pedersen and Little, 2023). Ó Duibhir (2021) refers to what until very recently has been the usual arrangement for changing political administrations as ‘tweedledum and tweedledee’ changes - with ‘splashes of colour’ from minority parties, such as the Labour Party and The Greens, but with most voters opting for either of the old Civil War foes, the ‘stable two’.

In 2020 the political landscape shifted. Sinn Féin became the largest single party in the Irish Parliament, a development which threatened the traditional political order that had been in place since 1922. Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael received 22.2% and 20.9% of the popular respectively and Sinn Féin 24.5%. It had campaigned on a left-wing populist agenda, focussed on re-building ‘fraying’ public services, especially health, and on a public house building programme (Carol, 2020). For Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, this development meant that the two longstanding rivals were for the first time joined together in a conservative ruling coalition in order to maintain a grip on power. At the time of writing, it is too early to judge whether this political shift towards having parties on both the left and right (as in most European countries) of the political spectrum, may change what it means to be Irish and if this will continue. Will it alter the ‘Irish habitus’ (Inglis, 2017) to the extent that traditional practices that have survived from an agrarian Ireland will now start to disappear? Later in this study I will consider these ideas, using the empirical data from my study to consider if a less conservative Ireland may result in a less traditional nation.

Although a stable and socially conservative nation, corruption in public office has been an ongoing problem since the establishment of an Irish state. It contrasts markedly with a country where citizens regularly demonstrate a high regard for one another without any expectation of reward (Wallace and

Thurman, 2019; Liston, 2017). Byrne, in her study of corruption in Irish public life between 1910 and 2010, notes the noble intentions of those revolutionaries who established the early independent state. They stated it should be free from vested interests, that might open the door to corruption, and with 'a compelling sense of duty' (Byrne, 2012, p25,). Despite this, Ireland has suffered from corruption in public office, evident since the 1930s, with eight separate tribunals of enquiry being held over that period. The last of these were: the Mohan enquiry into abuse of power connected to planning and zoning permissions (1997-2012) and the Moriarty Tribunal (1999-2011) into senior politicians including the former Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, receiving corrupt payments. By the time he left office in 1992 he was estimated to have corruptly received at least £8million in payments from wealthy individual and industrialists (Moriarty Tribunal, 2011).

Although both tribunals of enquiry did reveal serious corruption amongst senior politicians and civil servants, it is important to recognise that Ireland is largely seen as a country with a low level of corruption in a global context. Transparency International, who measure levels of corruption in public office, across the world, record Ireland as having the 10<sup>th</sup> lowest level of corruption in a list of 180 countries (Transparency International, 2022). That corruption has occurred in Ireland, or in any society where there is opportunity for personal or group gain, is unsurprising. However, the findings from the Mohan and Moriarty Tribunals do make for a stark comparison, when one considers in this same society people are regularly digging the graves of neighbours without any expectation of reward and as a simple expression of neighbourliness. It is at least an illustration of the complexity and contrast between public and community life in Ireland, and for this study represents a paradox that will be further explored in Chapter 8, *Discussion*.

Byrne (2012) offers some explanation for this seeming contradiction in Irish civic life. She dates it back to the 1801 Act of Union, when Britain set up a central administration in Ireland with the intention of consolidating the exercise of power in the interest of the colonial state, and against the interest of the Irish people. She argues this has resulted in an enduring culture of people giving their

first loyalty to ‘the townland, village, town and city’ (Byrne, 2018, p210), which in this study finds direct expression in the way that participants in rural Western Ireland offer support to their bereaved neighbours by voluntarily digging the grave. An older explanation for this imperative to protect or support anyone considered to be local, including politicians, is encapsulated within the Irish aphorism *Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine*. In translation it means ‘we live in each other’s shadow, or we shade each other from the sun’. I understand that to live in the shadow of the people who we live around, or in their shade, is supposed to have a positive and protective connotation (My Research Log, 19 March and 1 April 2023).

## **The Catholic Church**

The Catholic Church has had a significant influence on the spiritual, moral and social life of Ireland since the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD and its influence, though diminished, continues to the present day. While only one of the 26 participants in this study directly links Catholicism with VGD, I think it is reasonable to assume it has been a major force in creating the conditions where traditional practices like this could persist, flourish or be suppressed. For example, the Public Dance Halls Act 1935 was introduced at the instigation of Catholic Bishops to curtail the ‘moral danger’ implicit at unregulated places of dancing such as in houses and at crossroads. These were ... ‘the places where living, non-commercial, traditional dancing survived’ (O’Toole, 2022, p502) ... ‘and would be replaced by larger, strictly licenced halls, that in time would nurture the Irish showbands phenomena, but not performers like the lone fiddler’ (RTE, 18 August 2022). My argument here is that the influence and power of the Catholic Church was so considerable for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that it could chose to regulate and promote any major cultural practices that grew up during this period (see for example, the *Gaelic Athletic Association* below), or suppress them, if it was seen as threatening to Catholic teachings. That this did not happen to VGD, as it did for example to traditional dances held in cottages, was because it was not perceived as contrary to Church doctrine and threatening to a socially conservative order.

From 1932 and up to 1992 the Catholic Church exercised considerable influence over both political and civic life. One of the most important and encompassing examples of this influence was in their involvement in the drafting of the new Irish Constitution in 1936-37. Doyle (2018) in a wide-ranging analysis of the Constitution notes that many sections are marked by a 'religious tone' and Roman Catholic social teaching, emphasising the importance and centrality of the family in Irish life and therefore of parents and women and mothers. 'The state recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved' (Irish Constitution, 1937, Article 41.2). Key amongst the clerical contributor in drafting the constitution was Father Edward Cahill. He was the founding Professor of Irish sociology, a subject taught at Irish Universities up to 1970. The curriculum was based on natural law and Catholic social and moral values. It rejected positivist and value free sociology. Instead: 'Sociology for both Cahill and Newman (his successor) ... 'was the science of reproducing Catholic Ireland from one generation to the next'. (Fanning, 2017, p46).

In Ireland, as with other countries such as Poland that have emerged from a combined period of religious and national struggle, there has been a close association between a religion and the nation. In the case of these two countries, it has effectively conferred on the Catholic Church the status of 'protector of the nation' (Grzymala-Busse, 2015, cited in Calkin and Kaminska 2020) as well as to give it a virtual final say over policy and its liberalisation, particularly in health, education and family life. A study by Buddle et al. (2017) considered how, and if, religions can influence the development of policy that regulates social and personal behaviour in a polity. Using meta data looking at the regulation of abortion and euthanasia in 26 countries between 1960 and 2010 (including Ireland) they concluded that religious membership is not of itself a reliable indicator of religious civic power, but when it is linked to high rates of church attendance this gives more importance to church teachings. This then legitimises religious positions in public discourse and so shapes the perceptions and the actions of the population and their legislators (Buddle, 2017, p48). In Ireland there is a correlation between regular weekly attendance at mass and the influence of the Catholic Church in

the public sphere. I am not arguing this is a causative relationship, as so much has changed in Ireland at the same time as Catholic Church attendance has also declined and Church influence in the public sphere has waned.

Leahy, writing in *The Irish Times* (28 August 2018, citing the European Social Survey, published November 2017) records 36% of Irish adults attend a religious service at least once a week, compared to a European average of 12.8%. While high, this figure has declined rapidly in recent years with Byrne (2012) outlining a rapid change in regular Catholic Mass attendance, from 91% in 1974 to 55% in 2005. She argues the decline in Catholics attending Mass on a weekly basis is evidence something fundamental is happening: that people are taking more individual moral responsibility, rather than being guided by a hierarchy or through a submission to authority; further stating that a kind of 'Protestantisation of Catholic belief and practice' has occurred, so that people are now more guided by personal conscience, rather than any instruction from the Catholic Church (Byrne, 2012, citing Inglis, 1998).

Until comparatively recently the Catholic Church has commanded wide public respect and support for its social and spiritual teaching, both amongst the population in general and the political elite. An Ipsos Mori telephone poll of 750 adults, that coincided with the visit of Pope Francis to Ireland in August 2018, showed just how much public opinion had moved away from Catholic Church teaching. For example, with 86% of adults supporting the ordination of women priests, 92% supporting the use of contraceptives in all circumstances and 77% thought the Church should recognise gay and lesbian marriages. The survey also recorded there was very little difference between the responses of practicing and lapsed Catholics (Leahy, 2018).

Weekly Mass has been a key point for bringing most Irish communities together, as well as sporting events organised via the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), especially in rural areas. Since the beginning of the State, the Catholic Church has also run most of the schools and hospitals, as well as providing residential provision for children and adults. This combination of high and often

unquestioning regard for the Catholic Church, combined with a dependency on it as the major provider, has at times created the conditions for where terrible abuses of power can thrive and remain unchallenged. This abuse of power has since been catalogued in several commissions of enquiry (including Ferns 2005; Ryan 2009; Murphy 2009 and Cloyne 2011).

Perhaps the high point of Catholic influence in Ireland occurred in 1979 when Pope John Paul II spent three days in Ireland. During this brief visit approximately two thirds of the population attended one of his four outdoor celebrations of Mass. In his homily to the congregation gathered to hear him celebrate Mass in Phoenix Park in Dublin, he anticipated that a growing mass media would challenge fundamental Irish values and Catholic teaching, including:

...the sacredness of life, the indissolubility of marriage, the true sense of human sexuality, the right attitude towards the material goods that progress has to offer (Papal homily at Phoenix Park, outdoor Mass, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1979).

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems Pope John Paul II was prophetic about how much Ireland would change, but not entirely correct about the reasons that might bring about these changes. The exact moment when, what Fanning (2017, citing Inglis, 1998) calls the Catholic Church's 'moral monopoly' started to fade and eventually come to an end, is unclear. Fanning dates this change as happening imperceptibly from the point that Ireland dropped its policy of economic self-sufficiency in 1960 and opened the country to wider influences and international trade.

Because of the terrible catalogue of scandals connected to the Catholic Church (see catalogues of enquiry, mentioned above) it is easy to forget that it has been a stable, if domineering force in Irish society, especially during the period up to 1960 when it was enjoined with Irish politicians in a 'postcolonial nation building project' (Fanning, 2017). I suspect that much of what The Catholic Church wanted to promote via 'Irish Sociology', including the importance of the family (but not necessarily the narrowness of what constituted a family), were traditional practices and ways of



sustaining rural communities that would still find favour with most people living in rural Ireland today (Fanning, 2017).

An extract from a two-part BBC TV documentary of modern Ireland, by Simon Reeve (2015), *Ireland with Simon Reeve*, captures something about the residual influence of Catholicism when he interviews Catriona, the volunteer manager of a soup kitchen in Cork City.

**Simon:** My impression would have been, in what are, we still perceive as Catholic Ireland is that this would have been the Church behind it (the running of the soup kitchen).

**Catriona:** Maybe Catholic Ireland was the caring Ireland. Maybe that might be another good name for it. I am a Catholic right – and I care, you know. But I have friends you know, of all different denominations and they all care as well. So maybe we should have (soft laughter) a caring, I don't know...

**Simon:** So moving on from the religious aspect...

**Catriona:** Yeah, and just you know, care.

What is so interesting about this interaction is the way that Catriona flips this conversation, by politely suggesting to Simon Reeve that to be caring is an Irish quality that also finds expression through Catholicism. However, her point is that it does not belong to Catholicism but to a wider Irish culture, something that will be further explored in this study through the practice of VGD.

## **Economic Change**

The practice of VGD has its origins in an agrarian Ireland. This rural Ireland, as described by Brody (1973) in *Inishkillane* has largely disappeared, as Ireland has developed into a modern Western European industrial nation – but VGD still goes on. The point at which Ireland seemed to set off on the journey to become a modern economy can be dated to 1958 when the Irish Government published the white paper: *Programme For Economic Expansion* (also known as the Whitaker Report,

1958). This plan laid out a radically different path for the future economic development of the country and would come to represent the quiet and slow emergence of modern Ireland (Irish Times, editorial, 11 January 2017). The plan was radical because it meant abandoning the previous government policy of making the country as self-sufficient as possible and constructing high tariff barriers to protect key industries, such as agriculture. It also meant ending the toleration of mass annual emigration as part of the price for self-sufficiency. Even as late as the early 1980's approximately 70,000 people emigrated each year, mostly young people, usually moving to the UK (Hickman, 2017).

One consequence of economic development is that since the early 1990s Ireland has been a country with a net inward migration. Kline (2004) cites Mary McAleese (the then President of Ireland) as describing Ireland as having changed from a homogenous to a multi-cultural wealthy society, but one that is showing signs of being a place where immigrants experience racism and racist attacks. (Kline, 2004). Since 2013 the Irish Network Against Racism has collected data on racial discrimination and racist crime, via its observatory, *iReport*. In its 2022 report it records 223 racially motivated crimes were recorded, comprised of: 49 assaults, 112 cases of harassment and 95 public order offences (Reynolds and Omid, 2022). In November 2023 a stabbing in Dublin, thought by some members of the public to have involved an asylum seeker, unleashed a night of rioting, involving burnt out cars and a bus. McDaid in an editorial in the Derry Journal in May 2023 argues that although we must blame racists for their racist behaviour, causation must also consider Irish political society. He argues that it has made no real infrastructural preparations for promoting inclusivity or for rapidly countering racist lies about people who take refuge in Ireland. Multi culturalism and concerns about racism is not a significant feature of this study, only to note that VGD occurs within a now multi-cultural Ireland. In this study, all of the graves mentioned by participants were dug for local people, with just one exception, a UK Citizen who had settled in Ireland.

The 2022 census figures show that 12% of Ireland's 'usual resident population' are made up of *non-Irish citizens* who are permanently settled in Ireland, with Polish, UK, Indian, Romanian and Lithuanian nationals respectively representing the largest nationalities of 'non-Irish groups' (CSO a, Census 2022). More significance for this study is that many people who had previously emigrated are returning to Ireland with their families. Mac Éinrí and White (2008) in a review of Ireland's recent migration history, and looking at what would have been a boom period between 2000-2005 (and just before the 2008 World financial crash), record that 40% of the total immigrants were returning Irish nationals. In 2020, 28,900 Irish nationals returned to live in Ireland but almost the same number, 28,300 emigrated, giving a net returning migration of around 600 (CSO c, April 2020). This period coincides with the beginnings of the world Covid-19 lockdown and may therefore not represent a normal period. In the year ending April 2023, 900 more Irish nationals emigrated than returned to live in Ireland, although there was a net increase in the population of 20,000, representing the excess of 55,500 births against 35,500 deaths (CSO d, April 2023). Mac Éinrí and White (2008) record that even before it became evident that the Irish economy would economically 'take off', Irish people were returning in large numbers. For instance, between 1961 and 1981 the population of Ireland grew by an 'astonishing 22%' (Mac Éinrí 2001b, cited in Mac Éinrí and White, 2008, p153), with 'much of this accounted for by the high number of returning Irish emigrants and their children' (Mac Éinrí and White, 2008, p153). This pattern is echoed in findings from this study, where eight of the participants were also returning emigrants. As well as returning for economic reasons they were also motivated to return to rejoin aspects of their culture, that included VGD.

In her documentary, *The Funeral Director* (2019, ), Marsh captures this returning emigrant perspective via funeral director David McGowan. Here he compares his experience as a young man working in Chicago, where bodies were commonly left unclaimed, with home in Sligo:

Now bear in mind, I come from a culture that couldn't wait to get your body home. Now I see them stored up in a warehouse and nobody wants to claim them. And then I think about home

and all the customs, rituals and traditions that surround this. This is where I want to be. It was great to see it and experience living there, and experience earning money, and experience how much money you could make. So, you can understand why the Irish community in Chicago was shocked when I announced I was coming back to the West of Ireland (chuckles).

The changes in the Irish economy that had been occurring since the 1960s because of the policy laid out in *Economic Development* (1958), meant that people like David McGowan could exercise the option to return and still find employment. It also represented the end of a practice of exporting large numbers of the adult population every year to look for employment in the world, something that had been continuous since the 1840s (Bartlett, 2010). Over time Ireland has become an open economy that welcomed the expertise and investments from other nations, usually in the form of foreign direct investments (FDIs), especially those connected to computing, medical devices and pharmaceuticals. Currently over 1600 oversea companies directly employ 250,000 people, accounting for 20% of all private sector employment (Department of Trade & Employment, May 2023). US investment accounts for around 70% of all FDI's in Ireland (OECD, 2020, p30). For people living in the West of Ireland these developments meant they were then able to continue to live in small communities where traditional practices still flourish but earn their living in 21<sup>st</sup> century industries like pharmaceuticals and computer technology.

In parallel with economic planning, Ireland significantly increased its investment in the education of children and young people. From 1966 secondary education was free. Bartlett (2010) states that in the early 1960's only an estimated 20% were completing their education to secondary level, the poorest rate in Western Europe, but by 1990 this had risen to 80%. By 1990 Ireland was second in a list of 60 countries listed by the OECD for those attending technical colleges, with large numbers graduating in engineering and computer science. The availability of an educated, English speaking and trained workforce was one of many factors that encouraged FDI investment in Ireland.

For the participants in this study, improved access to continuing and higher education was largely viewed as a positive development. Nevertheless, for some, increased educational attainment was seen as a double-edged sword, especially when viewed in the context of continuing population decline in the West of Ireland (O'Driscoll et al., 2022). Details of participants' concerns about the association between increased educational attainment, rural decline and the loss of rural traditional practices are discussed in Chapter 5, 'It's Normal'.

Why it took so long for Ireland to become economically successful can be explained by several factors including its geographical position on the edge of Western Europe, domination by its larger neighbour and the political vision of its leaders, especially de Valera. Bartlett (2010) argues that it was also held back by its cultural mentality:

Put simply, the key question about the Celtic Tiger<sup>4</sup> economy is not what caused it but why it took so long to happen. The combination of economic factors identified as fuelling Ireland's boom years would have meant little without a positive desire on the part of the Irish political classes to create wealth, raise employment levels and stem emigration; in short, to embrace modernisation (Barlett, 2010, p541).

To appreciate how much Ireland has developed since the early 1990's it is worth comparing how it was seen before then by economic observers. Peet (2004) described it as experiencing an 'awful cocktail' of high levels of inflation, high unemployment, slow growth, heavy taxation and rising public debt, all brought about by mismanagement of the economy (Peet, 2004). Imperceptibly and then dramatically, Ireland emerged from the economic doldrums that it had been stuck in since the formation of the state. It was described as one of the most successful economies in the world, the 'Celtic Tiger', with annual growth rates between 1992 and 2007 that often exceeded 10% (Peet,

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<sup>4</sup> The Celtic Tiger was an analogous description of the rapid growth in the Irish economy from the 1990s to 2007, like that seen in the Eastern economies of for instance China and Japan.

2004). In 1973, the point when Ireland entered the EU, its per capita income was 64.2% of the European average. By 2003 this had risen to 120%. During this 30-year period official records also show (CSO e, Yearbook, 2004) the population increased by nearly one million, having effectively stood still since the formation of the state. This was connected to the ending of mass emigration and an increase in the birth rate. Furthermore, in 2003 (CSO e, Yearbook, 2004, [Ireland and the EU 1973-2003]), 70% of Irish exports were of chemicals and computers; Ireland was no longer dependent on the UK as its main trading partner. This relationship had been replaced with increased trade with Europe, the United States and the rest of the world, with Ireland acting as an independent nation in its own right, rather than one always economically bound to the UK.

Maher and O'Brien (2015) argue that coinciding with this time of national economic independence and new found affluence, was a period when Irish people became more individualistic and consumerist in their outlook. They refer to Irish people having lost the old constants of Church and State authority and replaced these with what could be bought and displayed for others to see. The participants in this study did not confirm the view that affluence had changed the rural West of Ireland or relationships with neighbours. The areas in which participants did think affluence had altered death practices was that now everyone could afford a good funeral. They thought the ubiquity of car ownership, arising from increased affluence, meant virtually every funeral was a big funeral, compared to the past when they were just small events for relatives and neighbours in one's village.

In 2008, this increased affluence and national meteoric rise suddenly halted in the face of a world economic turndown. In Ireland this was made worse by an unsustainable property boom, financed by Irish banks (Bartlett, 2010). The response of the Irish Government was to underwrite the debt these banks were carrying without any knowledge as to the extent of the liability, which emerged to be €64 billion, or about twice the annual tax revenues. In 2010 this resulted in the Irish Government seeking financial support from the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission and the

European Central Bank, collectively referred to as the Troika. From this point the Troika effectively determined Irish economic policy until 2013. During these three years Ireland was obliged to surrender its economic sovereignty (Sweeney, 2015; Ferriter, 2016). For a country that had fought so hard to become a sovereign nation, this was a humiliation. For Fianna Fáil, up until then Ireland's leading political party, it was the cause of its electoral downfall in 2011. Ireland has now recovered from the 2008 economic crash and is once again a successful economy within a stable democracy. Based on gross national income (GNI) it is now somewhere in the middle of European living standards. Given that the economy underperformed for much of the twentieth century, Ireland has now caught up with its European neighbours and so its current position represents 'convergence not exceptionalism' (Ó Gráda and O'Rourke, 2021, cited in De Bromhead, Adams and Casey 2021).

## **Ireland Today**

Since 1922, and when in the words of the song writer and republican Thomas Davis (1884), Ireland became a 'nation once again', it has gone through tremendous changes. During this time, it has simultaneously lost faith with its political and spiritual leaders (O'Toole, 2022) and has changed from being: '...a relatively insular, agricultural economy in the middle of the last century to becoming by the end of the century, one of the most open, advanced and globalised small economies in Europe' (Inglis, 2017, p4).

My thesis is that traditional cultural practices like VGD, are deeply seated in Irish culture, (especially in rural Western Ireland) and in the empathetic regard people want to show for one another. Chapters 5, 6 and 7, the results chapters, will demonstrate that the way people treat their neighbour, is not just derived from handed down standards, such as from the Catholic Church or political leaders, who may not adhere to them anyway, or the level of affluence of the society. They are also, and perhaps instead, held within the wider culture (Reeve, 2015). I suggest they illustrate how, although Ireland is a country where change is occurring, traditional values are upheld and can evolve.

In this section I will focus on four aspects of modern-day life where I think important cultural values are held and expressed and are indicative of wider Irish values. These four aspects are: the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA); secular Ireland; recent liberalisation of Irish life, reflected in liberal legislative changes and where people in rural Ireland live, as distinct from where they work.

### **Gaelic Athletics Association**

The GAA was founded in 1884 to promote native Irish sport such as hurling, camogie (the female competitors' version of hurling) and Gaelic football. Of equal importance the founders also wanted to promote Irish culture and its language. At this time most Irish people were excluded from English sports such as rugby, football, tennis and cricket (known as garrison games). This separation between Gaelic and garrison sports, (and the association with having foreign troops garrisoned in your country) meant that the GAA was from its inception a cultural and political organisation, as well as a sporting one. The GAA had until 2005 specified through *Rule 42* that only Gaelic games could be played at their affiliated clubs, so excluding 'garrison games'. Part of its purpose was to maintain a direct connection between Irish sports and Irish culture and communities, and to exclude sports that might dilute this connection. By implication this meant the linking of sport, sporting success and national identity was withheld from those who played these 'garrison' sports. In 2005 this rule was relaxed to allow the playing of non-Gaelic games at GAA stadiums. Fulton and Barnier (2007) examined the significance of the relaxation of GAA *Rule 42* in the light of this wider political context, noting: it made it possible for the National Irish Rugby Union Team (playing a 'garrison' sport) to use Croke Park for its international fixture against France in 2007, when Lansdowne Road, its home ground was being rebuilt.

Liston (2017) argues the GAA and the amateur values it espouses are one of the things that makes Ireland different to other countries. She goes on to describe how its roots have... 'permeated throughout every county and every village' (p199). Also, except for a few officials who are paid to manage the national structure, people give their time freely. The 2022 Census (CSO a, Census 2022)



records that volunteering is an important part of Irish society with 711,379 (14% of the population) reporting they regularly volunteer, with males most likely to do so in sporting organisations and females via service in their community. Liston (2017) stresses the wider social benefits of bringing people together to help and be helped, and to foster a sense of belonging in one's community. The same social qualities Liston describes as being expressed via amateur sports and volunteering, I would argue are also evident when men come together to voluntarily dig a neighbour's grave, when the family of the deceased bring food and drink to the gravediggers and when women organise the 'wakehouse' for the bereaved family.

Writing from a Marxist perspective, Mag Uidhir (2019) identifies other community enhancing and building qualities of the GAA, such as welcoming foreigners to play Gaelic sports and running special coaching classes outside the Gaeltacht areas where the lessons are taught in Irish. But he is also concerned that the national GAA is living through a crisis of purpose. He worries that if it loses touch with its founding aim of being the central core of Irish cultural and sporting life, many of the voluntary and community values will also be lost, not just in sports but throughout Irish society. He questions whether the GAA has imperceptibly become an organisation that exists mainly to fundraise to meet the rising costs of mostly servicing the high-performance county teams and so is losing touch with the networks of towns and villages.

Contesting Liston's (2017) claims of amateurism, he points to the large amounts of money required to just cover the organisation's annual running costs of around €66m in 2017. This money is needed to pay for a growing army of coaches, medics, specialist training grounds and to cover county players' expenses. This in turn has led to a reliance on maximising gate receipts, commercial sponsorship and selling exclusive media rights to pay per view TV channels, such as Sky. This, Mag Uidhir (2019) argues links opportunities to follow your team to your ability to pay. These changes, he claims, are silently changing the nature of the GAA into an organisation working at the behest of international media organisations and presumably not the community. In spite of these concerns, he concludes

the GAA clubs are still community organisations and for many of those communities, their lifeblood. He argues the GAA are... 'a mass-participatory sporting organisation, providing a much-needed, positive social outlet in today's atomised capitalist world' (Mag Uidhir, 2019, p56).

Mag Uidhir's analysis reveals something about the hidden fragility of Irish cultural life because of its dependence on 'giant carriers' of cultural values, such as the GAA. In the past these 'giants' have also included Irish political leaders and the Catholic Church. If the social standing of the GAA were to culturally collapse in the way that has happened to Irish political parties and the Catholic Church, I would argue this would threaten the survival of other important cultural and communal practices, such as the Irish wake, the performance of traditional Irish music and VGD. This is addressed in the analysis of my data.

## **Secularisation**

The 2022 Census shows that the number of people who identify as being Roman Catholic has continued to fall from 94.9% in 1961 (CSO f, Census, 2016) to 69% of the population (CSO a, Census 2022). I therefore want to explore whether Ireland is becoming a secular country and how this will affect traditional practices like VGD. The number of people who still self-identify as Catholic remains high. There are however indications that individual worshipers are moving even beyond just selecting the parts of Catholic teaching with which they still identify and those they can no longer accept, to a 'smorgasbord approach' (Inglis, 2007). This entails mixing 'ingredients' from other religions, spiritual beliefs and non-Christian faiths. It has been claimed Irish people are becoming more like Christians in the rest of Europe, retaining spiritual beliefs without necessarily having a strong sense of belonging to the Church, as Catholics in the recent past would have (Fahey, 2017). Ruane (1998) suggests that Ireland is becoming a secularised country, but this has been happening incrementally since the 1950s. He describes it as happening in an ad hoc way of gradually moving away from Catholic nationalism, without rejecting Catholicism, to a pluralistic society that includes all its citizens, especially its Protestants. This is also reflected by the participants in this study, three of whom are

from the Church of Ireland community and the inclusive relationships they have with their neighbours, that includes digging graves together when a neighbour dies. The Church of Ireland has around 340,000 members of whom 219,000 live in Northern Ireland and 124,000 live in Ireland. They trace their religious origins to 5<sup>th</sup> century Ireland and the early Celtic Church of St Patrick and then a split from the Catholic Church during the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Church of Ireland, 2024). Occupationally in Ireland, they are particularly well represented in managerial, professional and skilled occupations (CSO f, Census, 2016).

Signs of gradual change and of Ireland becoming a secular society are publicly evident in legislative and judicial changes as well changes to the Irish Constitution, which must be approved through a referendum. These changes include: the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution (1972) deleting the special importance of the Catholic religion as well as all other religions (as had previously been the case in the 1922 Constitution); the 1973 decision by the Supreme Court (1973, *Mc Gee V The Attorney General and Revenue Commissioners*) that married couples had a right by virtue of their 'marital privacy' to import contraceptives for their own use, as at this time it was illegal to sell or import contraceptives; the 1983 Eighth Amendment to the Constitution that effectively made abortion illegal and was then reversed in 2018 by the 36<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution; the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1996 that removed the constitutional ban on divorce and the 34<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 2015, that removed the restriction in civil marriages, based on sex.

All these changes reflect fundamental alterations in Irish society and point to the lessening influence of organised religion, which would oppose many of these deviations from Catholic spiritual and social teachings. Change on this scale would have until comparatively recently seemed unachievable. But, as Ruane (1998) explains, that a society has become secular does not necessarily mean its citizens are less religious or spiritual – just that there is a clearer separation between church and state. O'Toole (2022, pp 568-70) suggests that it is not just adherence to Catholic practice that has changed but the character of Irish people. Now, he asserts, they can live with the unknowns, compared to a

recent past when they... 'took refuge in the fabrication of absolute conviction' (O'Toole 2022, p568). O'Toole's argument is that in the past people relied on and deferred to rules from above, from Church and State, that directed their conduct and relationship with other people. Now they instead find these rules of conduct within each other and themselves. Some participants in this study also attribute their involvement in VGD to qualities within the person, while only one person suggests religious belief as a possible motivation for their action. Later in this study I will outline that secularisation has not played a part in the motivations of men to voluntarily dig the graves of deceased neighbours (see Chapter 6, *Spiritual and Religious*); that instead it seems to spring from a deeper source, and appears to be located in the compassionate and collective cultural values of Irish people, rather than any given system of belief (Reeve, 2015).

This willingness to think openly about other people and to reassess what before were trenchantly held views, is most clearly shown in some of the consultative processes connected to legislative and constitutional changes Irish people have supported during the last 30 years. They include: the Government commissioned, *Citizens Constitutional Assembly* (2013) in relation to equal marriage and a *Citizen Assembly* (2016-17) concerning abortion law constitutional reform; also campaign groups in favour of changing laws relating to equal marriage and then abortion law reform ran what were described as nationwide 'empathy campaigns'. They sought to promote a compassionate understanding of other people, who may be different to you (Shaughnessy, 2022) and by promoting '*personal conversations*' between campaigners and the voting public and their friends/family (sometimes referred to as the *Ask Me Why I Am Voting Yes*, T-shirt campaign) (Parker, 2017). Regardless of the forum, the assumption was that understanding and empathy would come from people (or their children) being able to tell their story. Campaigns like this highlight the general importance of storytelling in Irish culture and specifically for this study, its connection to VGD (see Chapter 6, *Telling the story of the life*).

Tiernan (2020) notes that the campaign for equal marriage was supported by some priests who were outspoken critics of the Catholic Church. They thought outdated social values were doing irrevocable damage to the Catholic Church. None of these priests were ever disciplined for speaking out publicly against Church doctrine or even for announcing to their congregation they were also gay. One Catholic nun, Sister Stanislaus Kennedy, announced she was going to vote yes in the Equal Marriage Referendum as all people should be entitled to marry as a civil and human right (Feeder, 2015). That she and other members of the Catholic clergy were able to speak out in this way is, I would argue, a demonstration that a new open mindedness was probably occurring throughout Irish society, even amongst people who in the past would have seen themselves as upholders of social and religiously conservative values.

One of the most interesting aspects of the struggle for equal rights was the ambition to change the law while also fundamentally changing minds (Parker, 2017). Equal rights campaigners appear to have learnt from the experience of South Africa and Montenegro that gay people would still face severe discrimination if change only amounted to a change in the law. By the work that was done through Constitutional/Citizens Assemblies and person to person non-confrontational dialogue, Parker argues Irish society has been able to make significant social and policy change and carry most people with them. In 2018 I encountered this social movement in person when I had a chance conversation with one of the research participants, Rory. It took place almost immediately after the recorded interview. Then Rory invited me to:

... sit a while' and drink some tea and eat some cake.

The conversation came around to the Equal Marriage Referendum in 2015. I mentioned I was surprised that Irish people had voted so overwhelmingly to give the same marital rights to gay as to heterosexual relationships. He explained that at first, he had been against this change in the law until it was explained to him by some young people that it was not about sex, but about love (My Research Log, 3 April 2018).

The macro legislative and constitutional changes outlined above and also Rory's micro account are linked by a common appeal to compassion and understanding towards other people. This may for instance be because 'these others' are in socially prohibited relationships, or need to be able to permanently separate from a failed marital relationship, or to form a marital relationship with someone they love - who happens to be of the same sex, or for a woman to choose whether she wants to continue with a pregnancy. In Chapters 5, 6 and 7, the findings, I explore whether there is a common thread that links these wider macro, whole society expressions of compassion, with those of the participants in this study, when they dug graves for their neighbours.

### **Geographical location**

The last important social change I have identified in modern Ireland concerns where people live and where they work. In the recent past most adults in rural Ireland made their living in or close to where they lived, usually in agriculture or fishing or both. These communities corresponded with those described by Brody (1973) in *Inishkillane*. Here, Brody noted the high level of interdependence between families and their neighbours that also applies to this study. Of the 26 participants in this study, all live in rural settlements, but 16 out of 26 earn their living away from agriculture in the wider economy including in engineering, pharmaceuticals, tourism, building, services and local government. At the conclusion of their working day all the participants return to these rural settlements where it is possible to maintain close and supportive relationships with their neighbours. In effect they live in the kind of traditional communities that Tönnies describes as *Gemeinschaft* but earn their living in formal organisations he called *Gesellschaft* communities (Tönnies, 1887). This lends support to Edwards' (1996) contention that what is happening in rural Ireland does not necessarily represent a fading and irrelevant past, but a glimpse into a future Ireland, where work and community are held in equilibrium.

Official statistics for 2019 (CSO g, 2019) recorded that 31.4% of Irish people lived in rural areas. This compared to a European average of 27.3%, with much lower figures for Germany at 23% and the UK

at 12.8%. The Wallace and Thurman (Carnegie Trust study, 2018) study of people's experience of kindness and public engagement in the British and Irish Isles found that 41% of Irish respondents self-identified as living in rural communities, with 31% of this total further self-identifying as living in the countryside. Within the same study they note Irish respondents recorded the highest level of kindness received and reciprocated at 97%, from people who live 15 minutes walking distance. In the Carnegie study the 15 minutes walking distance is used as a proxy for people one might describe as neighbours.

All 26 participants in this study of VGD live in rural settlements (also known as townlands) or small villages. They differ markedly from the *Gemeinschaft* communities as described in Chapter 2, *My Theoretical Approach* in one important respect: they do not need to rely on their neighbours, even if they are farmers or fisherman - but they appear to choose to do so. Why this happens is described in detail in the following chapters when participants outline their practical, group and personal reasons for helping their neighbours.

## **Summary**

This chapter has considered the wider historic and current context in which VGD occurs. It aims to contextualise and make sense of the continuity of this Irish agrarian practice, that still continues in a modern and post-industrial Ireland in the 2020s. The tradition has continued through a period of considerable change, with modern Ireland emerging from a long period of imperialist domination and then revolutionary struggle to again become an independent nation. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ireland was dominated by social and morally conservative voices, in the form of Irish political parties, the Catholic Church and the GAA; voices that have been conducive to the maintenance of traditional practices that would include VGD. However, since the 1960's and increasingly so since the 1990's, Ireland has gone through a period of rapid economic and social change that in turn has been reflected in people's improved standard of living and more liberal social

attitudes. Despite these changes the tradition of VGD has continued in rural Western Ireland. Here most people work in modern industries such as computing technology, pharmacology and tourism, but retain traditions more closely associated with a former agrarian Ireland. In the chapters that follow this study I will consider the practical, social and personal reasons participants gave for their involvement in VGD and how these fit with, complement and challenge existing knowledge about death and traditional practices.



## 5. 'It's Normal'

### Introduction

In this and the following two chapters I begin to present and analyse the findings that resulted from interviewing twenty-six different men, all of whom were involved in voluntary gravedigging (VGD). In the next two chapters respectively, I outline the social and individual motivations they gave for their involvement with this practice. First in this chapter, I describe and question the practical reasons they put forward for digging graves when a neighbour dies. This is outlined in seven sub themes: how it starts by being 'reared to it'; hearing a neighbour has died; the preparations before a first spit is dug; how to dig a grave; the *craic* and 'slagging' when men get together, with food and drink brought to them by the family of the bereaved; particular roles, especially those reserved for older men; the importance of backfilling and 'making' a finished grave. I therefore assert that the practical reasons participants put forward for their involvement in this practice, as well as the ways in which they went about it, supports my thesis that these practical behaviours held important social meanings for these men (Weber, 1978). VGD is not just a practical task (Van Heerikhuizen, 2016).

### Normal?

Before considering these seven sub themes I first want to outline the claim by participants about just how ordinary or 'normal' it is to dig your neighbour's grave. Some at first claimed it was an essentially practical, workaday task, so it therefore amounted to little more than digging a hole. Often any deeper meaning for the individual or the community went unnoticed, even by the men doing the digging. By considering these readily talked about aspects of gravedigging, I hope to begin to identify deeper, latent social meanings of what VGD meant for the gravediggers. From this point I will be using data from what the 26 participants told me during their individual interviews.

Occasionally I also use data from My Research Log. The names of all the participants have been anonymised. Brief details of each person can be found in Appendix 2: *The Participants*.

Ben was the participant who most succinctly and firmly explained that digging a neighbour's grave is a practical task:

**DC:** Yeah. And when you've been asked to dig a grave or you've been involved in, has that, has that, has that been significant for you? Is it, does it represent any kind of honour or anything like that?

**Ben:** No, you'd, you'd, you'd be pleased to sort of help out, um, but it would be kinda normal practice.

**DC:** Yeah.

**Ben:** There is probably a certain amount of satisfaction in helping out but other than that it'd be normal practice.

**DC:** Yeah, it's just a normal part of your life?

**Ben:** Yeah. It would be yeah.

The first time I encountered what Ben described as 'just a normal part of life' was in 2011. I then observed (by chance) Cillian, and a group of four other men who were digging a grave. I remember being impressed by the way he went about the job, how sensitively and respectfully he handled the remains of the last person who had been buried in this grave. A few years later I told Cillian about my plan to research VGD and he readily agreed to be one of my research participants. When I approached him to be interviewed in 2018, my timing couldn't have been worse. He was struggling with a wayward cow and a calf that didn't know how to feed. To him, at that time, I seemed to be asking daft questions. In My Research Log I recall him remarking:

Danny, what is there to tell. If a neighbour dies, I dig a grave for them – what is there to tell.

And I'm not intelligent enough to be talking into one of those machines (audio recorder). (My Research Log, 21 April 2018)

In the event, Cillian did agree to be interviewed the next day and I then left him to get on with the job of 'putting' the calf to the cow. Although this was a low point in my research, the bewilderment of many of my participants as to why I thought there was anything about VGD that was worth discussing, remained a constant and reoccurring theme. It was as though participants were perplexed by my suggestion that they were involved in a conscious, significant social action (Van Heerikhuizen, 2016; Weber, 1978) rather than an automatic and non-significant social behaviour.

This was evident in my discussions with Tim. He had heard about my research via the local kerosene tanker driver who delivered to all the farms in the area. He sent back a message via the driver, saying he would be interested in talking about gravedigging in his community. During the interview, it became clear to Tim that on reflection, digging graves for his neighbours was much more than a practical task. He realised it was a practice that was socially and emotionally important for him, but was not something he had consciously thought about, and so just got on with it as a normal activity. Very close to the end of the interview he reflects on this 'unconscious normality':

**DC:** You dug graves of people who dug the graves for your parents and grandparents?

**Tim:** I did, yeah

**DC:** What did it mean to you then, for the people to do this for your family?

**Tim:** It meant an awful lot, it meant an awful lot. It did. But then again at that time we didn't know any other way of doing it. That was the tradition. There was no other way of doing it. They done it.

**DC:** Yeah. That would be the normal way, it wouldn't stand out?

**Tim:** Yeah, that was the normal way yeah.

**DC:** It's so normal that people don't think very much of it do they?

**Tim:** No no, it's just another day.

**DC:** And I suppose this is what's got my interest in the first place in that this practice, where it happens, it's so normal people haven't really noticed it.

**Tim:** No, they don't notice it. We take more notice of you now asking us about it (laughter).  
That you should have known we do all these things.

When Tim mentioned that I should have 'known', my understanding is that in this area of Mayo/Galway, 'known' in this context means noticed. My interpretation is that Tim is also explaining he has only recently and consciously noticed the significance of digging a neighbour's grave because I as an outsider have drawn attention to the practice: 'That you should have 'known' we do all these things.' This is an illustration of how important aspects of a culture can be invisible to the very people who practice and maintain them (Alexander, 2003), a theme I return to in more detail in Chapter 6, *Tradition*. Up to this point Tim has seen VGD as unremarkable, as something they just do in this part of the West of Ireland.

### **'Reared to it'**

A common explanation gravediggers gave for the continuity of this practice was, it was something they had been brought up to do, or had been 'reared to it', from an early age, as part of an agrarian upbringing. They were aware that a younger generation of voluntary gravediggers had not been brought up in this way (see Chapter 6, *Tradition*) and had consciously chosen/not chosen, to take part in this practice. Instead for the participants in this study, VGD originated as an unconscious commitment that they had imbibed since childhood, so as to make it something you just do.

Eamon distinguishes between how he learnt to dig a grave as though acquiring motor skills, and a younger generation who have not learnt when they were young enough:

Austin would have supervised that. Praise me, the young willing lad and I was fit enough to work. Because I've talked to a gravedigger since and he tried to dig, to keep it going, but is not able anymore. He would get young fellas to help him but he was telling me that the shovel would spin in their hands, they didn't know anything about shovels.

Martin was the participant who best illustrated how this happened. He is an agricultural engineer. He works 25 miles away from where he lives, yet views himself as part of a core of men who are always available to dig a neighbour's grave, if called upon to do so. Below, he describes his induction into the practice as a young child. This took place at (the name of a graveyard) in Connemara, where the soil level is so shallow that it is not possible to dig deeper than three feet before hitting the bed rock. In this situation children are used to gather extra sods of turf to build up the level around the coffin, thereby creating the impression of a deeper grave.

**Martin:** I remember digging with my father and the neighbours there and them digging, you know, down beside other coffins that were there and you just squeeze them in and just covered them over basically and stones. It was basic enough now. It took the fear of death away from us anyway.

**DC:** So how old were you when you first started?

**Martin:** Probably be six or eight or ten. You know going around, with your father, you know. Or just carrying the shovel or whatever, but you wouldn't actually be digging

**DC:** You'd be there you'd...?

**Martin:** You'd be there. You'd be there in association like as a child, and that's something you did. Then as a teenager you'd be giving them a hand lifting out the stones. Or you'd be, sometimes you'd go out across the wall and get some scrawls or clay. You know the scrawls of basically - and bring them in just to rise the sides of the grave and stuff, just to make it look deeper you know. And kinda camouflage it off from the rocks and stuff.

In this account, Martin is both describing how he was gradually inducted into the practice of VGD and how this *'took the fear out of death'*. Grainger (1998), writing about the Irish wake tradition makes a similar observation about Irish death practices. He argues that it is by getting close to death and the dead: ...'individuals and communities make death seem less threatening' (Grainger, 1998, p129).

Sean confirms Martin's view that there is a 'becoming process', that typically starts off in childhood, by just being there, or as an adolescent by showing you can now 'handle a shovel'.

Oh boy. I would have been a young lad at the time. When I say a young lad, I would have been able to use a spade and a shovel. There is no point in being a *gosser*<sup>5</sup> around a grave. You tend to start off as a sort of teenager and then you would graduate on. (Sean)

Hugh, who is Martin's younger brother has a more jaundiced view of how he first became involved in gravedigging, by being instructed by Martin to give a hand with the digging of the grave, a process that sounds more like being dragooned than volunteering:

I would probably have been late teens, I suppose I'm not sure like. I would have been invited by my brother, that's a loose term (amused tone), told to come and give him a hand because he was doing it. (Hugh)

When participants talked about their involvement with VGD they could comfortably describe it as something they were reared to. As my conversation with them went to the follow-on generation of voluntary gravediggers, their sons, it became inaccurate to describe them as having been reared to it. If they were to follow in their father's footsteps it would be because they were or were not, consciously adopting it as a tradition. Hugh, age 36, was the youngest participant in this study. He seemed to be suddenly aware that he was positioned at the join between those who had been

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<sup>5</sup> A gosser is an Irish name for a child.

reared to it and those who might consciously become involved in VGD. Right towards the end of our interview he said:

**Hugh:** It's funny actually. I now find myself thinking I should be more involved in digging graves. That I should be actually canvassing for other people to get involved so that when the older generation are moving on and they get a bit stiff and can't dig graves any more there still will be guys around that want to and should.

**DC:** Well that might be a side-effect of my study.

**Hugh:** It definitely it is for me anyway. Because I just thought it was something you would have to do even though no matter how hungover you were, get up and dig a grave (soft laughter).

The participants in this study, who perhaps represent a generational tipping point, seem to have been driven by a less socially conscious impulse of being reared to it. That is why they could so readily describe their involvement with VGD as 'just normal'. They do however realise that if what they have been doing almost automatically is to continue, it will be as a consciously adopted tradition for following generations (see Chapter 6, *Tradition*).

## **Hearing a neighbour has died**

People usually heard about the death of a neighbour either by personal contact or via local radio (Taylor, 1989), such as *MidWest Radio*. This is a community station that serves Counties Mayo, Galway, Roscommon and Sligo. Twice a day they broadcast death notices of the people who have just died in this area. According to many of my participants this was the main way people hear about deaths and then know to turn up to help dig the grave. Declan, who at the time of interview was living 35 miles away from Area 4, depended on these notices to alert him to the death of a neighbour.

I'd hear if someone was dead like. We have here what you call MidWest radio where you can hear the deaths on it like. So I'd hear the deaths. ...Yeah, well Midwest radio if someone dies the undertaker puts in, gives all the details of the person who has died and when the funeral will be and all of that and when he'll be buried. And they announce it on Midwest radio, for as long as. If it's going on for three or four days he will announce on Midwest radio in the morning and at 5 o'clock in the evening. (Declan)

This account may give the impression that in all areas, people hear a neighbour has died and just turn up to help dig the grave. In Area 1 the reasoning underlying the decisions to dig a neighbour's grave is socially complex, and far from the mechanical task some of my participants might lead you to believe it to be. Here, knowing that a neighbour has died is not reason enough for you to make yourself available to help dig their grave. Rory was the first person I interviewed, and he wanted to ensure I understood this rule. Within a minute of our interview starting, he reveals a complexity:

I just remember you were invited to dig a grave. They say you didn't volunteer to do it, you are invited. (Rory).

In this area gravediggers receive their invitation directly from a member of the deceased person's family, or from a neighbour who has been asked to organise the digging of the grave. According to Cashman (2008) this will happen at the wake, as it is a convenient time and place to confirm who will be available to help dig the grave. On the two occasions I have been asked to help dig a grave, both in Area 1, it was by a close family member while attending the wake (My Research Log, 19 February and 9 September 2019). Although it was something I had hoped to be included in at some time, I knew by this point in my research it was something you never volunteer for in that area.

One participant in my study, Dara, explained that even though you might want to offer to help dig the grave, to do so would be seen as inappropriate. The implication of what he says below and the firmness of Rory's comment above, is that by offering to dig, you would be flipping an honour for the family of the bereaved to bestow into a favour for you to give.



Do you know like it wasn't a thing that I'd go out and tell people I'll do it or my sons will do it. It was a thing that a person would think that enough of you, that you was kinda respected – and that you'd go and help to dig the grave for them, do you know. But you wouldn't advertise yourself as doing such a job. (Dara)

This complex social arrangement in Area 1 contrasts markedly with what Sean says happens in Area 4 and echoes what participants report occurs in Areas 2 and 3. In Sean's experience people either turn up having heard someone has died, or perhaps a member of the family asks an experienced digger to get a group together. Ben, who is a member of the Church of Ireland community and has also dug graves for his Catholic neighbours, puts it simply:

You arrive up with a pick and shovel and that's the invitation you get. That's the only invitation I ever heard anyway. (soft laughter)

In most areas then, neighbours are just expected to turn up and help to dig the grave, if they can. But this is clearly not universal, as the above discussion illustrates. A study by Mallon (2009) illustrates the complexity around who is involved in the expression of loss and at what level. It is concerned with the aftermath of university students' suicides from the perspective of their friends. Mallon relates how one student wanted to know more about the circumstances leading to a friend taking his own life, but refrained from asking for more information from people who were much closer to him, because of what the student described as a '*hierarchy of grief*' (Mallon, 2009, p160). I think this concept goes some way to explaining what is happening in Area 1. Neighbours are aware that such a hierarchy exists and it is for the family of the bereaved to decide if you are high enough up the 'hierarchy' to be invited to dig.

The difficulty with this kind of hierarchy is that it is a double-edged sword. Informally, people in Area 1 have told me it can be used to deliberately leave out people who might have reasonably expected to be invited to dig the grave. Sometimes it fails to bring a gravedigging party together at all, because the core neighbours have fallen out. Conor told me that sometimes people just fail to respond to the

honour of being invited to dig the grave. In his example it was for a man who had dug many graves for his neighbours. For the bereaved family it was experienced as a painful snub, and instead the grave had to be dug by a paid gravedigger. What remains unclear is why in Area 1 there is a requirement that you only dig the grave if invited to do so by the bereaved close family, while in the other two areas there is no such requirement. My judgement is the reasoning behind this tradition is complex and is an area for future research.

## **Preparations**

One of the common issues the gravediggers encountered was whether the plot could be used at all. Typically, this decision is connected to conditions in the graveyard, including underlying rock formations, flooding, and whether the existing family plot is already overcrowded. Sean referred to the latter as a '*three coffin situation*', where the grave has been used on multiple occasions and it is therefore very difficult for the gravediggers to reuse it and still sensitively and respectfully handle multiple sets of human remains already in the grave. He explained this can normally be resolved by using the network of other members of the family who have experience digging graves to approach the grieving family and diplomatically suggest they pick a fresh plot. A further complication is that in most of the graveyards the graves are close together and the gravediggers must ensure that in digging the grave they protect the adjacent plot. As a minimum this normally involves bagging up and removing the stone chippings. Often, it's more complex. Tim explains what is entailed:

The digging of the grave was not too bad. You can imagine your grave is there, that piece of paper (pointing to a piece of paper on the table to make a spatial comparison) and we are digging this one over here (just beside). Now your grave is all flowers, whereas the clay will have to go up all over that grave. So we have to turn around and get timber to put a stage all over your grave. Put a floor on it and the clay up on it. So, we don't want to spoil your flowers, throwing clay on top of them. So that is a problem. (Tim)

Sometimes the dilemmas are both practical and comedic, especially when it comes to the matter of what kind of coffin is to be used. Many of the participants shared with me how important it is to make sure you've spoken to the undertaker before a single sod is dug to establish what kind of coffin is expected. To get this wrong means that at the burial the coffin may stick or be too big for the grave.

And I mean the worst thing, the worst thing is when you hear casket, the word 'casket'. You kind of go, ah, casket, oh my God, what kind of a casket is it? 'Is it an American casket, is it an Irish casket, is it an English casket, how big is it, how wide is it?' Because they tend to be bigger and an American casket is 'big'. (Sean)

One of the details that intrigued me was how the diggers knew where to dig a grave for someone who was not in their direct family, in graveyards where many of the plots are unmarked. From the point of view of my participants this often seemed an inane question, (based on the quizzical facial expressions this question evoked) which was politely answered: of course they would know where to dig, explained Martin, or if they didn't one of the other diggers would, including details of which member of that family was buried in which side of the plot. This assumed knowledge about your dead neighbours and care taken in preparing for the dig would seem to illustrate a high level of social cohesion. To many of my participants it was seen as hardly worthy of comment, but I would argue this knowledge would be considered extraordinary in most urban settings.

## **The Digging**

My knowledge about what is involved in volunteer gravedigging comes from two sources. Firstly, from personal experiences as I observed one grave being dug in 2011 and then took part in digging two others in 2019. Secondly, most of the participants described what was involved in digging a grave in the natural flow of the semi-structured interview. The actual process of digging a grave was always described in the same way. It begins with taking off the top turf layer and putting this to one

side to be used later to cover the finished grave. Although a purely mechanical task Conor captures the significance of this moment.

Sometimes people are just standing around and they start opening up the grave. And people remember that. They often say you were there, you started, you cut the scraw<sup>6</sup> - all of that.

(Conor)

This moment of 'being there when the first scraw is dug' hints at, but does not explain the social significance for the individual neighbour; what it says about his relationship to the deceased and his/her immediate family, as well as with the other neighbour-gravediggers. My judgement is that this was a moment for bearing witness to the importance of your recently deceased neighbour in what feels like a first act of remembrance. You were there, even if you were not involved in any of the physical work of digging the grave and were just there at that significant point of opening or reopening (if an old grave) the grave. What is also contained within this quote from Conor is a negative connotation, of not being there and possibly left out, given that all-inclusive social process must at some level potentially entail an element of exclusion.

The actual digging itself is normally a straightforward task involving 4 to 5 men, alternating in 5-minute shifts. It typically takes between two and four hours to dig depending on the ground conditions and whether it is an old or new grave. One man at a time will either be loosening the earth with a pick or their own shovel. As the grave gets deeper the men at ground level are building a growing pile of earth. If it is an old grave, it will be easier to dig, but the gravediggers will soon come across human remains, coffin wood and coffin furniture. When this happens, all activity stops until all these items are painstakingly and respectfully gathered up. In some areas they are put into a bag that is discreetly re-interred beside the new coffin at the point of burial; in other areas they are

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<sup>6</sup> A scraw is a large piece of turf. In this situation it refers to the grassy top that will be removed and put to one side to be placed back on the grave, following the backfilling.

buried in the bottom of the grave. Padraic, who in addition to voluntarily digging graves for close neighbours was also a paid gravedigger, explained he preferred to let the old and collapsed coffin remain at the bottom of the grave and then create a new floor a few inches above it. His explanation was that he did not think it necessary or right to disturb these remains. Padraic did not offer any further explanation for why he thought this, but he did explain he developed this technique as the lone paid gravedigger in the area. On those occasions when he voluntarily dug graves with others for a deceased neighbour, he encouraged them to adopt the same technique. From interviews with other people in his area (Area 1) and from observing what happens as graves were dug, it seems his technique was not widely adopted by his neighbours. Instead, they favoured placing all the remains in a bag and reintering them discreetly beside the new coffin at the time of burial.

On the issue of human remains, all the participants maintained a consistent and understated position: human remains were something you would encounter if re-using an existing grave. All that was required was that they were dealt with respectfully. If it did cause unease or upset, Tim explained this would be when you were a young man, at your first gravedigging. Then you might be hesitant about handling human remains and it might form part of the ribbing to tell you to go down into the grave to pick up the remains (in this example, false teeth):

...go down there and pick them' (soft laughter). No way he'd go down. You had a bit of a laugh over that. (Tim)

Most participants claimed they were not bothered by handling human remains, although Declan said he would always prefer a new grave as he was unsettled by doing this. He explained how shocked he had been when the remains of a woman he knew as a child were revealed at a gravedigging some 30 odd years after her death

...so much so that when I went digging a grave in (Area 4), now I always want to let one of them down, down where I think that's going to happen (encounter the old coffin), because I don't want to be down there when that's happening. It is scary, scary like (Declan).

The discussion about human remains may give a false impression or overstate how significant this matter was for most of the gravediggers. My participants told me they were primarily focused on making sure nothing goes wrong and completing their primary task of digging a grave that was deep and wide enough and safely constructed. My impression was they felt they had a serious as well as a solemn job to do. If death and human decay was less daunting for them, I would argue that this was because they were encountering it as a group, as a team, and this would include the new and young gravedigger. They were inducted into the reality of death in the company of other men with the sharp edges of human mortality rounded off by humour.

In recalling a gravedigging they will often recall how they worked together as a team to overcome a problem, like a big rock in the wrong place, a flooded site they made appear dry on the day of the burial or a sideways collapse averted. This is how Eamon describes the toughest grave he ever dug.

Now, his wife died first and there was a rock in the corner, but we got out you know, the corner of that rock - it was a double plot. And J died then two years later, so he was being buried beside her, and that rock continued across into his grave, right on an angle. That was one of the toughest. That was the toughest grave I dug. So JT's and MT's, my cousins. They were hard graves as well but I think JO's was the worst. And to make it worse the new grave was beside us, so we had to timber all of that side as we were going down to keep, like it fell, all the loose clay it was falling back on top of us. (Eamon)

A repeated question I put to my participants was why were four or five men spending back-breaking hours digging a grave with a pick and shovel when it could be done with a mini digger, in a quarter of the time? At first many seemed offended by this question (based on facial expression), until I explained I was not saying they should use a mini digger, merely trying to understand their motivations in digging the grave with hand tools alone. Some at first responded by saying it was a practical consideration as many of the graves were too close together for it to be viable to 'bring in a machine'. When pushed, it was clear that for most, the idea of using a mini digger was something

they had never considered, but having done so, it felt inappropriate to use one in this setting. Two participants said they had not ruled out ever using a mini digger. Just one participant talked about routinely having one standing by if it was a new grave or there was a rock to be removed from a grave.

Those participants who spoke out clearly against using mechanical diggers were at the same time revealing that VGD is much more than a routine task, even if its participants are not consciously aware of it. Declan states that people dig by hand as an act of respect and to use a mini digger is lacking in respect, and a method only suited to a building site. Conor explained that even though powered machinery could be of practical help they tended to change the whole atmosphere and therefore it was better to just use hand tools as this was

...more of a time for contemplation and less noise. (Conor)

Two participants, Brendan from Area 3 and Michael from Area 1, both thought that introducing mechanical diggers changed the whole nature of the practice that included both the digging and the burial. My analysis is they were suggesting that mechanical diggers dehumanise and depersonalise the whole funereal process and their neighbour becomes just an item that needs to be efficiently disposed of. They are no longer a person. Brendan who lives in Area 3, where mourners help to back fill the grave ('take the shovel') explains why they do not use mechanical diggers:

Cause that's the tradition, that's just it. And we wouldn't change, it's kind of more intimate, if you know what I mean. It's kind of impersonal, an old bloody mini digger. When the coffin has gone down and the mini digger comes along and just shovels the stuff in. It seems more, I don't know what to say, but that's the way it's done anyway. And a mini digger would seem totally impersonal, you know what I mean. (Brendan)

Michael noted that until recent times ('up until lately'), most people in the Area 1 followed this practice of staying by the graveside until the backfilling was complete. He thinks it changed when

mechanical diggers started to be used by the paid gravedigger in the area. This meant people would not want to remain behind because the backfilling that could be done by hand could not be completed sensitively by a machine

...without making an awful sound. (Michael)

What Michael has noticed is how the adoption of a new technology has changed, and in this case ended, a significant cultural practice. I argue this change is significant, because it has altered what was a communal involvement with a death practice to one that is now undertaken by just a few people (the gravediggers), when close family and other mourners have gone. This idea will be explored in more detail below in *Backfilling and 'making' the finished grave*.

## **The craic and the slagging**

Viewed from the outside the practice of a group of men digging a grave can appear as a largely social affair. Eamon made no apology for this. As well as being a solemn matter, he saw it as a time for men to come together. He described it as 'a day out'. He and other participants conceived of it as being a continuation of the fun and conversation, or *craic*, that started the night before, at the wake (Cashman, 2008). Eamon described the range of what gets talked about at the digging of the grave as 'the finest of nonsense', from the price of cattle to sex and politics. Of course, there are more serious conversations recalling the person who died, and this is discussed in Chapter 6 of this thesis.

Close relatives of the deceased are expected to bring food and drink to the gravediggers (or make similar provision at a nearby pub). Typically, this will include sandwiches, cakes, biscuits, plus hot and cold drinks, including whiskey, beer, tea and coffee. Some of my participants thought that drink-driving laws had significantly curtailed the amount of alcohol consumed at the gravedigging, with most now just sticking to 'a nip' of whiskey, with anything that is left, kept for after the burial. Tim said the tradition is: 'don't bring it home', suggesting it was still usual to finish any alcohol that was brought to the gravediggers at the gravedigging. Eamon told me about what happened when as a



young man he was digging a grave on a hot summer's day – and he and his fellow digger were doing well until...

...if it kept going the way it was going, it was grand, but we took on a dash of the whiskey on board and a bottle of beer and a few sandwiches. We were fine at this stage but as we got down closer we hit rock. And the more we dwelt on the rock the more we drank out of the bottle. So it came 7 o'clock and I was milking cows at the time. We were pretty inebriated at this stage, both of us, and the grave not finished (quiet laughter). (Eamon)

The story ends with Eamon receiving the wrath of his father when he discovers what has happened, and him and his brother returning in the early hours of the morning to finish digging the grave.

Martin says that in his experience lots of people turn up for the digging of a grave but only a core of 4 to 5 men were doing any work. The rest, according to him were there for the craic, and hopefully a shot of whiskey and maybe a couple of cans of beer. Declan describes a group of older gravediggers, aged 70 plus who are known to make a whole day of digging a grave, so that by the end they leave it 'scattered drunk'.

A key part of the digging is the back-and-forth banter between the men, known as 'slagging', when the gravediggers make fun of one another, tell jokes (some of which can be very bawdy) or just exploit weaknesses in one another.

So if he's throwing the sand out well you say 'oh good man yourself, keep it going there' and the sweat is pumping off him. Or else if he's a bit slow you say 'will you come up out of there, let a real man down'. So there is a lot of this slagging going on. (Sean)

Viewed from the outside and without explanation, it might seem the gravediggers are being disrespectful to the deceased, but this would only represent what can be visually observed. My understanding, based on what the participants have told me, is this behaviour is partly a way of coping with the responsibility of digging a neighbour's grave, and the sadness it entails, especially if it

is a tragic death (as will be discussed in Chapter 7). By interacting with one another in this way, the gravediggers were also able to turn what might otherwise just have been a sad occasion into something that has the feel of a celebration of life and an opportunity for neighbours to come together.

Three of the gravediggers offer slightly different explanations as to why gravedigging is a social 'event'. Martin refers to the gravedigging as a modern-day men's shed<sup>7</sup>, that is, a context for men to get together in a common activity, in a society where there are now few opportunities to do this. Patrick believes many farmers are lonely, working alone for most of the day while their families are being educated or working in the wider economy. Declan paints his analysis on a larger canvas. He notes that rural Western Ireland is empty for most of the time, and not just during the day, with people predominately earning their living away from the countryside, hence the importance of anything that brings people together. He talked of people looking forward to someone dying 'if it's an older person' as it provides a context for the community to come together and bring back the people who are now working elsewhere. His analysis is that death, in a strange way, breathes life back into communities that appear to be dying demographically, a perspective I return to later in this thesis.

One possible explanation for why men become involved in gravedigging concerns the centrality of the wake to Irish funeral traditions. Two of the gravediggers, Conor and James both emphasised that when a neighbour died, the centre of activity was around the 'wake house', which was organised and controlled just by women. The wake entails the body of the dead person lying in an open coffin in their home for up to two days and nights, allowing for neighbours and relatives to come to pay their respect to the dead person. During that time the women neighbours and relatives will be expected

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<sup>7</sup>Men's shed: a kind of club that brings men together around an activity on a social basis, usually involving tools and making something. They are now common throughout the UK and Ireland. Further details about Men's sheds can be found at: <https://menssheds.org.uk/>

to provide much of the food for the wakehouse, for potentially hundreds of visitors. Typically, this will include roast meats, plates of sandwiches, saucepans of soup, cakes and biscuits. Both Conor and James explained that gravedigging was one way for men to be involved, even if on the periphery, in what is mostly a female task of supporting the bereaved family. James said that gravedigging and traffic management around the wakehouse are the two ways in which men feel they can help, but realise they are ancillary to the larger role, assumed by women, of supporting the wakehouse.

People don't realise how much women are involved in what we do. They are always in the background but they are more important than what we do ourselves. (James)

Conor offered a deeper and seemingly contradictory explanation for why men get involved with gravedigging and marshalling. Firstly, he thought men were much better at talking about the person who has died and their life if they were doing something physical at the same time. He believed women can talk without needing a physical activity. Secondly, he thought it enabled you to avoid difficult painful emotion:

And maybe you want to do something physical and help and get away from the emotion or whatever. Sometimes I think that. (Conor)

In these two alternative observations Conor offered for why men dig their neighbours' graves he demonstrated this is far more than a practical act of support to a bereaved neighbour. He revealed participants are also having some of their social and emotional needs met as well - and they knew this.

## **Particular roles**

Based on my own direct observations of three grave diggings and from what my participants described, men of all ages from their late teens to their 70's and 80's help to dig graves, but playing different roles. At some level, everyone present was cognizant of these different roles, even if they are not named (Goffman, 1969). One that was frequently mentioned by my participants was the

'young buck', the strong young man, often assumed to have more physical strength and energy than technical skill; the person in charge (even though I was repeatedly told no one is supposed to be in charge) was sometimes called 'the ganger man'; 'the joker' who noticed and drew attention to details of individual weaknesses (including his own) and so increased the merriment; 'the steady worker' who was focussed on getting on with the digging and ensuring the job is finished; 'the civil engineer', who usually only became apparent if a problem arose and it required a technical fix, such as shuttering to avert a sideways collapse and the 'quality assurance manager'. This later role is a senior position. It is normally associated with older or old men. Sometimes the old men were present at the digging, standing at ground level, perhaps tidying around the pile of mounting earth, offering the occasional comment to those doing the really hard work, like:

...you'd need to straighten that corner or widen that end (Tim).

Sometimes they appeared as the grave was near to be finished, or critically peer down into the grave at the actual burial. As the other gravediggers knew this 'critical eye' will be cast over their work at some point they are incentivised to do a good job, knowing that a poorly dug grave would be noticed and probably become a source of 'critical craic' at a later gravedigging. Tim explained how it works:

**Tim:** Well they wouldn't come by when you were at it, but the day of the burial, they'd have a look down to see.

**DC:** A gaze, a critical gaze?

**Tim:** You got it then after that, criticism (soft laughter)

**DC:** What like that wasn't very square or?...

**Tim:** Yeah, 'did you see the stone sticking out there'.

What these roles also marked were stages in a man's life, moving from the young buck to the steady middle-aged man, to the manager/ganger man, to the wise older man, responsible for quality

assurance. Sean told me the story of one man, NC, that illustrates the passage of his life. NC was the wise old man when Sean was a young man.

And the funny thing was I was at a grave not too long ago and I realised that I was doing N's (NCs) job. So it had come full circle. I'd gone from being the young fella digging the grave to being the old fella up on top of the grave, tidying up and slugging the boys down in the grave. So it had gone full circle. (Sean)

### **Backfilling and 'making' the finished grave**

Backfilling and finishing the grave is the final part of digging a neighbour's grave. For the gravediggers it meant they must make themselves available over two days, for the digging and then the backfilling on the second day. The practice was the same in all four of my study areas, except for one important detail: In Area 3 the backfilling took place while everyone was still at the graveside and after hay had been placed on top of the coffin to soften the sound of the backfilling. Anyone present could join in with the backfilling. To signal you wanted to take part all that was required was to tap the shoulder of the person who was backfilling and they simply handed you the shovel. You continued until people notice you were tiring, and then hopefully someone tapped your shoulder. Backfilling continued until the grave was completely filled, the turf replaced, and flowers placed on top. While this was happening, prayers were said, and in some instances, there may have been singing. When I asked people in Area 3 why it was important to backfill while everyone was still at the graveside they were usually perplexed by my question, as to them it was obvious why. Brendan, who is also the local undertaker, said that people didn't want to walk away from the grave and

...to leave their loved one there, exposed. (Brendan)

His explanation seemed to suggest that to leave the burial before your family member is fully buried would be seen as a kind of abandonment. Although this practice has now largely died out in the other three areas, it does still happen if requested by the close family of the bereaved. Sean, who

lives in Area 4, felt that although it was hard for the family of the deceased to witness backfilling, it was healing.

That was the traditional way. And I look at that now and I say, it is a good thing. I think that is the best way to do it because it adds to the grieving, it helps the grieving. Because when you see someone put down into the grave and then the soil is thrown in on top and there is a certain noise. You know obviously it's going to have a reaction from the people that love that person, it's almost as if they're getting hurt. So, in my view it helps the grieving. (Sean)

In contrast, Patrick describes the practice of backfilling while the family are present as uncaring. He said:

...we would see it as disrespectful for them to see, you throwing down soil on top of them.

(Patrick)

He also thought it was distressing for the family. So although backfilling was the practice in the all four areas until recent times, there was no overt regret that the custom had now largely died out in Areas 1, 2 and 4, except for that expressed by Sean. Three of the gravediggers said they preferred it when the family left after the coffin was lowered so they could get on with the job of backfilling and finishing the grave. Once the grave was backfilled, regardless of the area, the gravedigger would remain behind to put the finishing touches to the grave and remove all the materials and tools from the graveyard, so the area was left as it was, with just the addition of a newly dug grave. James referred to this process as:

...community work in the graveyards in the West of Ireland. (James)

Some participants mentioned a prayer might be said about the person they had just buried, or a few words said about them. This final prayer was referred to as the gravedigger's prayer, although it followed no set format.

From the outside looking in on a community burial, it appears at first glance to be a group of very busy men who are just shovelling, shaping and tidying up. Observed more closely, the gravediggers are taking great care and demonstrating respect in all they do, such as discreetly re-interring any previous remains beside the new coffin (if not already buried beneath the new coffin), shaping and re-turfing the new grave, placing and netting down any flowers and ensuring all of the neighbouring graves are left as they were before the grave was dug. In September 2019 I took part in digging my second grave and had the opportunity to observe one of the gravediggers. This is my observation:

Of particular note was the care taken by JT. In the digging he was worth two of any other man. Now at the final end he was showing a gentle finesse I would not have associated with him. I saw him searching for small pieces of sod to fill in any gaps (in the turf layer) – later I witnessed the care he took in creating chamfered edges to the grave and then wetting the back of his spade so he could create a smooth polished edge to the chamfer. Later I spoke to him about the care he had taken and he told me how much N (who was being buried) had meant to him as a neighbour and he said, ‘but it’s the old ways you know – the *meitheal*, and that means kindness and helping one another’. (My Research Log, 9 September 2019)

When JT referred to the *meitheal*, the traditional practice of neighbourly reciprocal help and support, he was making clear gravedigging was much more than the practical task described by Cillian in the *Introduction* to this chapter when he said:

Danny what is there to tell? If a neighbour dies, I dig a grave for them – what is there to tell?  
(Cillian)

He is instead affirming a complex set of values that may have their origins in farming and an agrarian Ireland but are still adhered to in the post-industrial West of Ireland. This is a point I will return to in more detail in subsequent chapters.

## Summary

When considered from the viewpoint of the gravediggers, it was clear why they described the act of digging a neighbour's grave as 'just normal'. It was, after all, something they had been 'reared to' and therefore appeared to be a practice that just happens, along with the many other duties in their daily lives. However, in this chapter I have demonstrated that the gravediggers are also involved in complex social actions that hold significant meaning for them, both as individuals and as members of their communities. The participants demonstrate through their actions and reflections that VGD is an important and considered death practice, when they chose to reflect upon it. For instance, in the practical preparations they made before a single spit was dug; their knowledge of precisely where to dig and the respectful and delicate way they handled human remains. Even when they are having the so-called *craic*, they did so in a way that was a celebration and recognition of their recently deceased neighbour, a matter discussed more fully in Chapter 6, 'We Do It For'. It is also clear that these were not perfectly harmonious communities. Sometimes the invitation to dig was experienced as unreasonably withheld, or just does not happen, and a paid gravedigger was employed instead. The point at which the participants revealed this was an important cultural practice and far more than 'just normal' was when they reflected on the future of the practice. In their fear and optimism about it, I would argue they conclusively demonstrated VGD was an important death practice and an expression of a collective culture. This coming together is explored in more detail in the next chapter where the participants describe and analyse why 'we' dig our neighbours' graves.



## 6. 'We Do It For...'

### Introduction

In the previous chapter participants described and initially explained their involvement in voluntary gravedigging (VGD) in practical terms. In doing so, they revealed that their participation was connected to their relationships with their neighbours and the importance of this death practice. In this chapter I will explore the various reasons the voluntary gravediggers gave for joining with others to dig a neighbour's grave. When I asked the participants why, in common with others, they took part in this practice, they offered a variety of reasons, beyond the practical ones outlined in the previous chapter. Often, the participants prefaced their reasons with phrases like: 'we' do it for or 'we' do it because, the collective pronoun suggesting the inter-personal nature of their involvement in this practice. As this chapter will explain, I found their explanations were complex, deeply felt and connected to shared social values, beliefs and expectations; that is, they were expressions of a shared culture. Giddens (1992) describe the concept of culture as follows:

Culture consists of the values the members of a given society hold, the norms they follow, and the material goods they create. Values are abstract ideals, while norms are definite principles or rules which people are expected to observe. Norms represent the 'dos' and 'don'ts' of social life. (Giddens, 1992, p31)

while Spradley et al. (2005) describe it as ...'knowledge that is learned and shared and that people use to generate behaviour and interpret experience' (Spradley et al. 2005, p5,). In the following sections, I will demonstrate through five sub themes how, in voluntarily digging a neighbour's grave, the participants were not only expressing a commitment to a traditional practice but, more significantly, they were also expressing their deeper underlying cultural values, beliefs and conforming to the norms of expected behaviour. The themes that will be explored in the sections that follow are: tradition, the most common explanation for the continued existence of VGD, given

by 15 participants; reciprocity and obligation, often extending back several generations; telling stories about the person whose grave was being dug; time as a practical and conceptual entity and the spiritual and religious beliefs of the participants. As with the practical explanations participants gave for their involvement in VGD, all their social reasons for digging neighbours' graves, add to and support my thesis: that is, they were engaged in a jointly perceived social action, even when it was not recognised as such by individual participants (Weber, 1978).

## **Tradition**

In his 1981 seminal work *Tradition*, Edward Shils attempts to go beyond an examination of tradition as a pronoun for established practices, such as marriage or burial. Instead, he wanted to drill down into what people might mean when they referred to something social or material, as being traditional. His definition of tradition is broad: 'It is anything that is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present' (Shils, 1981, p12). He adds that in the process of a tradition being handed down to people it is not even necessary for the recipient to recognise it as a tradition, if its acceptability as a transmitter of tradition is self-evident to them. This process of onward transmission, Shils argues, brings the 'past into the present', making it, 'as much a part of the present as any very recent innovation' (Shils, 1981, p13; Jacobs, 2007). When participants referred to tradition to explain their involvement with this practice, I would argue they used the term as widely as Shils, and they demonstrated his contention that tradition brings the past into the present, even if its practitioners do not call it tradition.

Some participants included within their explanation of a 'tradition,' tiny details of what could also be described as custom and practice, but they nevertheless saw as a tradition. An example of something described as a tradition was that on the day of the digging, you are expected to turn up at 10 o'clock and to bring your own shovel. Another was that on the day of the burial the gravediggers come dressed in work clothes, ready to do the backfilling. Sometimes customs were connected to a *pisreog*

or superstition (see Chapter 4, *Recent History*) such as: after the grave has been re-filled the turf must be placed dirt side up; you must remove all the clay on your boots as you leave the graveyard.

Although seemingly insignificant, these customs, practices and superstitions seemed to be so well known and accepted by gravediggers as to be obvious to them, so much so, that it seemed unnecessary for them to state them out loud. I came to know about these 'unstated and obvious' practices in two ways: by inadvertently transgressing them or in making sense of what the participants had previously mentioned in retrospect. For example, at a burial, when I started to lay some of the turf, grass side-up, I was told it had to be laid root side up. Jokingly, I was told if I was seen doing it grass side-up, I would be 'drummed out of the graveyard' (My Research Log, September 2019). Later that same day I was about to leave the graveyard when I noticed all my fellow gravediggers were carefully cleaning off their boots at the graveyard tap. It was then I remembered the spiritual significance of what Rory had told me during my first interview 18 months before, about the grit he discovered in his wellington boots, hours after digging a neighbour's grave and the spiritual significance of this discovery. It was that the grit would directly connect you to the dead people in the graveyard (see *Spiritual and Religious* below).

These practices and their assumed nature suggest a cohesive social group with a shared understanding of everyone's role and responsibilities exist in relation to the practice of gravedigging. For me as the outsider, it meant I often found myself asking questions that to my participants seemed hardly worthy of a reply. For example, Padraic, who had until recently been the paid gravedigger in the area (as well as a voluntary gravedigger), told me that if the person had died in tragic circumstances, it would 'obviously' not be appropriate to use a paid gravedigger. This, he explained, was because the community would naturally want to dig the grave as a mark of compassion for the bereaved family and it would be inappropriate to involve money in this situation. Sometime afterwards I related this 'rule' I had learnt, to a person, local to the area. His reply was:

Ah sure Danny, didn't you know that?

Of course, that is one of the confounding things about culture, it is only obvious to people who are its practitioners, so much so that it might not be discernible to them, as 'their culture' (Giddens 1992), and may instead be experienced as 'normal' or 'common sense' (Cole, 2020). Gramsci (2005) in *Prison Papers*, refers to this process of accepting and unconsciously absorbing norms of behaviour and values, usually derived from a higher and more privileged social strata, as cultural hegemony, with religion and state being favoured vectors for onward transmission. Based on what participants told me I did not find evidence that the practice of VGD comes from higher social classes, other than in the Irish state and Catholic Church being bastions of traditional culture and social conservatism (see Chapter 4, *The Catholic Church*). Instead, if there is strong evidence for onward transmission of this practice, it came from other people in their community. It would therefore be more accurately described as sideways or horizontal transmission.

One of the sociological challenges in this situation is to try to make the unconscious or socially invisible, visible, and 'to bring the social unconscious up for view' (Alexander, 2003, p4). For this study it happened via the interview process, which allowed space for participants to just talk about the mechanics of gravedigging and then for them to reflect on why they thought it was important to dig their neighbour's grave. Often this resulted in them reviewing and questioning their motivations for their involvement in VGD. Giddens (1982) describes this process as 'double hermeneutics', when social scientist go beyond describing social behaviour, to additionally interpreting its underlying meaning. In some of the interviews recorded for this study participants demonstrated they were also engaged in a double analysis: first in describing an important traditional practice and then putting forward additional underlying interpretations. For example, see Chapter 5: when Tim reflected on me noticing VGD, leading to him really noticing the practice as having deeper meanings (see *Normal?*); or when Sean noted he had changed roles from being the 'young buck' digging the grave to the older wiser man, up top and responsible for quality assurance (*Particular roles*).

Analysis of the interviews indicated that some participants did not appear to be motivated by any conscious social impulses to take part in VGD. They simply described it as something they did. Alternatively, many viewed it as a clear expression of their traditional values, customs and practices. Their motivations were described as connected to other local (cultural) traditional practices such as Irish dancing, Irish music, the Irish language and Gaelic sport (organised via the Gaelic Athletics Association). Paul described how all these practices were ingrained in the adult population and handed down to the next generation.

We still retain, we have a, shall we say we have an element that in our lives, er it's a string going through our lives that has never been broken. Never been broken. (Paul)

Two additional participants, like Paul, also stressed that community gravedigging is not just something they do but rather is a conscious social practice. When I asked Tom why people in modern day Ireland didn't just leave gravedigging to people who were paid to do the job, as you might any other specialised task in a modern economy, he explained:

It's just in your consciousness. You respect the person you're doing it for. And it's a tradition, you've watched it before, as I was growing up. You know what I mean. (Tom)

Tom goes on to explain the practice remains outside the scope of a simple social and commercial transaction and was more than just a repetitive act that they performed, because they had done it before. His description of it as being 'in your consciousness' is revealing; it is as though it had arisen from an inherited part of a person's psychology, where what you believe and how you see the world, precedes you as a person. Mead in his 1913 seminal paper: *The Social Self* argues that the self emerges from a social experience, rather than from the individual (Mead, 1913). I think this observation goes some way to explaining where Tom's commitment to dig his neighbours grave came from, how it had come to be in his 'consciousness'. As part of the same dialogue, Tom refers to qualities that are 'in' the person and connected to neighbourliness and outside a commercial transaction:

It's just the generosity in the person. You don't do it for money. (Tom)

By implication he was explaining that values such as kindness, that get 'in' your consciousness are given to you, effectively culturally transmitted from an early age, chiming closely with the definition of culture as defined above by Spradley et al. (2005). James describes the motivation in even stronger terms. He saw it as coming from the way people in the West of Ireland go about their daily life. He refers to the practice as

...the tradition that is so deep in the heritage of our lifetime. (James)

Again, he explained that the motivation for this tradition practice was greater than any one individual or time, and instead had its roots in the past, but was in the present.

In considering the future of this tradition, participants were divided on whether it had one, because of the dependence on a new generation being willing and available to dig the graves. Declan's is the most pessimistic voice:

It's kind of an old tradition that has been done for years. I don't think it's been any other way here in the West of Ireland. And it's like all old traditions, it takes a long time for it to fade out. But definitely I can see with the young people all gone away to school and not working on the land or doing any of that anymore like. All the old traditions as regards farming are gone. In terms of cutting turf with a slain<sup>8</sup> is gone, it's all done by machine now. And the saving of the hay and the sowing of the potatoes, that's all finished and done with. There is no one doing that any more. So it is a bit surprising that the grave digging hasn't gone along with it. (Declan)

Like Declan, Martin, Mikey and Tom, appeared to be wrestling with a perceived dilemma: that if your children are progressing educationally, they would not be digging graves, and to encourage them to do so would be to disadvantage them by emphasising manual skills. Earlier (see Chapter 5, *Reared To*

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<sup>8</sup> A slain is an I-shaped spade used for cutting wet turf off a turf bank

*It)* Martin gave what to me seemed a beautiful description of his childhood experience of digging graves and 'being in association with his father'. In contrast here is how he describes his relationship with his son in connection to grave digging:

**DC:** And do you have sons that are involved in this at all?

**Martin:** No. I have a son there. He's only 18 - now 19 but he wouldn't, I don't think he ever stood in a graveyard, do you know - not to dig a grave anyhow, you know.

**DC:** Right and why is that?

**Martin:** I don't know, I just never, I never brought him like either.

**DC:** I'm contrasting that with what you said...

**Martin:** About your father yeah.

**DC:** You're seven, eight, you know, sending you over the field.

**Martin:** That's right.

**DC:** To dig some scrawls.

**Martin:** We never just did it. I don't know why. It's just the kids nowadays don't seem to do any physical work at all (humorous tone) so it's not, it's just a different time I suppose, you know. I suppose it's getting back to your point that in the next generation here as well we're going to end up paying gravediggers like the rest of the country. It's probably dying out as well here like.

In contrast to the pessimism expressed by some of the participants, others are confident that a new generation is coming along or in training, that will retain the skills of how to dig a grave, without compromising their future. Redmond argues it is possible to retain traditional practices and still be a part of a present-day Ireland. Conor saw the tradition of VGD continuing because there were young people coming forward. Liam (who is also a local undertaker) said it is a mistake to assume all the

people who dig graves are manual workers. He related that recently he had attended a burial where three of the diggers were university educated. Sean felt part of the answer was for fathers to encourage their sons to get involved in VGD. He specifically refers to his son serving a gravedigging apprenticeship.

He's now 23, but he's been going since he was in his late teens. So, the first time I would have brought him he would have been just about able to handle a shovel. It was like 'come on for the craic like' or 'so and so is getting buried, he would have been a friend of mine' and said 'come on up and we'll help with the gravedigging'. And he's come away. And like what you're doing, it's an apprenticeship. He is serving his apprenticeship. (Sean)

Redmond strikes what sounds like a third and more balanced position. He thought people were still digging graves for their neighbours simply because it was a tradition and people like to carry on traditions. He is relaxed about the future of the practice, concluding it will continue if people want to keep it going, and if it dies that is also

...good and well (Redmond)

but that people shouldn't do anything to accelerate its demise. Sadly, he notes that he may be of the last generation who kept it going and there may be no follow-on generation of voluntary gravediggers to dig his grave.

Some of the participants have pointed out that traditions around death and gravedigging have not actually been constant and in fact what we think of now as the 'tradition of gravedigging', has evolved. I think this is important to record because it both explains the changing and sometimes oscillating context in which VGD is taking place. Conor recalls that in the past:

Yeah, there was a local man here who did it for a lot of years, put flowers all round (the grave).

He did it as part of a community service. And it was beautiful, but when he stopped doing it



then (name of local undertaker) took over and he bought the stuff and he supplied that to us.

(Conor)

Michael remembered that as a child he had a very low exposure to death and at that time children did not attend wakes. He said it was now usual to see children at wakes. Michael remembers that in his childhood, funerals themselves were small events, with around 50 people in attendance. In contrast, Paul supports the commonly held view that 'death is big in Ireland' and by implication it always has been.

Oh absolutely, funerals are big and when I say big, everyone has a very fine funeral here, no matter who they are. You know, let it be the very well known, very well, very popular, when it comes to that day, funerals are very well attended. (Paul)

Michael noted funerals can attract thousands of people, a change he attributed to people having access to a car, something that was unusual when he was a child. Dara claimed the practice of many people going to a funeral reception (at which the gravediggers are honoured guests) after the burial, is a new tradition. When he was a child, the practice was people went home after the funeral. Some participants spoke of certain traditions as ongoing, while others reported traditions that had disappeared in their lifetime such as prayers at the graveside, the symbolic placement of tools and religious practices that the community have consciously jettisoned, connected to VGD. Liam and Patrick both noticed that the number of people willing and available to voluntarily dig a neighbour's grave went up and down and up again in an oscillating pattern that corresponded to fluctuations in the Irish economy. It therefore seems traditions around death and specifically around VGD have not remained the same. So that when participants talked of maintaining tradition, they were referring to a concept that appears to be always in flux, even if this is not evident to its practitioners.

Two elements that surround this practice were seen as givens by all participants: first that digging a neighbour's grave is a purely voluntary action and secondly, it never involves payment. Within the

voluntary action were embedded sub motivations. Patrick illustrated this when he talked about a tragic death and the subsequent arrangements to support the bereaved family.

Again for the community centre and the whole lot of it. Everyone brings in food that is going to it (the wake). So I know she had to get an extra fridge for all the food that people were bringing. Do you know, that it just takes the pressure off, it's one thing less they have to do. And the women of the area would help out with babysitting duties and stuff like that. So again there's a lot more I s'pose help, kicks into action. (Patrick)

He modestly described what happens and how the community 'kicks into action', with gravedigging being just part of that action. I originally came to interview Patrick because he had recently dug the grave of a man who died in what were described as tragic circumstances. The bereaved wife of this man knew of my research and wanted me to include Patrick in my study. She and her late husband were not from rural Ireland and up to this point had little knowledge of how the community might respond in these circumstances. In My Research Log, I recall how she described the way the community supported her and another family subsequently bereaved in the area. Describing the community support (of which gravedigging is a part) I recall she said: 'It seems to happen organically.' (My Research Log, 6 January 2019.)

When I mentioned to Martin how people seemed to just come together around a death as a 'communal thing' he immediately corrected me to say

A community thing, it does of course. (Martin)

I think what he was saying to me was that 'community' was a noun, a presence in its own right, rather than a description of an action. I also wonder if community better evokes an image of how he and other gravediggers see themselves, as people acting in unison, based around a common set of values and expectations, a culture.

Participants held similarly firm views about accepting payment for digging a neighbour's grave. It was seen as a voluntary, non-financial arrangement and neighbours would know it would be viewed as inappropriate to suggest or expect payment for digging a grave. James relates the following

But that's what it is, you don't charge for it. I once dug a grave for a woman and they wanted to pay me and I said 'no'. It's not why we do it, we didn't go there for money to dig a grave. It wasn't in our times. (James)

The normally unbreakable rule is then, one never accepts money for digging a grave. The only example of anybody doing so was separately described by three of the participants when, as young men, they had together dug a grave for someone they hardly knew, and cash had been 'put' into one of their pockets. This was done by the relative organising what was a last-minute burial, for someone they hardly knew. Their response was to go to the pub and spend the money as soon as possible and get rid of what was experienced as... '30 pieces of silver' (Michael). In that sense it felt to Michael as a betrayal in the biblical sense, as when Judas betrayed Christ for money. Implied within this and other accounts is that to even offer to pay the gravedigger is a social faux pas and may be seen as insulting the motives of the gravediggers. Based on what participants explained to me, my understanding is that the only thanks they expect is for the family to bring food and drink to the men when they are digging, to express appreciation, and to ensure all the gravediggers are invited to the funeral reception.

## **Reciprocity and Obligation**

Up until the early 1970's, farming in the West of Ireland, a sector where most people earned their living, was largely unmechanised. Farmers therefore relied on a system of mutual help and support from neighbours, especially when harvesting, known as *cooring*, as mentioned in previous chapters. This system described by Brody (1973) in his study of the West of Ireland which has now largely disappeared; most people now earn their living away from agriculture and fisheries, with farming

only accounting for 4.2% of employment. (Western Development Commission: *Insights*, October 2017). However, the underlying expectations of reciprocity and obligation that informed *cooring*, was still evident in VGD, as expressed by many of the participants.

The pattern of obligation to dig a neighbour's grave, leading to reciprocity in return, seemed for the most part to exist as an unspoken understanding. Rory explained it was taken for granted as something that just went on in the community, without anyone expecting any special praise for it. He expressed this as

Nobody made a compliment of it. (Rory)

Only half the participants specifically mentioned they dug graves for their neighbours because they consciously felt obliged to do so or because a neighbour had in the past, done this for their family, suggesting this was an unspoken understanding. Instead, as shall be discussed in this section, reciprocity and obligation was implied by committing to returning to your neighbours the same kind of support they recalled was given to your family when a member died. I also noted some participants held a detailed memory of those who had 'dug' for their family. Cillian's account is a good illustration of this happening. He described how, when he and his siblings were young children, their father suddenly and unexpectedly died. Although he would have been too young to have witnessed the digging, he knew in detail who the men were who dug his father's grave, as though it was a significant family memory. When I asked him who they were, he replied as though recalling a recent event:

...JM and PO. I don't know whether AM was on it or not. P anyway was, PO and JM. I don't know whether there was, oh I'd say WT, JT's brother was on it, one of them were on it anyway.

When his mother died 20 years later, he again recalled another group of neighbours who were responsible for digging her grave:

Each of the neighbours, MR and JT I'd say was on it, and I suppose TM. I cannot think but I know MR would be on it anyway. And JM and P, one of them.

In both cases Cillian had retained a distinct memory of who these men were and their importance in being involved in two key events in his life. These two lists cover men from at least three generations, with one of them, JM, being involved in digging both graves. Many of the participants mentally retained these detailed lists of people who had 'dug for them', with the implied sense of obligation to reciprocate when called upon to do so. In the case of Cillian, in 2011 I personally witnessed him, with others, digging the grave for JM, who had been one of the gravediggers for his mother's and father's graves. The sequence of reciprocity was as follows:

- Cillian's Father dies 1960. JM helps to dig his grave. (source: Cillian interview)
- Cillian's Mother dies 1987. JM again helps to dig her grave. (source: Cillian interview)
- JM dies 2011 and Cillian helps to dig his grave (personal observation 2011)

When the last grave was dug in 2011 it also entailed Cillian respectfully handling the remains of JM's father - who had been buried in this same grave in 1953. What these examples illustrate is that many participants had a strong sense of obligation to dig their neighbours grave and to reciprocate, based on what had been done for their family, and this information around who dug graves for family members is stored as a significant family memory.

In the case of Cillian, there was a twist in the tale. In February 2019 he died unexpectedly. His extended family, who lived outside the village (he lived alone), mistakenly understood there were no neighbours who were able to dig his grave. And so, none were approached because of the rule you do not volunteer to dig, you are invited (see Chapter 5, *Hearing a neighbour has died*). This resulted in his grave being dug by a paid gravedigger (My Research Log, March 2019, pp55-57).

For many people there was a conscious understanding, expressed as a tradition, that each family knew what was expected of them and would keep the practice going as Liam explained

We have a tradition in Ireland, particularly rural Ireland of gravedigging. For a family member, a next-door neighbour, or a friend. And that tradition was handed down from generation to generation to generation. You'd have a situation whereby we'll say a grandfather would have dug a neighbour's grave and then his son would say my father dug your grandfather's grave so I'll dig the next grave, and it was a tradition. (Liam)

When Liam talked about this tradition, he talked about it as something that exists in the present and comes from the past. When I relisten to the recording it seemed he, like Cillian, is talking about an undertaking that is so much more than a neighbourhood IOU, and much more akin to a valued obligation that has been passed on through the generations, ad infinitum. Tim illustrated this long line of connection in relation to his family's experience.

**DC:** And your own family: have people dug graves for members of your family?

**Tim:** Oh yeah. My father and mother and my grandfather and grandmother. Oh Yeah

**DC:** And who dug those graves?

**Tim:** The people that dug them are dead and gone. I dug a grave for some of them (soft laughter).

**DC:** You dug graves for people that dug graves for?...

**Tim:** Yeah, I did, I did indeed

Paul described this process of benefit leading to obligation, as being like the turning of the clock, until it comes around again. James stated:

We didn't start this at my age. (James)

Returning to the passing baton analogy (see Chapter 3, *Accounts of VGD*), he explained the practice was much more than a repeating pattern of giving and getting benefit. It was also a tradition that they had handed down to them from previous generations and they must not let it die.

So far, the nature of the obligation I have outlined has applied to people who know one another and live geographically close, although Redmond included a family who lived two miles away as neighbours. But an even more extended view of who could be described as one's neighbours was also evident. As explained in Chapter 4, Ireland has a long history of emigration and emigrant return, so some of my participants felt they had an ongoing and historic obligation to assist people who had left Ireland and wished to be buried there (Hickman, 2017). This connection with people who had emigrated seems to have influenced who these participants were willing to describe as their neighbours and therefore people for whom they held obligations. Three participants extended this obligation as going beyond people who live in your neighbourhood, to the deceased emigrants who wish to return to Ireland as their final resting place. James was the participant who expressed this commitment most forthrightly and emotionally. Prior to our interview he took me on a walk to the two local graveyards (one Catholic and one Church of Ireland) where he, his neighbours, and generations before them (he refers to them below as 'my ancestral people') had dug graves for and buried their neighbours. Along the way, he pointed out places where some of these people had died from starvation during the Potato Famine (see Chapter 4, *Recent History*) and been buried along the roadside. These folk memories and awareness of subsequent generations who had to emigrate, meant he felt he had to maintain the same commitment to people who had left but wanted to be buried with their ancestral people:

**James:** They were all buried by my own ancestral people. And that's why we do the job. You don't ask. The only thing you want to know is when a person dies, 'is where they are going to be buried, what day they're going to be buried, leave the rest to us – we'll just dig the grave.

**DC:** Right. So these people you are doing it for they could be from Australia or...?

**James:** They could be from any place at all. It doesn't make any difference.

**DC:** No?

**James:** No.

**DC:** So we're normally talking about ashes now, are we?

**James:** Ashes or a coffin – we'll do it, we'll dig the grave. If they are ancestral people from our area, they don't have to be related at all, it doesn't make any difference. You do it for the love of the people.

This was a very open-ended commitment and I do not know how widely this view is held as James was the only person to make this claim. However, it could be argued he represents one end of a continuum of obligation and reciprocity that extends to those at the other end, who just turn up 'at the digging' to maybe join in the story telling or to 'have the craic'. Two other participants mentioned people coming home to be buried, or to die in Ireland, so as to be buried 'at home'. I would argue part of the commitment to those neighbours was a cultural reaction to how death was dealt with in other countries. Specifically, was it also to save them and their surviving family from a perceived unemotional and clinical death in countries such as the United States, Australia or the UK – as much as to afford them a final resting place in Ireland? This was supported by comments from Michael about his comparative experience of how death was dealt with in England, where he had lived and worked for some time, he replied:

Well I think it is a little colder than here (tremulous laugh). (Michael)

Padraic described how shocked he was to see how sudden death in particular was dealt with in Australia (from his experience working in mining). There he saw it treated as though it was a purely operational and private family issue, with no expectation of collegiate or community involvement. This, he said, would never happen in Ireland. In the next chapter I will expand upon this idea and consider in greater detail participants' diasporic experience of how death was dealt with in other countries (and large cities in Ireland) and how this might have informed their involvement with VGD on their return to rural Western Ireland, including support to those Irish people who wish to be



buried there. Had some of the participants lived and worked in say Mexico or rural Greece and respectively learnt about the day of the dead or the reinternment of dead relatives after five years by local women (Danforth, 1982), the comparative differences between Ireland and say the UK would not have seemed so wide. In parallel with Ireland, these Greek traditional burial practices are now confined to rural areas, where greater community support allows for a wider expression of grief and mourning (Mystakidou et al., 2003, citing Tsiantis, 1996).

Some participants felt they had an obligation to dig a neighbour's grave because they had previously promised the deceased they would 'be at' the digging of their grave. For Conor this occurred when he was ten years old and he was asked by man in his 90's if he would dig his grave, when the time came. This occurred seven years later, and again seven years after that when the old man's son also died. Tom told the sad story of how two years before he had dug a grave with a friend who had been one of the people who had dug his father's grave. Now 73, this man realised this was the last grave he would dig and asked two of them:

...ye make sure you're on my grave when I die, you know. (Tom)

At the time this was laughed away in terms of 'we could be gone before you', but Tom told me this story to illustrate why and in what circumstances people make these binding commitments. My analysis is that this commitment and other examples of extreme consideration for bereaved neighbours, are also motivated by a bond of friendship, a theme I will return to in Chapter 8 of this thesis.

Sometimes people can inherit or marry into the obligation to dig graves for deceased neighbours. Just one person, Declan, explained to me that he had never dug graves in the area he grew up in, although the practice is still common there. When he moved to his wife's village there was an expectation that as the husband, he would assume this responsibility that had come to him, via her. He explains:

So, if someone dies in either of those villages like, or kind of the villages in between, you kind of have to help out like and show that you care. Because like when my day will come, we'll say she has loads of people, she has a grandfather, she has a grandmother, her uncles, her mother – all buried in (Area 4), and someone had to dig them like. All the neighbours round like, dug them. It is only right that I would give a hand when someone else would die in the village, it is only right that I give a hand like. (Declan)

I thought Declan's involvement in VGD was interesting for two reasons. Firstly, he had, without question, assumed this responsibility, via his wife, for keeping this obligation to dig the graves of neighbours. Secondly, he also seems to have accepted the responsibility extends backwards and forwards, to his wife's relatives going back at least two generations as well as to his current neighbours to dig his grave, when the time arrives.

Stephen felt the continuation of obligation and reciprocity could be simply explained by its roots in farming life and the kind of communities that grew up around it. Effectively he described the sort of preindustrial community that Durkheim (1997, [1893]) describes as mechanical, where there was a high level of mutual interdependency and low levels of specialisation. Stephen talked of the kindness of neighbours who would always help you out, as they had when, say, bringing in the oats or threshing. When I asked him why a way of life that had gone from agriculture still persisted in VGD, he thought this was because the people who are still digging graves had at least a historical connection to farming. He thought that when that generation were gone, the practice of gravedigging would fade and then die. Optimistically he notes that in spite of all the wider changes in how people now earn their living:

...still they dig the graves. (Stephen)

## Telling the stories of the life

In 1998-99 and for smaller periods up to 2007, Cashman (2008), an American folklorist, conducted an ethnographic study of the rural community of Aghyaran in Tyrone, Northern Ireland (see also Chapter 3, *Accounts of VGD*). He focused on, via attendances at wakes and céilidhean (gatherings) the importance of storytelling as a significant social vector for transmitting local cultural values and practices. In telling stories about people who have died, he notes:

Memorialising the deceased through anecdotes, then, is in part a secular act of incorporating the deceased into a vernacular body of memory, and that can be contrasted to the sacred act of incorporation achieved by the more elaborately ritualised funeral to follow. (Cashman, 2008, p87)

For many of the participants in my study, gravedigging was more than a practical task. It was also a vehicle for celebrating the life of the person who has died by bringing people together to talk about them, remember them, 'have the craic', and as it were, to tell stories about the life that was the person. One consequence of this is that many more people may attend the digging of a grave than take part in any digging. James told me it was not unknown for 30 men to be present. He explained:

Now some of them will be all digging, more of them will be having the conversation about the person.

Some participants pointed out the storytelling got started the night before, at the wake, and then got picked up and built upon at the gravedigging. Eamon describes how he went to see the neighbours digging his father's grave and realised that stories about his father, including some he had never heard, were a continuation of stories that had started at the wake. This demonstrates stories were, as argued by Cashman (2008), being used as a vector for passing on memory.

Padraic offered a concise picture about how the storytelling brings together the various strands about the person who has died, as well as how they were perceived in their community:

**Padraic:** The conversation, we talk about everything. Cattle and sheep (soft laughter). Talking about maybe the man or woman that would go down in it. What he did in his lifetime. That would be brought up at the graveside. When you'd knowed them well, how they live their life. Enjoyed it some of them. But it used be everyone would have a different story (soft laughter) about the grave.

**DC:** About the person that's going down?

**Padraic:** Yeah. But you couldn't say a bad word (soft laughter) that was after dying.

**DC:** So the stories you'd be telling would be?

**Padraic:** It would be good stories, about what he'd done in this lifetime and how he reacted, you know.

Redmond observed that everyone seemed to have 'a different view' of the deceased, illustrated by stories that showed them in a different light. Others stressed that although all gravediggings are similar, all the people whose graves they dug were unique individuals and this was reflected in the story telling. For example:

If they were a character, the kind of character they were would be considered; if they were neat or rough in their mode of dress, conscientious or a drinker ...There'd be no bad word said about them, you know what I mean. There might be when they were alive (soft laughter) but not when they were dead. (Tom)

All this would be related through the stories of the people that knew them, but without any note of censure.

One result of telling stories in the context of a gravedigging, is that it brought together disparate strands of a person's life, retold by neighbours and friends. In the process, a fuller picture emerged of the person in a variety of contexts and stages of their life. For example, Redmond talked about how interesting it was to hear about the 'daft' antics that deceased neighbours of his parents' generation

got up to when they were young people, such as long-distance courting, when bicycles were the main mode of transport. At one level what seems to be happening is these gatherings are memorialising people and recording the uniqueness of an individual life, as I assume one might expect to find in any funereal celebration in other parts of present day-Ireland. Alternatively, are they also celebrating the individual as a representative of the wider community or society, a quality usually associated with pre-industrial communities (Walter, 2012)?

Cashman (2008) argues the participants in his study may appear to be celebrating the individual who has died when they told stories about them. But at a deeper level the person is also being used to model behaviours and values the community wish to buttress or alternatively to jettison. He illustrated this by recounting stories told at wakes and céilidhean (gatherings) in rural Northern Ireland when one person might be remembered for their neighbourliness and another disparaged for how mean they were. The accounts participants told me echoed these findings, stories about deceased neighbours were both memorialising individuals (but not disparaging them) and using traits of these people to reinforce certain social mores at the same time. For example, see Sean in Chapter 5, *Particular roles*. In this account he was both memorialising the person and using him to project and reinforce certain social norms connected to neighbourliness and pride in performing civic tasks. In contrast to what Cashman (who was ethnographically embedded) reported, none of my participants shared with me a negative picture of any neighbour whose grave they had dug. The nearest they got to offering criticism was in relation to the men who were still alive and who did little or no digging but turned up 'for a few cans and maybe a nip of whiskey' - but even then, the censure was good humoured and perhaps mildly critical.

When participants did mention a dead neighbour to me it was always in positive terms. Cillian said:

The person that's dead is talked about and the craic about them, how funny they were, how good they were, how nice they were. You know... (Cillian)

On the face of it this may sound like an idealised account of how the dead person is recalled while their grave is being dug, but I do not think this is the case. Instead, I think the emphasis was to tell stories that were a celebration of the deceased person, but as a real person. So, for example Redmond described how both their good and their bad points were discussed and Tom pondered their strengths and weaknesses. Expressed in these ways, what could be viewed as a critical memory of the dead person is reframed as sounding like an affectionate recall.

Except for a tragic death involving say, the death of child or when someone has taken their own life (see Chapter 7, *Compassion and tragedy*) gravedigging is a celebratory event for the gravediggers and the other people who gather around it. When Stephen started to explain this to me, he seemed to be looking at me for reassurance; that what he was telling me was not shocking for me as a non-Irish person, hence his softening of the message by saying three times (within the quote below): 'it wouldn't'.

**DC:** And what was it like the first time you are digging graves?

**Stephen:** Ah well, it wouldn't really be a sad occasion really (soft laughter), because there'd be a bit of craic you know and that you know. You'd meet, you'd meet the neighbours and that and it wouldn't be really sad. You talk about the person that died and all that and there, it wouldn't be an awful sad occasion we'd say.

When Stephen says, 'it wouldn't be a sad occasion', followed by soft laughter, I think he is emphasising the opposite – it's mostly a celebration. Redmond explicitly states, 'it's more celebration than sad'. By seeing a non-tragic death in this way, I would argue they are adopting a positive attitude to the inevitability of death (Seale, 1997), and the celebratory aspect of the gravedigging is a potential way of shielding off the emotional pain arising from death. Either way, what they are attesting to is the importance of giving recognition to the life that has just ended – by telling the stories of the life that was the person.

Patrick saw story telling as a central element in the practice of VGD. He reflected that if it were to end, the story telling would end with VGD. This would be because the people digging would not necessarily know or care about the person they were to bury, or about the stories that bookend their life. Of course, it is possible that many of the stories would continue to be told at the wake (Cashman, 2008; Grainger, 1998) but this is a different place and context. I would therefore argue this would alter the stories that would be told about the deceased. It would change how they were told and end the continuity mentioned above by Eamon, of stories started at the wake continuing and being developed as the grave was dug – and blended with the *craic*.

## Time

Some of the participants were particularly conscious of the passage of time immediately following the death of a neighbour. They spoke of things that seemed to be connected to the quality of time, such as how it seemed to slow down/stop; how what had been urgent, could now wait. But central to their discussion about time was how it was reprioritised over three days. This reprioritisation included providing support to the bereaved family by performing a variety of tasks related to funeral arrangements, including digging their neighbour's grave. In the *Sociology of Time* Šubrt (2021) captures this different way of conceiving of time:

The existence of time structures, moreover, also corresponds to the question of “time for something”, time that is or is not suitable for performing certain activities. ...however, this is not only related to time structures themselves, and what they allow or prevent, but also the specific situational context, created by other than just time factors (Šubrt, 2021, Epilogue).

For the participants in this study, their ‘time for something’ was directly linked to a perceived obligation to their recently deceased neighbour: a period to switch to doing something unplanned and to suspend other routine activities. To make this commitment, to be available to dig the graves of neighbours, is an open commitment and something that cannot be planned for. For the nine

participants who were self-employed in agriculture this was not a challenge. Most participants did not have this flexibility, but still somehow managed to find the time. Martin related how from August 2009 to March 2010 he had dug 10 graves and fitted these around his fulltime job as an agricultural engineer employed in an industrial setting. That employed participants were able to make this kind of opened ended commitment was achieved through a combination of factors, such as because the digging occurred on a rest day or over a weekend. Sometimes participants found it was not possible to get away from their job and then they devised ways around the problem. Patrick talked about it modestly, in a casual/problem solving way:

It could be that I say someone died tomorrow it means we go to work today and we all meet in the evening and dig it in the evening, half dig it and then meet again early morning, five or six o'clock in the morning, and do it before you go to work. And then go to work and continue on again like. So you make it work, so you do. (Patrick)

Three participants made mention of taking paid leave as the most obvious way of ensuring you could dig a neighbour's grave, when called upon to do so, even if this meant having less for your personal use:

**DC:** So that is taken as part of your leave entitlement. So you're having to give some for this?

**Martin:** Oh you would yeah. But sure, if you can't give something, do you know, to your neighbours when they're wanted, what's the point in having time off, do you know.

In contrast, he goes on to highlight that one of the reasons why VGD may be dying out in other parts of the country is because many individuals are no longer willing to make this level of commitment to their neighbours. This argument must be self-evidently true, but it does not tell the whole story and I will go on to argue in Chapter 8, *Individual Motivations*, that there must also be wider socio-economic reasons for why the practice may be disappearing.



Sean was the person who most clearly articulated the concerns about how people are using time compared to a past he personally recalled. He said:

I think it's the speed of life you know. Things are becoming less neighbourly. Now we're all individual units. We spend more time on social media than we do talking to each other and to our neighbours. Cars, you know you're moving around, you're kinda giving a person a wave, you're gone. Things were lot slower in the olden days, you know things moved a lot slower. You know you had a lot more walking around, a lot more cycling around, a lot more animals being moved around. We still have a fair bit of that. You know some villages are very strong and then other villages are losing it. Then emigration is a problem you know. (Sean)

This sense of separation from other people did not apply to those involved in gravedigging. When a neighbour dies all of the activity is typically concentrated into three days, starting with the wake on day one and two, the gravedigging on day two and the religious service, burial and funeral reception on the third day. Patrick noticed that something unusual seemed to happen to time during these three days:

**Patrick:** ...like we're all caught-up in our own work, our own lives, or so busy with everything, with family, so busy that when something like that happens (a neighbour dies) the clock stops and everybody comes together to do it, if you know what I mean like. That time stands still - that was a priority, now at 3 o'clock is not a priority any more until three days later, because you're making time to deal with this like.

**DC:** Three days being the time for the person to have the wake and finally to the church and finally be buried?

**Patrick:** Buried yes, and you're part of that. So you make your life stand still until, and then continue on, do you know.

It is interesting how Patrick describes what sounds like a sudden change of direction, when all the normal priorities are re-ordered. Then people focus on the things that need to be done for the deceased neighbour and their family, including supporting the wakehouse, marshalling traffic and digging the grave. There is no suggestion that this level of commitment is experienced as burdensome. It is just a social given, and neighbours want to, and are expected to, get on with supporting their dead neighbour and their family. Martin contrasted this slowing of time in rural communities with that in the larger towns and cities in Ireland, where funereal practices are more professionalised and commercialised, and so give the impression of getting one through the process of disposing of your dead (Aries, 1974). His contention is that this slowing down of time, when someone dies in his area, is rooted in a different and positive attitude to death and not something to be hurried through. He says:

‘We kinda treat death as something okay’.

Sean adds to the discussion about how we treat death, by arguing grieving is a process that needs time. If this process is truncated it leads to unexpressed and therefore unresolved grief, that eventually catches up with the person. Sean refers to this as ‘a rest due down the line’:

You know it gives time for people to talk and you know. It’s all the grieving process. So I think that grieving process is cut short and people don’t grieve properly and then you maybe have a rest due down the line. You kinda look at the way the old people did it and you go, ‘God there’s a lot of sense in that’. That’s what I think. (Sean)

Liam who is also an undertaker, talked of his time in England, where he had undertaken his training in embalming. Reflecting on this period, he recalled families there commonly delayed the funeral for several weeks after their relative had died, rather than having it within a few days, as was common in Ireland. His view was the practice in England was emotionally unwise as grief could not be delayed in this way. He wondered how many people there were as a result, suffering from unresolved grief (My Research Diary, 4<sup>th</sup> April 2018).

I do not think of Sean, Martin or other participants as claiming effective grieving is just a function of how much time one devotes to it. They are also giving time in unison with other members of the community, to come together around the death of a neighbour, via the wake, gravedigging/burial and religious ceremony. Grainger (1998), writing about how much more easily the Irish were able to address death and loss (with a focus on the pre burial wake) compared with British people, attributes this more to the communal nature of how death is dealt with there, rather than because of the time 'given' to death and the funereal process:

I am convinced, however, that the aim of the wake is not to disguise death or even to oppose it, but actually to proclaim it. To proclaim the meaning of its presence for the social group in which it has occurred. To assert its human significance in the face of our defensive attempts to play it down. The wake overcomes our defences by demonstrating the provisional nature of our world (Grainger, 1998, p132).

What these accounts of how people used time seem to demonstrate, is that time takes on a reified quality following a death. Participants talked of 'making time', as they might a physical gift, a gift for their neighbour who has just died, as well as practical and social support to the bereaved family. In 'giving time' in this way many of them were aware that they were also doing so in unison with other neighbours. Ben expresses this sentiment most concisely:

One of the things that's scarcest in this world at the moment is time, and a lot of people don't have time. But people make, make time for an occasion like, like this to be neighbours and to dig the plot for their deceased neighbour. (Ben)

But when participants expressed themselves metaphorically, say about time 'standing still' or 'giving time', this can give a false impression that they perceive time as a vague and perhaps poetic concept. Instead, I think for those participants who talked about time it remained anchored to the practical perspective that time is finite (Šubrt, 2021). It was for them an expression of what is important and what takes priority when a neighbour dies, and how other day to day priorities, such as paid

employment, can now wait. For those who just cannot make these adjustments when the death of a neighbour occurs, they will try to find some other imaginative ways of taking part in the digging, as outlined above.

## **Spiritual and Religious Reasons**

In the 2022 Irish national census, 69% of the population describe themselves as Catholic, down from a high of 94.9% in 1961 (CSO a, Census 2022). Even with this fall, this is a large proportion of its population still identify as Catholics. Contained within this description of 'Catholic', is the recognition that increasingly people are choosing which parts of Catholicism to follow/leave out, and, more recently, to blend with other spiritual and world religions, a so-called 'smorgasbord' approach (see Chapter 4, *Secularisation*). Given the high proportion of Irish people who still describe themselves as Catholic, I therefore expected Catholicism and formal religion to have been a theme in how the participants in this study explained their motives for digging graves for their neighbours. However, only one person made mention of their religion in relation to the practice. This is surprising given that gravedigging is an activity that entails a very direct contact with both the recently dead and sometimes the remains of those who died some time ago. In *Constructing death: the sociology of dying and bereavement*, Seale (1998), attempts to explain how social and cultural action (including religious and spiritual beliefs), is the bulwark against the death we all face, because of the reality of our embodiment:

Study of human experience of death allows us to understand some fundamental features of social life. Embodiment dictates basic parameters for the construction of culture, the key problem for which is contained in the fact that bodies eventually die. On the one hand this threatens to make life meaningless, but on the other it is a basic motivation for social and cultural activity, which involves a continual defence against death (Seale, 1998, p1).

Seale goes on to argue that through joint human social activity we are able to rise above the threat of individual death and ensure human existence remains meaningful. Of the fourteen participants who spoke about their spiritual and religious motivations connected to gravedigging, twelve spoke about spiritual reasons that seemed to 'make sense of death' or reaffirmed the cohesion of the social group. Redmond was the only participant who said he had no spiritual motivation for his involvement and instead he explained:

And as I said before it's respect that you have for your neighbours and that's why you do. But I don't think it could be termed spiritual or anything like that, I don't think so. (Redmond)

He later qualified this statement when he said he saw the actual burial as spiritual:

...it's not a spiritual thing, that'd be the burial itself. But not digging the grave, it's just something has to be done and you do it. (Redmond)

He never explained why, or how, he distinguishes between the digging of the grave and the burial, other than implying the digging is a practical act, while the burial is connected to a religious service.

Liam was the only participant who connected VGD to Catholicism, and then only in passing. He briefly speculated whether it was connected to a Christian or Catholic ethos, whereby it would be seen as one of 'the seven corporal acts of mercy', with the seventh being the teaching that we should bury the dead. These acts of mercy are based on the Christian teaching that in carrying them out, such as feeding the poor (number 1), it would be seen by God as though we had done this for Jesus Christ (Matthew 25:31-46).

Sometimes the spiritual meanings people attached to VGD appeared obliquely in the way that participants talked about the graveyards. For example, Rory explained that these places of burial are ancient, pre-Christian and pagan in origin.

**Rory:** ...And that would have been an ancient pagan site as well. You see the rock, the ancient standing stone that's there?

**DC:** I do.

**Rory:** That's a few thousand years old, probably you know. And there was no church there in (a place in Area 1) and it was consecrated as a burial ground. Yeah, that was it. And there was another burial ground on the Strand, the white strand, in the West. They called it Doughmoor. But the sea has encroached on that now and washed it away. It has.

Patrick points to the special, perhaps spiritual qualities these graveyards have beyond being mere places where the dead are buried.

And some people then are of the belief that you always clean your shoes leaving the graveyard. That you don't bring the soil out of the graveyard, it's bad luck, the soil from the graveyard. That you make sure you don't bring soil away from the graveyard. Some beliefs say that. (Patrick)

He goes on to explain it in terms of a belief or *pisreog* (superstition) that he was not sure had any substance to it, but nevertheless you would not contravene. Eamon said he had never felt fearful about the dead, although he was aware of *pisreogs* that were told by older people such as the dead may 'come back' to haunt you when you have to disturb their remains. He thought that for some people the drink that was brought to the digging helped them overcome such fears and 'give them courage'. Rory, like Eamon was aware of the spiritual significance of soil from the graveyard. He told me a similar story, involving dirt from the graveyard. He vividly demonstrates the importance of listening to signals that have their origin in the graveyard and demonstrated for him the kindness of the dead for the living, including 'the dumb animal'.

**Rory:** These people were there and that was their last resting place and you treated them with respect naturally. Yeah, that's the way I found it. I had no fear or, or no sense of unease or anything at all about doing that. I, I. People might be a little bit uneasy about things. And I remember one night after we had a neighbour back (in) the village buried and I had to get up, I

knew there was a cow going to calf and sure enough she calved. And when the job was done, I could feel the grit on the wellington. And I says, I have the clay of the graveyard in the wellington and I turned round, and went round into the other part where the rest of the cows were and there was another cow calving in the open byre and I said if there was anything the people (the dead) would do like, they'd put you onto looking after the dumb animal. You know. I just, just never forgot that you know.

**DC:** It was a sign to you?

**Rory:** You see (soft laughter) I made a sign of it. These were people who had great respect for the dumb animal and that's what they do, if they do anything. They wouldn't frighten you, you know. If they did anything, that's what they do. That's what they'd be happy - whether they were dead or alive, they'd be happy to see that the dumb animal was cared for.

I find it interesting that when I asked Rory about the spiritual significance of the grit from the graveyard in his wellingtons, he politely and good humouredly takes it as a challenge. He defends his position not by trying to persuade me of its validity, but by claiming it as his interpretation, 'I made a sign of it'. He holds to this view, regardless of whether I or others may share his experience as being a truly spiritual one. Miles (2012) referencing Gallie's (1956) notion of *essentially contested concepts*, explains it is possible and equally valid for people to view the same concept (in Rory's case, his relationship with the dead) quite differently from other people, and for it still to be valid. I thought Rory's viewpoint was illustrative of how deeply some participants had thought about death, and also friendship, love and neighbourliness, that also suggested personal exploration, rather than concepts necessarily derived from a dominant ideology, that had to be defended.

The spiritual or religious meanings participants attached to the digging or burial varied considerably. None of the three participants from the Church of Ireland faith mentioned anyone saying prayers at the gravedigging. As mentioned earlier, only one person specifically connected gravedigging with Catholicism but many mentioned prayers and symbolism connected to Catholicism. For example,

Conor described how even before the first sod is dug, they would say a decade of the Rosary and sprinkle holy water on the grave and then repeat the prayers once the grave was dug. Eamon described how the spades are laid across the newly dug grave to depict the sign of the Cross and left there until the next day. Both stressed, like Rory, that their involvement with gravedigging is also spiritual as well as neighbourly:

There is something more to it, there is a spirituality to it, that's deep. And it reminds you, like you're going back to that clay, that's where you came from. (Eamon)

You've had contact with the person and their lives and the fact you're there for that part of it, you know. To me there is a spiritual thing to it. I just hope it continues. (Conor)

After the burial, just the gravediggers remain at the graveside. Based on what I have been told and witnessed at two grave diggings, a 'quiet busyness' descends on the graveyard. It starts with backfilling and then tidying/shaping the grave, netting down the flowers and removing any equipment. Sean said that perhaps someone says a few words about the person who has just been buried, and perhaps some formal prayers such as an 'Our Father, a 'Hail Mary' or a Decade of the Rosary (consisting of ten Hail Marys finishing with one Our Father). But then regardless of what prayers are said, Sean explained that for the gravediggers... 'it's a tradition, 'always', the gravediggers, we say the last prayers'. While many of the participants made comments about the spiritual connections associated with the act of gravedigging, others felt these links had disappeared or had never existed. When I asked Tim about crossing the shovel to make the sign of the Cross, he said he remembered it happening but said now 'That's gone'. Similarly, when I asked him are any prayers said when human remains are later reinterred by the gravediggers, he said it never happened. Like Redmond above, who says 'it's not a spiritual thing', he conveys a picture of a very significant social/personal action of digging a neighbour's grave but did not connect it to religion or spirituality.

The one area in which formal religion featured to any extent (mentioned by five participants) was historical criticism of the Catholic Church in relation to who could be buried in consecrated ground



and the ban on Catholics attending non-Catholic services. Both these matters are now in the distant past. Cillíni are no longer used, Catholics are free to attend religious services in non-Catholic churches and VGD is a cross-community practice. However, there is still a strong and critical cultural memory of a time when the Catholic Church separated off people into two graveyards: cillíni, for infants who had died before they could be baptised, (and were assumed to be in a state of original sin) or those who had taken their own life (and therefore died in a state of mortal sin), with everyone else buried in the graveyard. Dara told me how upsetting it had been for his family when his infant brothers were buried away from the family in the cillín. He said:

Do you know like, the Catholic religion say, made two halves of a family. (Dara)

Although some participants were critical of how the Catholic Church had acted in the past there was recognition that things had dramatically improved because of changes in the central teachings emanating from Rome. No longer were there groups of people who were excluded from consecrated churchyards. John, for example, talked about burying his prematurely born granddaughter in the same plot where his parents were buried. He told me that in the past these infant burials were confined to the cillín and their graves dug in the dark. He particularly welcomed initiatives led by the Catholic Church to hold ceremonies of remembrance for all the children who had been buried in the cillíni. Cillíni, and the babies and adults who were buried in these out of the way places, are not really part of this study but they are mentioned here as three participants thought they were connected to VGD, because of the stark contrast in the way and circumstances in which certain people were buried. Perhaps in talking about the cillín, Liam, Dara and John wanted me to know there had until recent times been two ways of dealing with death. One that had been open, celebratory and inclusive; another that was shameful, hurtful and excluding. That people were willing to share this information with me about the cillíni is perhaps indicative of a community that is open about how death is/was treated: one way that was positive and another that was still painful, but important to recall.

## Summary

In this chapter I have outlined the five reasons the participants gave for joining together to voluntarily dig their neighbour's grave. Much of the impetus for VGD springs from an agrarian tradition of people acting collectively at times of crisis, linked to an intergenerational and ongoing sense of reciprocity. When participants described what they were doing it was of a death practice that was celebratory, commemorative and life affirming. The common denominator that explained how and why this practice had survived was that VGD was an expression of their values, beliefs and expected norms of behaviour, that is, their culture. I thought the clearest expression of their death culture was in the way they saw and manage time when someone in their community died. A background theme running through this chapter is the significance of neighbours. This is a theme I will address in the next chapter, when I consider participants personal motivations for their involvement in VGD.

## 7. I Do It Because

### Introduction

Voluntary gravedigging (VGD) is a communal act and the motivations for acting with others was discussed in Chapter 6. This chapter concentrates on the five main individual and personal motivations participants had for their involvement in this practice. These were: because of the importance of neighbours; as an expression of esteem, expressed as honour and regard; as an expression of participant's personal commitment to VGD that arose as a consequence of experiences when living away from rural Western Ireland; as an expression of belonging and when a grave was dug for a person who had died in 'tragic' circumstances. The views expressed by participants in this chapter align closely with my thesis that VGD is seen and experienced by individual as an important vector for expressing social meaning. This is most strongly demonstrated by the extraordinary regard people hold for their neighbours, both living and dead, as well as their direct, positive and visceral relationship with death.

### Neighbours

As this study is about men who voluntarily digging graves for their neighbours it is perhaps understandable and predictable that 'neighbours' was a theme present in all the interviews, with fifteen participants explaining in some detail the personal importance of these people. Before considering these explanations, I first want to situate how the term 'neighbours' was used in my four Study Areas. This is important because the terms neighbour and neighbourhood seemed to hold particular meanings for the participants that may not apply in most urban contexts.

My contention is that participants were not just referring to a physical proximity, but to a social and emotional connection to others who occupied this space, a space that can be miles apart. In a special edition of *Urban Studies* devoted to the concept of neighbourhood, Kearns and Parkinson (2001,

citing Casey, 1997) grapple with this idea, in their quest to pin down this widely used social concept and the connection with geographical nearness:

The philosopher Edward Casey, in his book *The Fate of Place* (1997), utilises Heidegger's concept of 'nearness' to argue that places are about 'dwelling in nearness' to others 'nearness' entailing face-to-face contact and a reciprocal relationship; and that this 'nearness' brings about neighbourhood (Kearns and Parkinson, 2001, p2104).

These authors stress that geographical proximity does not necessarily lead to 'nearness', rather this is dependent on what people's needs are, and therefore to what extent these are met in people who live nearby. This perspective was reflected in how some participants distinguished between very small rural areas, usually referred to as townlands, and larger villages, towns and cities. Padraic and Declan, told me how people who live outside the towns and villages, 'out the country', have a much closer/knowing relationship with their neighbours and willingness to help one another. When participants spoke of 'out the country' they were referring to the characteristics of rural Western Ireland, as described above. They explained:

But we'll say out the country is different, because the neighbours all knows one another, all helping you see. (Padraic)

Your neighbour is well thought of in rural Ireland yet. You're nobody without your neighbour like. Whereas you just come in their hour of need to help out like. It's out of respect and all that. (Declan)

The kind of helping, interdependent relationships that Patrick and Declan described corresponds to Casey's (1997) 'nearness' to other people and Tönnies (1887) 'natural will' (*Wesenwille*) to help the people with whom you live in proximity. Up until the early 1970's these close and inter-dependent relationships were common in most of rural Ireland. They were associated with subsistence farming and the *cooring* system and an inter-dependent relationship with one's neighbours. These historic

connections between different farms and families are still important but not crucial to survival. Now these people who live in thinly populated areas look to their neighbours as the closest point of support in a crisis. They also seem to know one another well, and sense that people care about their neighbours to an extent that would be unusual in an urban setting. See also Chapter 4, *Geographical Location* (Wallace and Thurman- Carnegie Study, 2019).

Perhaps the different context in which people live in rural Western Ireland partly explains why three of my participants wanted to be sure I understood how differently the term neighbour is used in these very rural communities. Paul, who had worked for most of his adult life in the UK wondered if I, as an English person, even knew my neighbour's name and therefore could I (by implication) understand what it meant to be a neighbour, from his perspective. Martin was aware that people in larger Irish towns and cities had a much more distant relationship with their neighbours. His impression was that in Dublin a funeral could be leaving a house and the neighbours might not even be aware someone had died. Redmond's point of comparison came from having previously lived and worked in the United States, where his neighbours were people he never really knew, whereas in the rural West of Ireland his neighbours were people he knew very well and held in high regard. He explained:

Like say I lived in Chicago going back 20 odd years, I didn't even know my neighbour, so you don't have the same sense of belonging. ...Whereas here you know your neighbours two miles away, never mind ones that live next door to you, you know, and that is the difference. And you see you have to remember that you got a very, very small population here and it is an awful lot easier to mingle and mix. (Redmond)

To illustrate his dependence on neighbours, Redmond told me a story about how his wife, who was not from the area, had inadvertently locked their baby in the car, with the car keys inside the vehicle. As she was alone, (and presumably out of the practical reach of motoring rescue services) she called a neighbour who immediately came to her aid. When Redmond reminded me: 'You're in a very rural area', he was pointing out a particular feature of rural Western Ireland; that when you live in the

countryside this usually means living some distance from your nearest neighbour, who is nevertheless someone you depend on and who depends on you. Tim explained that the closeness to one's neighbours is reflected in the fact that a close relative is rarely asked to dig a grave. Instead, this is nearly always left to the neighbours who are not directly affected by the loss of a family member. For some participants the digging of a grave was also seen as registering there had been a loss to the community, and as a way of bringing neighbours together. Cillian described it simply as 'a neighbourly gesture', a way of helping a bereaved family.

Some of the participants seemed to hold an even deeper and personal attachment to their neighbours as significant people in their life. It was Redmond's view that next to your family, your neighbours who you have grown up around, are the second biggest influence in what sort of person you turn out to be. He concluded:

It's where you grew up with them all their lives, you're interacting all your lives and then you know when you they die, the least you can do is dig the grave for them. (Redmond)

Hugh vividly described the two sides of neighbours digging graves: first, the appreciation a family feels when it is on the receiving end of neighbours offering to organise everything around the digging of the grave, when they may be immersed in loss; secondly, he explained how the act of digging your neighbour's grave gives you, their neighbour, purpose:

A lot of the time when you do have a bereavement there is nothing you can do. The person is gone, you can say you're sorry but I think sometimes it gives purpose to people. They can't help you because someone has died but they can help you deal with it and this is one way to deal with it by: we'll dig a grave for you; we'll fill it in; we'll have hay for putting over the coffin; (to dampen the noise of the backfilling) we'll have a bit of a net for putting over the whole thing; (to prevent the flowers from blowing away) everything will be looked after so you don't have to worry about that side. (Hugh)

In this extract, Hugh demonstrated there is for him a direct link between the intensity of feeling people hold for their neighbours and the practical act of gravedigging. When he said 'there is nothing you can do', he was referring to the pain he empathetically assumes his neighbour must be experiencing, because of their loss. By digging his neighbour's grave, Hugh is both emotionally connecting with the bereaved family and finding an outlet for his own feelings, arising from the loss of a neighbour. That people want to help and be helped by their neighbours in this way seems to be, in some way, connected to the particular social and geographical circumstances in which they live, that results in this conscious form of social action, of digging your neighbour's grave, rather than just a social behaviour. It therefore carries social meaning for all those involved (Weber, 1978; van Heerikhuizen, 2016).

Padraic was the paid gravedigger in his area. He was the only participant who had dug graves on a paid and voluntary basis and so therefore occupied a unique position in this study. For him there seemed to be a clear motivational distinction between these two types of graves. Graves dug for neighbours were for people you were socially and emotionally close to and dependent upon, even if their house was geographically distant. These are the people he referred to above as 'living out the country'. In contrast, the people who have employed him to dig graves predominately lived in the towns and villages in close geographical proximity, but appeared to him to be socially and emotionally distant from each other.

He talked about how moved he had been when neighbours dug the grave for his wife. When I asked him about what it meant to him, he talked about what a nice and kind thing he found it to be and his wish that when he dies, it would be 'the neighbours' who would dig his grave. Dara echoed this wish to be buried by your neighbours and the point made by Redmond above, explaining that your neighbours are very significant people in your life, even when your life has ended:

**Dara:** Well it seems a cold kinda of an end to think you'd pay someone to bury you in the ground, do you know. I think the people was dealing with all your life, that they might leave you down a bit easier or something (soft laughter). I don't know, it's just my opinion.

**DC:** But when the neighbours come and do it, why does that make it different?

**Dara:** Well, you're dealing with them all your life and it's kinda your end and they're kinda looking after you to the end.

When Dara said your neighbours are 'looking after you to the end', he is pointing out neighbourly commitment goes beyond attending your wake and/or funeral: the end point is them putting you into your grave and burying you. However, the system of VGD assumes a high level of harmony between neighbours, but they do not always get along. They can fall out so badly that the grave has to be dug by a paid gravedigger. This was remarked upon by Padraic, who has dug more graves than any of the other participants:

You might get a bad neighbour who mightn't be speaking to four or five in the village, they have to get the undertaker to do it then. That has happen too (soft laughter), that the neighbours are not speaking. You see that comes into it too, that comes into it. (Padraic)

One participant, Conor mentioned this had happened to his father-in-law:

(Name of wife) was saying there about her Daddy who dug graves for all his life and then a paid gravedigger dug his grave and his family were a little disappointed with that. (Conor)

When Conor said that they were a little disappointed I have assumed this was understatement (as he appeared visibly upset) and in fact this event was experienced as hurtful and possibly punishing by his father-in-law's family, especially given that his father-in-law had been a voluntary gravedigger. On other occasions neighbours failed to dig the grave because of disharmony between the potential gravediggers, who then fail to come together, again resulting in the grave having to be dug by the paid gravedigger. Should this happen, and I only encountered it once (My Research Log, February



2019), it is not seen as a slight against the bereaved family, rather it was viewed as a wider community failure, especially if the deceased was a known voluntary gravedigger.

Sometimes a family may decide not to ask neighbours to dig the grave. Rory described the contrasting arrangements that were made for his mother compared to his father. When she died, she was waked at the family home for two nights to allow neighbours and all the family to gather, including those coming from the United States. Her grave was dug by 'the neighbours'. When his father died 8 years later in a nursing home, Rory said he had previously 'cautioned me' not to bring him back to the house to be waked and instead:

To rest him in the funeral home (about 2 miles away). And he thought it was the most practical, practical thing. (Rory)

His grave was then dug by the paid gravedigger. When a grave is not dug by 'the neighbours' this can happen for a variety of reasons such as: the community has fallen out with the bereaved family; neighbours who would usually dig graves in a locality have fallen out with one another; none of the neighbours have been invited to dig the grave, or as in Rory's case, his father had died away from the area in a nursing home. This would seem to suggest that there is an underlying structure that appears to work seamlessly and only becomes visible if one of the component parts of the 'social architecture' is missing – although it is difficult to generalise, given the small number of cases included in this study.

Sean was the participant who spoke most about the enduring relationship that exists between people as neighbours both in life and as dead neighbours, in the graveyard. He explained how when he went to the graveyard he would often 'chat' with his dead neighbours. This is what he said about his father's grave and the importance of neighbours.

But it was funny because, and even like to the present day I would always look at that spot because I picked it out, and why did I pick it out: because he was going to be buried with his

friends, with his neighbours, men that he had palled along with, gone out to 'Johny Patton's', had a pint with, you know played cards with, gone over to England with, worked with, you know – and he was going to be buried with them and that's why I picked that particular spot (tapping affirmatively on the table). (Sean)

In the Irish novel, based on 'goings on' in a graveyard in Connemara, *Cré na Cille* (The Dirty Dust) Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1949, translated Titley, 2015) captures this idea that although they may be dead, neighbours are still neighbours, interacting just as they did in life. In the translator's introduction he writes 'The characters in the novel may be dead, and lying down in their grave, but they do not shut up' (Ó Cadhain, 1949, translated Titley, 2015, p.vii). I think this idea of the dead neighbours metaphorically talking to one another and to the living community, is what Sean was referencing; that even when the individuals are dead and buried, patterns of neighbourliness remain significant, certainly for the living.

From all these different accounts it appears that neighbours, living or dead, were important for the participants to an extent that would seem unusual in most urban communities. That neighbours were held in such high esteem seemed to have its roots in tradition and the small and geographically isolated communities. However, I note that only ten of the twenty-six participants earn their living working in the same communities in which they live, in farming or local fishing. Most of the others are employed in industries that include engineering, pharmaceuticals, tourism and local government, but return each evening to these small townland communities, having worked in the surrounding larger towns and villages where VGD does not occur. When participants explained how important and vital neighbours were to their life, they were describing relationships that sound much more like those that one might have with family or friends. But as Padraic points out, when these close neighbourly relationships break down, when parts of the social architecture are missing, the expression of that closeness can also collapse, as is evident when neighbours fail to come together to dig their neighbour's grave.

## Expressions of esteem: honour and regard

When participants talked about honour and regard, they were describing a range of emotions and motivations that are perhaps best encapsulated by the concept of esteem: the esteem they felt for their recently deceased neighbour and that they felt was conferred upon them by the act of digging their neighbour's grave. In *The Economy of Esteem* (2005) Brennan and Pettit argue that esteem is a powerful social force, something we wish to both get and give to other actors (they refer to the demand and supply of esteem) and to avoid their disesteem. I would argue these imperatives were motivating factors for these participants.

In explaining their reasons for involvement in this practice, some specifically connected it to the idea of 'honour'. This was firstly as a way of paying honour to a friend and/or neighbour and then the honour they felt was conferred on them by being invited to take part in digging the grave. Talking about honouring a recently deceased friend, Liam said:

There is no greater tribute you can pay to a fellow human being than maybe to prepare their final resting place. It's a very strong act, to dig the soil, to prepare the place of burial of your friend, neighbour. (Liam)

In saying this, Liam is making it clear that although digging a grave may be a normal and practical cultural practice, it also confers honour on the person who has died. Seamus makes a similar claim. He related how he and a friend had only dug one grave and this was for a school friend who died in his mid-thirties from cancer. He said they just wanted to honour their ex-classmate and friend. As explained in Chapter 5, the ostensible contention made by several participants is that the act of digging a neighbour's grave, is just a 'normal' and practical act, as when someone dies, they need to be buried. Normal to these participants it may be, but both Liam and Seamus explained it is also a significant act and a way of conferring honour on the person who has recently died.

Two participants, Patrick and Tim separately explained that the process of being honoured starts the first time you are included in the group tasked with digging the grave and this usually occurs in your twenties. You may not know what you are doing the first time, but there will be older and experienced men who will be watching over you, gradually inducting you into what appears to be a kind of 'society of men who dig graves'. Another participant, Hugh explained that even though he had dug six graves, he was usually the youngest person at the digging, so he still wouldn't have been classed as a gravedigger, not like the men who did it all the time. Tim remembered the first time he dug a grave and the honour he felt just

...to dig for my uncle (who was being buried) (Tim)

As explained in Chapter 5, in Area 1, you do not volunteer or just turn up at the gravedigging, you have to be invited. In this area to be invited to help dig the grave was viewed as being honoured, as participants explained. Rory talked about it as being a privilege to be invited to take part in 'that kind of work'. Michael thought that being honoured in this way was a sign that the bereaved family saw you as a friend. He said:

Well, it's an honour to be asked to dig a grave. There's people think you are a good friend if they asked you to dig a relation's grave. (Michael)

Of course, there was a flip side to this arrangement. Not everyone who might want to be invited to help dig a grave was necessarily invited. This can happen for a variety of reasons, such as there being a maximum number who can fit around a grave (in my three times of direct experience, usually five) or because some people are just forgotten about. In general conversations with people in Area 1, I was told that sometimes this practice that can be used to honour neighbours can be used to leave people out. This was not a matter that arose in any of my audio recorded interviews so I cannot be sure if this is true or how widespread it might be. However, it logically follows that any social arrangement that is used to honour certain people carries the opposite potential, of making other people feel left out and perhaps dishonoured.

When participants talked about the reasons why they had dug graves for neighbours, this included a range of motivations, ranging from friendship and kindness to an expression of love. All of these explanations I have grouped as expressions of regard. I chose the term 'regard' because it described the feeling the participants ascribed to particular individuals or families, as different to the more general personal motivations to collections of people, such as those for 'the neighbours' or 'the Village'. James and Liam were the only two participants who talked about love as a motivating factor their involvement in VGD (see below).

For three participants gravedigging was primarily seen as an expression of friendship. Both Hugh and Paul saw it as way of supporting the bereaved family and as an expression of friendship for their deceased friend. They wanted to stress that their notion of friendship encompassed not only the person who had died but also their family. Paul described the act of digging a neighbour's grave as a

...final act of friendship. (Paul)

Sean spoke movingly of trying to perform his duties as a gravedigger without becoming overwhelmed by the grief he felt for his friend who they were burying:

There was a young man that died, a lovely man, gone off to the States, spent most of his life in the States (USA). I knew him really as when I was a young boy, you know he was a brother of my best pal. But when I jumped into the grave, you know you fill the grave in so much, then you have to sort of pat it down, you know make sure it's all down at the sides. I could not see the soil, even though lads were throwing it in to me, it was just a blur (because he was crying). And I was working out of memory and out of habit. And you know that's special, that's me grieving for my friend that had passed on. (Sean)

I found his account impressive: for the way it linked concepts like friendship and childhood memories with the very physical activity of burying someone; the visceral details of patting down the earth on top of the coffin containing your friend and making sure to fill in the sides of the grave. In effect he

expressed the noun of friendship as a 'doing thing' and demonstrated a tangible way of expressing his feelings for his friend and his own sense of grief.

Liam and James are the only participants who specifically mentioned love as one of the reasons that might motivate you to dig your neighbour's grave. When Liam mentions love I gather he is also drawing on his wider experience as an undertaker to share his understanding of why people do it – without necessarily claiming this is why he did it. He says:

...I suppose, if you analyse it enough, it's a very final act of love to someone that you would have regarded as a friend or a blood relation, that as I said, you would have prepared their final resting place. (Liam)

James is the participant who talks most passionately and expansively about love as the form of regard that motivates the practice. In twelve instances where he refers to love he prefaces each statement with 'we', such as:

We do it for the love of the people. (James)

On just one occasion he instead said

You do it for the love of the people. (James)

From the passion with which he expresses himself it is reasonable to assume he also means 'I do it for the love of the people'. But the fact that he does not see it as necessary to separate the 'I' from the 'we', suggests that when it comes to this practice the individual and the group motivation is subsumed within a wider collective, in what grammatically is the 'inclusive we': With reference to academic writing Fløttum et al. (2006) explain what is happening when people use the 'inclusive we':

**Inclusive 'we'** (sic) for 'I' has rhetorical functions like those of inclusive 'we' for 'you': It creates a sense of togetherness and blurs the author-reader divide, and this community promotes agreement. As Mühlhäusler & Harré (1990: 175) point out, the use of 'we' instead of 'I' also

diminishes the responsibilities of the speaker, since he or she is portrayed as collaborating with the hearer (Fløttum et al., 2006, p100, bold emphasis in original).

Just one participant, Tom, talked about kindness in relation to gravedigging. Based on his view, I have included kindness in this section as a kind of unconditional regard. He thought it was as an inherent motivating factor that resulted in people showing a level of regard for their neighbours:

Like out of pure kindness you do these things. (Tom)

His contention was that he was kind and this was a quality he expected to find, and had found, in other people (see also Chapter 4, *Geographical Location*, Wallace and Thurman- Carnegie Study, 2019). Tom described how he had supported a neighbour for several years through a terminal illness and then with other neighbours, dug his grave. He also recounted how, when he was away working in London for twenty years, neighbours assumed responsibility for digging the grave for his father and then his mother:

These graves were dug and that was it. You know that's the way with me too. (Tom)

My understanding was that Tom was going beyond describing kindness as a give and take relationship, for example describing reciprocity between neighbours. Instead, he saw it as an unconditional regard for another person, without any need or expectation the kindness would be rewarded or even recognised. His contention was kindness was more likely to flourish in small rural communities. Another participant, Ben did not specifically refer to kindness, but he referred to many situations where neighbours had shown regard for one another; a regard that I have interpreted as kindness. His explanation was that it arose from a natural order of things, whereby human beings wanted to help one another and forget anything that might divide them.

There is now a small, but growing body of sociological theory and empirical research that supports the contention that kindness is a social factor in its own right. Brownlie and Anderson (2017) argue that we need to account sociologically for its importance in everyday life and the different ways it is

described and used by people. Their intention is to demonstrate kindness is 'sociologically useful' (p1223). Their theoretical arguments are supported by a qualitative study undertaken over three areas in and around Glasgow: *The Liveable Lives Project* (Anderson et al., 2015a, 2015b). They argue that kindness is a subtle but real concept, that mostly goes unnoticed in everyday life because of its very nature; that the people who are acting kindly are not doing so to be noticed but merely to be kind. Based on what I have been told by participants in this study and what I have observed in these four study areas, I support the contention that kindness occurs as a separate social motivation. The social scientific challenge is that it seems to be mixed in with other social motivations.

### **Living away from rural Western Ireland**

Those participants who had lived and worked in other countries experienced different ways of dealing with the burial of the dead. This seemed to have heightened their appreciation for the way it was addressed in rural Western Ireland, including the practice of VGD. For example, Padraic left this area and Ireland when he was 16. He did not return to live there until he was 35. During that time, he had worked in deep mining in Australia and construction in England and Wales. He described an incident that occurred while he was in Australia where his work team recovered the body of a young man who was crushed under a rockfall. Apparently, the young man had only recently graduated from mining school. Padraic was shocked that this could have happened and surprised they were not expected or invited to attend the funeral of the young man whose body they had recovered. He told another story of when he was working in England, which he seemed to retell with a shocked amusement:

You know the people here feel, there is more sorrow in them than the people in England. I seen a young fella, I worked in England and his mother died. And he came in until 12 o'clock to work. And he says "I have to go now", he says, his mother was being buried today. He went for an hour (soft laughter) and came back to work. That was the truth. Here they wouldn't do



that, they'd take three or four days off. It's a different ways altogether. Did you ever notice that now here? (Padraic)

His conclusion 'there is more sorrow in them than the people in England' was put to me as someone from England, as a sad observation, not to offend, but also to underline the difference between an English and a rural, West of Ireland death culture. In a similar vein, Adrian related an incident he witnessed in a Scottish fishing port about 50 years before. He happened to have been staying at a house where an elderly woman from there had died. When her remains were returned to her home the closed coffin was put into a room and they

...turned on the television (soft laughter). (Adrian)

He described how the next day there was a full funeral for the dead woman that included a hearse, limousines for the mourners and an undertaker walking in front of the funeral cortège. Adrian ends this account by peeling off into a soft but sardonic laughter. What seems to have irritated him is not that people have a different way of dealing with death, but the contrast between the private way the deceased's body was treated and the outward show of mourning. His account of what he witnessed in Scotland was used to contrast markedly his description of how the dead are treated in rural, Western Ireland, including the care taken in digging their grave.

Another participant, James lived in Lewisham in South London for 9 years and said he thought it was terrible to see what happened when he attended a funeral there, such as the grave being dug by a mechanical digger and backfilled from a dumper, rather than by the neighbours. He said there was:

No love to it, no nature. (James)

When James comments there was 'no nature' in it, my understanding is he was saying there was no tenderness in what he witnessed during burials in London and the way a grave was filled in was unfeeling. Dara lived in the Midlands and Northwest England for 14 years and worked as a steel erector. His view was that in England death is mostly dealt with in a cold and clinical way. His

observation was that usually: 'In England it's just you're dead, you're taken away, you're put in the fridge for a fortnight'. His observation corresponds with Aries' (1974) observation that people in the Western World stop caring about the person as soon as they die and they become just another commodity that needs to be disposed of. However, recalling the deaths of two children of a work colleague who died in a house fire while he was working in England, Dara noticed that when a tragic death occurred, there was likely to be a big response from the whole community (Walter, 1991). My overall impression was that neither Dara or James were judging of the way death is dealt with in England but registering their comparative appreciation of how well death is treated in rural Western Ireland. James said:

When you come to the West of Ireland you see it done. It goes over two or three days, but it's the nicest thing as ever was done. (James)

As has been stated previously, in addition to differences between countries, there also seems to be a marked distinction between how death is dealt with between communities in Ireland. The Irish Association of Funeral Directors (2022) report that VGD is still common throughout the Republic of Ireland, but it rarely occurs in the larger towns and cities. This is something remarked upon by my interviewees. Two participants recalled their experience of how differently death was dealt with in Dublin. The way they described funeral practice seems to me as if they viewed it almost as a different country and culture, experiencing it as though they were part of an 'internal' diaspora.

This must have been a cultural difference most of the participants in this study encountered on a regular basis, because although all lived in rural areas, most earned their livings in the nearby larger towns. This difference would have been even more marked when they visited Irish cities. Sean recalled attending a funeral in Dublin with five colleagues of a woman he had been working with and realising if they had not attended there would have only been two people at the service. Martin described attending a funeral at a Dublin crematorium and being funnelled in and out in exact time slots. Ben accepted cultural practices were bound to be different in the larger towns and cities,

compared to rural Ireland. He explained that he had attended funerals in Galway City and several large towns and that 'they're basically all the same'. He had no expectation that the neighbours would be involved in digging the grave for their deceased neighbours in these places. He realised that to expect otherwise was unrealistic. Equally Hugh, appreciated that some of the cultural practices concerning the burial of the dead in his community might seem strange to those living in the cities of Ireland. He recalled:

I did remember a friend of ours from Dundalk (soft laughter). He was introducing my mother to someone and he said 'oh she's from (name of a village) in Connemara, they dig their own graves', as if she was burying herself, I dunno. (Hugh)

In Tom's account of why he left London and returned to live in rural Western Ireland he described it as 'a very small, tiny place'. He implies it offered very little emotional and social place for other people, as well as freedom for children to roam:

**DC:** What made you make that decision to come back?

**Tom:** Well probably, we had kids late. In 2000, oh no 1998 the girl was born and then the lad in 2000. London was a very small, tiny place I thought for them, when you can give them a place like this to grow up, you know what I mean. So that's what brought me back here really.

**DC:** Space?

**Tom:** Space and like they have a way more freedom here like. Like in London like you have a house and your back garden is only say 30 yards long by maybe 15 wide. I mean that's the space they grow up in. You can't let them out onto the street over there. Round here I can let them out. They used to go, go way up that mountain there. Go way up there and I wouldn't worry a bit about them. Send the dog with them, you know. You wouldn't have to worry about them like. In all my time growing up here I've never taken the keys out of the car. It's never locked. Do you know what I mean, I could go away for the weekend and leave the car there, I

could leave the doors open. Do you know what I mean, never have to worry about anything coming. Locking the door is the last thing I'd be thinking about or taking the keys out of the car like.

Alternatively, Mikey wondered if the distinctions in the way people treat death and therefore their commitment to traditional practices, was not to be found in geography or different nations, but between generations. His contention was that communal gravedigging would rapidly fade as a cultural practice. He thought this was because as young people became more educated (which he welcomed) they dropped their commitment to traditional practice. Reflecting on young people (including his own two sons) he said:

I don't know, the young ones today is very hard, because they don't, they're not interested you know and that's - they say it's a different race now. (Mikey)

When Mikey said 'it's a different race now', I understand it to mean that he is contrasting younger people with people of his generation (he was age 78) who mostly worked in manual occupations and had little access to continuing or higher education. Mikey saw his, an older and fading generation, as the one who maintained local traditions, that included digging your neighbour's grave. He doubted following generations who increasingly lived and worked away from rural Western Ireland, would maintain the practice of VGD.

## **Belonging**

An enduring impression many of the participants left me with, was that the act of digging their neighbour's grave was an outward expression of their involvement with and sense of belonging to their community. In *Belonging: Solidarity and Division in Modern Societies*, Guibernau (2013) has developed the concept of 'communities of belonging'. She uses this concept to explain how some people have swapped living in modern and anonymous communities where people have little sense of belonging, to join ones where they may give up some of their personal freedom, but in return

benefit from a sense of security and solidarity with other people. Guibernau's contention is that people are willing to give up some of their independence in order to attain a sense of belonging. The participants in this study are, I would argue, examples of people who have the best of both worlds: they benefit from living in communities where individuals have a deep sense of belonging, but retain daily contact with an industrial world via their work in modern industries, such as pharmacology and computing; they do this, without losing their primary sense of being part of communities where they are recognised, known and valued by their neighbours.

Only two participants talked directly with me about the connection between gravedigging and belonging, but this concept of belonging to a community, was inferred and peppered throughout most of the interviews. Examples include three participants who talked about babies who had died or been stillborn, who stressed the importance of ensuring they were buried with another member of the family, usually a grandparent. This was explained as a way of ensuring they were not alone - and by implication they had a place of belonging. Historically, this had particular resonance for these participants who had lived through a time when there were two different categories of dead people. As discussed in Chapter 6, *Spiritual and Religious*, it was until the early 1970s, the normal practice amongst Irish Catholics for children who had died unbaptised or adults who had taken their own life to be buried separately and in unconsecrated places, known as a cillín. Above, Sean talked about a sense of belonging even applied to his dead neighbours in the graveyard. This feeling of being part of what Guibernau (2013) describes as a 'community of belonging', is also evident in the extraordinary way people refer to their neighbours as central parts of their communal life or as being second only to family, as formative influences in the person they grow up to become. Perhaps the point where a sense of belonging is most impactful is when what some participants described as a 'tragic death' occurs. It is at this point that families feel most supported by their neighbours (see *Compassion and tragedy* below).

Hugh was the only participant who asserted there was a concrete connection to an actual geographical location, a place where you live/come from, and your sense of belonging. To illustrate this, Hugh told a story about one day being 20 miles away from his village and how local people were curious to know who he was. In the background he could hear them making connection to his older brothers and his parents, and then the exclamation that of course they knew him:

**Hugh:** And then 'oh I know you now'. You still don't know who I am. You know where I came from (soft laughter). Which is the thing you do around here.

**DC:** But this gravedigging that we are talking about, that kind of relates that, about belonging?

**Hugh:** Of course.

In this account, Hugh supports Kusenbach's (2020) contention that belonging is in many ways connected to a place and the fit with other people who also occupy this space. She says: 'One belongs where one is deeply familiar and comfortable with the surroundings and/or its people, where one fits in' (Kusenbach, 2020, p2). Where this sense of fitting in and belonging was most evident was amongst those participants who had lived and worked away from rural Western Ireland (see above, *Living away from rural Western Ireland*). When they reflected upon death practices they had witnessed in other countries, it seemed to amplify their appreciation of what happens to you when you die in rural Western Ireland. But it was also an expression of belonging and returning from somewhere where you felt you did not belong to somewhere you did belong. This is the same sentiment that is reflected in the Marsh (2019) RTE documentary, *The Funeral Director* (see Chapter 4, *Economic Change*).

Hugh was the participant who was most consciously aware that there is a price to be paid for belonging. His contention was, and I agree with him, that in accepting you belong in this certain place you are also accepting the social expectations that go with it, such as that when a neighbour dies you will help to dig their grave. Also, when he humorously comments 'Which is the thing you do

around here', he is also alluding to the element of belonging that is socially directive - in the sense that people are telling you, you are where you come from and with this comes social obligations and expectations. His observation supports Yuval-Davis' (2014) criticism of Guibernau's 'communities of belonging', that belonging in a given community is never an entirely free and individual choice. In this account, Hugh ties up these two threads of belonging: one relating to place and the other to the people who live/have lived and died in that place. In this setting one of the practices that reflects and maintains the sense of belonging and in Tom's words 'brings all the village together', is VGD.

## **Compassion and tragedy**

One of the particular types of death that participants referred to were 'tragic deaths'. These deaths encompassed a range of circumstances in which a person had died including: when they were young; as a result of an accident or because the person had taken their own life. In any of these circumstances, participants felt people wanted to be as helpful as possible as there were limitations in terms of what you could do. While a person could say they were sorry for the family's loss, this seemed insufficient to many of the participants. Digging the grave offered them as individuals one way, a practical way, of also helping to deal with their feelings of inadequacy in terms of not being able to diminish the loss the bereaved family would be feeling. This also applied to Sean and Martin, who, even though they had direct experience of dealing with tragic deaths because they were or had been part of the emergency services, nonetheless were still moved by any tragic loss that occurred in their community. In one case, Martin related having attended a tragic accident and a few days later helping to dig the grave for that person.

When I started this research, my initial expectation was there would be a strict separation between paid and unpaid gravediggers, depending on how a person had died. I assumed that where a death happened in 'tragic circumstances', that these graves would be dug by a paid gravedigger. My reasoning (see Chapter 2, *My effect on the Research*) was that where a death was seen as tragic the

family would be too upset to want to involve anyone outside the immediate family. Therefore, it would be emotionally easier to have a paid person dig the grave. Padraic, who had until recently been the paid gravedigger in the area, patiently explained to me why my assumption was wrong.

**Padraic:** No, in a tragedy, I never dug because the neighbours dug them, you know.

**DC:** Right, okay, explain that to me.

**Padraic:** We'll say the likes of them two lads that got drowned, last year down here in the river – the neighbours dug it.

**DC:** Right

**Padraic:** And then there was a couple of suicides, and the neighbours dug it.

**DC:** So am I right in thinking that in the normal run of things neighbours might dig the grave or a professional person like you might dig the grave, but if there is a tragedy...?

**Padraic:** It's usually the neighbours

**DC:** Right, why is that?

**Padraic:** I don't know, because they all got together and they feel sorry and for the people that lost whoever they lost. And they all got together, all the village, you know in certain villages.

It therefore became clear, when the death was viewed as tragic there was a particular wish amongst neighbours and friends to show a practical kindness and sensitivity to the bereaved family. Several people mentioned beautifying the grave as a way of achieving this. For example, Patrick talked about covering the bottom of the grave with ivy for the burial of a young parent. He did this so that if the children should look down into the grave it wouldn't look like a 'cold hole', but instead be seen as 'homely'. Martin also described the grave of a young child and how the gravediggers had draped sheets onto the side of the grave and attached flowers to the sheets. Padraic believed people wanted to show care and consideration for the bereaved family, especially when it was connected to a tragic



death, because of the sorrow they felt for them - a sorrow I feel might also be interpreted as compassion.

Michael explained that if the death is considered to be tragic, the atmosphere at the gravedigging is serious. Gone is the humour and craic that would have happened if the person had died after a full life. Many more people are likely to turn up to either help dig the grave or just to be present, which of itself could be seen as another expression of belonging. James recalled that when his son died aged five, about thirty men turned up dig his son's grave. He was very moved by this support and wanted to thank each one of them. Liam described something similar when a young man died in a drowning accident. When the grave was being dug the father turned up with food and drink for the gravediggers and stayed until the grave was finished. Usually, a close relative of the deceased would only attend for a short while, to bring food and drink to the gravediggers. Liam thought he stayed to show solidarity with his son's friends. He observed:

He brought some, he brought some food with him and some drink and refreshments. He was there just in solidarity really and there was actually in total ten or twelve, but there was about seven or eight that were digging. But it was more to support, to morally support the friends who were preparing the resting place of their friend, to give their moral support to do that, you know. (Liam)

Tim explained that in spite of the sadness surrounding a tragic death, when neighbours dug the grave, everything was handled with finesse and sensitivity. He related how a father had died in an accident in his 40's. He then had to be buried with his infant child who had died shortly before this. Because of the close proximity of the deaths the burial entailed reintering the child's coffin with the father's coffin. When I asked Tim how this was done (the child's coffin had been discreetly put to one side) without all the people at the funeral seeing the child's coffin he replied:

They didn't see that? They wouldn't have been aware, that would have been discreet. (Tim)

Many of the participants mentioned suicide and that it was becoming more and more common in the West of Ireland. Official Irish statistics show that suicide is the leading cause of death amongst males under 25 (CSO h, 2019). James described how tough it was for the gravediggers and the family of the deceased, when they were digging a grave for a young person in these circumstances. Two participants talked about their direct experience of digging a grave for someone who has taken their own life and how emotionally stressful they found it. Patrick had agreed to be interviewed at the suggestion of Maude, the wife of the man who had taken his own life, who was also Patrick's friend and neighbour. Maude and her husband were not originally from rural Ireland. She spoke about how she felt so cared for by her neighbours and all the support they gave her around the arrangements for the 'wakehouse' and in particular that they had dug her husband's grave (My Research Log, 6 January 2019).

When I spoke with Patrick, he seemed modestly unaware of how kind he and his neighbours had been to Maude and her children around the time of her husband's death. He spoke of having dug several graves before, but this was the first time it involved someone taking their own life and who was also a friend. When we met nearly two years after this happened, he recalled being in a state of shock while they were digging the grave and then burying a friend. Stephen was the only other person who spoke directly about burying a neighbour who had taken his own life, aged just 40. He recalled the positive memories he had of his friend, someone he had dug graves with and who incidentally had been one of the people to dig the graves for both of his parents. Stephen, was left with a sadness of wondering whether if his friend had got the right help, would he still be alive.

Martin was a strong advocate for VGD in any circumstances but he felt it really helped when the death was a tragic one. He said:

...that's the most time you're most wanted. (Martin)

In making this comment Martin is not saying digging your neighbours is less important when the person has died of natural causes. It is still important for all the reasons outlined above, but it has an

added importance in showing support to the family who are not only dealing with a loss but also a tragic loss.

## Summary

This chapter has been an exploration of the personal motivations of participants for voluntarily digging the grave, when a neighbour died. It contrasted markedly with the very practical explanations offered in Chapter 5, *'It's Normal'*. At the centre of this chapter was what seemed to me to be the extraordinary regard people routinely hold for their neighbours. It has shown that the practice of VGD was seen by participants to do with how the living regard one another, a sense of belonging, and their commitment to this death practice. The ten participants who had lived away from rural Western Ireland turned out to be particular advocates for VGD, which seemed to be because of their disappointing experiences of how death was marked in other countries. The way people respond to tragic deaths was, I would argue, an illustration of the collective nature of death in this area. Instead of families being left alone and in privacy with their terrible grief, the wider social expectation was, that this was a time when neighbours would be drawn to the bereaved family and most needed. In Chapter 8, *Discussion*, I will review the evidence that has been presented in these last three chapters. I will consider how it confirms, adds to or challenges what we know about existing death practices.

## 8. Discussion

### Introduction

In small communities along the West Coast of Ireland it is still common practice for men to dig the graves of their deceased neighbours by hand, without payment, and for the family of the deceased to bring food and drink to those digging each grave. This study sought to address two questions related to the practice:

1. why are men still voluntarily digging graves, a practice associated with a preindustrial/agrarian society, when they are living and working in a modern post-industrial economy?
2. what do the views, experiences and explanations of the men who carry out these practices, tell us about modern-day rural Ireland and its potential direction as a society?

In the previous three chapters I considered the ostensibly practical reasons participants gave for their involvement in voluntary gravedigging (VGD), the social motivations that brought men together to dig graves and their individual reasons for their involvement in this practice. In this discussion chapter I largely retain this three-part analytical structure but recognise any such division is artificial and in reality, all three explanations are at some level joined together. Wherever possible I reflect this in my discursive analysis.

### 'It's Normal?'

#### Social action

A repeated question from many of my participants throughout my research was, what was there to discuss about VGD? It was their initial contention that digging their neighbour's grave was a purely practical action (see Chapter 5, *Introduction*). My view is VGD is more than a practical action. My

thesis is that when men took part in VGD they were involved in a meaningful social action. Their actions expressed and demonstrated how they viewed their neighbours (including dead neighbours), how they were viewed in return and the importance of VGD as a cultural death practice. My participants questioned why I thought it worth considering why they dug graves for their neighbours. This reflects Weber's contention that much of what social actors describe as a non-significant social behaviour is in fact a significant social action. Weber (1978, p4) states:

We shall speak of "action" insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behaviour-be it overt or covert, by omission or acquiescence. Action is "social" insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby orientated in its course.

In applying this 'action' test to the data collected here, my finding is that the participants did attach social meaning to VGD, through their 'acquiescence' and cooperation with other people. They demonstrated this in three ostensibly practical ways: First, via word of mouth and an established communication system (see Chapter 5, *Hearing a neighbour has died*). Secondly, by those charged with digging and filling the grave committing to being involved over two days and to have in place all the general and specialist equipment that might be needed. Thirdly, to dig the actual grave which necessarily involved knowing your neighbour's plot and on which side to dig (see Chapter 5, *The Digging*). That all these processes were waiting to click into action when a neighbour died, I would argue demonstrated VGD is a significant death practice that held important social meanings for all the participants.

### **Invisibility**

The participants awareness of all these details, of what was involved in gaining the knowledge that their neighbour had died, and then preparing for and digging their grave, I assert would be considered extraordinary in most urban communities in Ireland where the practice is largely unheard of (see Appendix 3, The Irish Association of Funeral Directors) and undocumented (Irish National

Folklore Archive, search February 2018). Participants were not being ironic or excessively modest when they described this practice in purely practical terms. Their lack of conscious awareness of why they took part in this practice, supports Alexander's (2003) observation that significant cultural practices can be close to invisible to its practitioners. He suggests the challenge for cultural sociologists 'is to bring the socially unconscious up for view' (Alexander, 2003, p4).

In conducting this study, I have demonstrated that this practice has a complex set of meanings, far in excess of being just a distinct cultural practice. It is important that these meanings are documented for what they tell us about how people in rural Western Ireland live, their relationship with one another and their responses to death in their communities. Should this practice disappear from the area, this study will also represent an archive to record it was still happening in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. That this culturally significant practice was so 'invisible' for participants I think can be largely explained by their early exposure to VGD. Participants described an induction to the practice that started in childhood (see Chapter 5, *Reared to It*). Martin spoke of 'being in association' with his father, until gravedigging was something that you had internalised (Mead, 1913).

### **Continuity and volunteerism**

Inglis (2017, p224) questions whether when Irish people retain 'certain cultural traits', in this case rural Irish traits, whether they really value what they are doing or are being drawn into a coercive social myth of what it means to be Irish, in order to paper over structural social problems. This study did not find evidence that VGD had these negative connotations. Instead that for its older practitioners, who were 'reared to it', it had become something they had chosen to continue doing and not just because they had been 'reared to it'. For follow on generations it was a consciously learnt and adopted practice, if indeed it was passed on to them. My assessment was that participants were conflicted in their loyalty to VGD. All hoped the tradition would continue in the long term, but many thought it would not survive beyond their lifetimes. I think these participants were being overly pessimistic about the continuity of this practice. I base this on the fact that Ireland

as a whole has a long and strong tradition of volunteering, community service and amateur and non-professional sport. Outside VGD, this spirit best represented by the nationwide reach and achievement of the GAA (see Chapter 4, *Gaelic Athletic Association*).

This voluntary element was integral to the practice. It never involved any monetary payment. To even offer money was considered a social faux pas. When a family accepted the offer from neighbours 'to dig the grave', they did so as a response to the generosity of spirit and emotional support being offered to them by their community. These generous and compassionate attitudes contrast with the current market orientation of the funeral industry. Writing from a Marxist perspective, Fletcher and McGowan (2024, p 29) offer the following observation of the worldwide funeral industry:

While millions of ostensibly individual funerals take place in a variety of novel ways, one thing unites most of them in at least one sociologically important way – they are bought and sold as commodities.

As funerals in Ireland also exist within the realms of modern capitalism, it is not possible to totally exclude the 'extractive value of mourning rituals' (Fletcher and McGowan, 2024, Introduction, p4), that is, to make a profit from death. Only the element that was enacted at a community level, the gravedigging and burial was free, and therefore existed outside modern capitalism. This contrasts with England where the role of paid digger has existed before modern capitalism and is included in the ancient office of sexton (Westwood and Moss, 2017). Four participants did in fact point out that one of the biggest cultural changes they had noted in their lifetimes was that funerals used to be small affairs and confined to close family and neighbours but were now big affairs, regardless of the person. This indicates that in the background of community and VGD there is a contrasting and vibrant commercial funeral market that now includes body embalming, a period in the funeral home and after-burial receptions at a nearby hotel or public house. This area of death practice has not been a part of this study or a comparison with the UK, where Woodthorpe et al. (2022) argue there is an opposite trend for simpler and 'direct' funerals. However, in Ireland it must be that at some

point in the funereal process the voluntary and increasingly commercial aspects of death must butt up against one another.

I did not detect there was a clash of values between the two systems. Rather, the three participants who were also professional undertakers were enthusiastic supporters of the practice of VGD, even though it would have been in their commercial interest to include the gravedigging and burial within their 'funeral package' (see Chapter 4, *Economic change, The Funeral Director*, 2019). These participants demonstrated that VGD was important for them as individuals but also because it was important for their community, of which they were a part.

### **Culture expressed as knowledge**

McCurdy, Spradley and Shandy (2008) argue that culture is knowledge; that holding certain types of knowledge is a tangible expression of what is important in that culture. This study is a clear illustration of that view. For example: when participants talked about the technical knowledge involved in gravedigging; when they knew all the equipment and materials they had to have to hand to be able to dig a grave; by being able to tell and listen to the stories about your neighbour so as to tail-end their life; and knowing - but not knowing how you knew, but that you had, maybe since you were a 'young fella' - they were expressing their culture. All of this internalised knowledge supports the contention that culture is knowledge.

However, this study also shows this practice has changed in some ways and questions whether it has now become vulnerable. In the past this knowledge would have been received automatically via a kind of social osmosis, of 'being reared to it' (see Chapter 5, *'Reared to it'*). Now this knowledge is being more deliberately passed on by father to son, or in some cases is not passed on to the next generation. This indicates the vulnerability of this cultural practice (Walter, 2012; Howarth, 2000). When I examine my data, I note that nine participants (see Chapter 2, *Research Methods*) specifically spoke about the issue of handing on the practice to another generation. Four were optimistic about the future survival of VGD and five were not. My data demonstrates that the future of this practice



hinges around two different viewpoints: firstly, that VGD is associated with a less educated/agrarian Ireland, and therefore in time it will die out as fewer young people are employed in farming, even though still living in the countryside; secondly VGD is an important cultural practice like Irish traditional music or Gaelic sports that will be passed on to the next generation. Both arguments are valid but I think it is a cultural, more than a practical skill that can be passed to another generation. The fact that only nine, of the twenty-six participants were farmers supports the argument that VGD is culturally embedded and reflected in wider, whole community support for this practice.

### **A collective perspective**

When the people in Area 3 backfilled the grave while everyone was still present, they literally described a communal burial, where anyone had permission 'to take the shovel'. The reasons they gave for this practice are very close to those described by Walker and Balk (2007) and Walker (2019) amongst members of the Muscogee Creek Nation people in Eastern Oklahoma. The Muscogee People believe that you should backfill with everyone present, as to do otherwise is tantamount to leaving your dead exposed and walking away. Brendan gives a very similar explanation for this practice in Area 3, of not wanting to leave their dead uncovered and exposed. The descriptions the Muscogee Creek people give in relation to what it is like to attend burials in American cities (Walker and Balk, 2007) compared to those held in tribal lands in Oklahoma, has much in common with what some participants described whilst attending funerals in Dublin and cities in England as large, process driven and impersonal. Sean talked about the contrast between rural and city Ireland, experienced when he worked in Dublin. Tom's reasons for leaving London were because it was so small compared to Area 4 and the open space for his children to play. In the wider context of the tone of this whole interview, I have interpreted this as also intimating that London was also small socially and emotionally; that it was a place with little space for meaningful social interaction and space for other people who you live near to (see Chapter 7, *Living away from rural Western Ireland*).

From Tom's perspective this makes sense, but he was looking at social interaction from a collectivist perspective, as someone now back living in a small and close-knit community, whereas people in large cities like London and Dublin are more likely to see social interactions from an individualist viewpoint (Cruz, Stahel and Max-Neef, 2009). And perhaps this is the key connection between the participants in this study and the Muscogee Creek Nation people (Walker and Balk 2007; Walker 2019): they share common practices like VGD, communal backfilling of the grave and a wake tradition in which the deceased is never left alone – but most significantly they have both retained a collective way of life in relation to death practices, compared to many people who live in large towns and cities, where this is more difficult to sustain. When Walker and Balk (2007) comment that for the Muscogee Creek people the only difference between the tribe and the family is size, it echoes much of what the VGD said about their neighbours. They showed a conscious awareness that as well as existing as individual and family units they also did so in relation to the people who make up their community and specifically their neighbours.

## **Neighbours**

Many participants stressed the paramount importance of neighbours and the connection to VGD. They spoke of how their identity was tied to their relationship and interconnectedness with neighbours. Some participants felt that they were nothing without their neighbours and that after your immediate family, they were the people who had most influenced them and that, in the end, they were the people who would bury them (hopefully). The descriptions participants gave of their contacts with neighbours were of close, affectionate, practical, but sometimes conflictual ones when neighbours fell out with one another. This had from time to time resulted in graves not being dug by neighbours, so the job was then passed to the paid gravedigger.

But the question still remains: why were neighbours so important, as demonstrated through the actions of VGD? Firstly, it seems while Ireland changed from being an agrarian to a post-industrial society, starting in the 1970's, people in rural Ireland were able to retain many of their pre-existing

cultural values, including neighbourliness even while working away from agriculture. Secondly, they never lost these close relationships with other members of their community, when working in the modern Irish economy, because they still lived where their ancestors had lived. Kerr et al. (1973) anticipated that countries that came late to industrial development would not necessarily develop in the same way, in a process they described as pluralistic industrialism. They would instead be guided by a variety of factors such as class, family structure and national traits. The particular way that rural Western Ireland has developed and still retains many of its existing cultural traits would seem to confirm what Kerr et al. predicted. However, some participants in this study did report a tension, with a trend towards less connected communities in rural Western Irish life and this was reflected in the time some people would give to their neighbours. This observation supports O'Sullivan's (2006) contention, arising from his study of how globalisation is affecting Irish society, that it will lead to less caring and neighbourly communities, arising from greater disparities in wealth and materialist attitudes.

Industrial development has come late to Ireland. It did not unfold like it did in other parts of Western Europe, with massive shifts of population from the countryside to alienating towns and cities, where close knit relationships with neighbours were no longer feasible (Bartlett, 2010). What has happened, or perhaps more accurately, continues to happen in rural Western Ireland in the form of very stable and caring communities, is in other parts of the world having to be designed and expressed as futuristic social policy. Writing about human scale development in periods of rapid change, Cruz, Stahel and Max-Neef (2009) argue for a balance between purely economic development with social and environmental considerations. This, it is claimed, will produce communities which promote wellbeing and meet fundamental human needs. Citing the developmental work of Max-Neef during the 1980's they identify nine fundamental human needs that are unchanging across historical periods and societies (even when met in different ways or what are described as *satisfiers*): subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, idleness, creation, identity and freedom. The participants in this study have shown it is possible to achieve

this balance between living and working in a successful economy and meeting these fundamental human needs, it seems by waiting for modern capitalism to come to them as post-industrialism.

However, it should be recalled, before this happened, and up to the 1990s (see Chapter 4, *Economic Change*), tens of millions of their fellow Irish citizens had been forced by economic circumstances to emigrate, to live in cities across the world, where their neighbours were not people they knew in the same ways or were connected to over several generations. O'Toole (2021, p100) recalling the visit of American President Kennedy to Ireland in June 1963, notes the President praised Ireland's special economic identity: as a country that exported its people rather than minerals or grains.

In spite of this criticism, my study found that these communities were socially cohesive. They demonstrated many of the key elements that might 'glue' communities together, such as a shared culture, a common history and a sense of belonging (Fonseca et al. 2019). Most importantly, this is shown in the level of regard participants demonstrated towards their neighbours, even though there was no practical reason to do so, as there might have been in an agrarian past. There is no universal agreement on the elements that constitute a socially cohesive society but there is a consensus that it is a useful metaphorical construct (Abrams, 2023; Fonseca et al. 2019; Novy et al. 2012) for describing the important parts that result in a stable community or society. Lepineux (2005) in a Europe wide study of social cohesion claims it comes down to how nations hold together. Durkheim (1897) first coined the term social cohesion to describe this imperative to join with others. He observed it happened easily in close knit 'mechanical' societies but through necessity when people were forced together in large scale industrial 'organic' societies (see Chapter 2, *My Theoretical Approach*). This study has found communities where people mostly worked in a post-industrial society but lived in close-knit and socially cohesive communities, without there being an economic imperative to do so, as originally described by Tönnies (1887) and Durkheim. That they have been able to do this can be partly explained by the homogeneity of these communities, populated by people with shared languages (English and Gaelic Irish), religion and culture, who were also often

related to one another, if only distantly. This compares with the situation pertaining in larger Irish towns and cities where there may be differences in class, religion and/or ethnic origin, so making the task of communities acting in unison more challenging.

Fonseca et al. (2019) in a meta review of social cohesion from 1897 to 2016, cite seventeen different major definitions of social cohesion over this period. They propose a three-axis framework to situate the construct, consisting of the individual, the community and wider institutions, with social cohesion being the point at which these elements intersect. This study is in many ways an example of these three parts coming together: individuals participants demonstrated they wanted to be part of a cultural tradition that drew them to their neighbours and expressed their sense of belonging; communities were constituted with a collective viewpoint about the importance of neighbours, especially when it came to death practices; Irish civic and cultural life had since the establishment of the Irish State in 1922 emphasised the importance of wider family, tradition, community and until recently, the Catholic Church, as the place where people would come together. Fonseca et al. claim that social cohesion is a dynamic force and capable of changing and finding new ways for people to socially cohere. For the participants in this study, they have drawn on old and new ways in order to 'stick together'. In their lifetimes, rural Western Ireland has changed from being a highly religious and agrarian society to a more secular, socially liberal and post-industrial one (see Chapter 4, *Modern Ireland*). This study has added to our knowledge about how some societies can go through periods of massive social and economic change, and still remain socially cohesive.

### **A social activity and a time for story**

When neighbours got together to dig a grave (unless the death was considered to be tragic) it was a social and celebratory event. Eamon explained the digging of the grave had all sorts of meanings, including spiritual, but he felt it was important to not be too solemn about it and honestly admit it is also an excuse for men to come together, concluding, 'it's a day out'. When participants talked about the celebratory atmosphere around the grave, they were aware that what they were doing was

culturally distinct and may seem unusual, perhaps shocking to people outside rural Western Ireland. This perspective about VGD aligns closely with what both Grainger (1998) and Cashman (2008) have found in their studies of the Irish wake, as a celebratory and a socially affirmative action in support of the bereaved family and the community in which they live.

The main way this happens is via the collective term of 'having the craic/crack'. This is a fluidly used term and encompasses people coming together for fun and conversation, and is often associated with drinking and the pub according. It also retains a wider meaning (of Anglo-Saxon origin) of people coming together for friendly gossip (McMahon et al., 2010). In this study it means men getting together and talking, 'talking about everything and anything'. Padraic mentions talking about 'cattle and sheep' (followed by soft laughter) - and of course, stories about the person who has died and their life. Participants have described it to me in terms of many stories about the person coming together in this one place, at one time, tail-ending their life. All are celebratory, none are openly critical about the deceased. Hayes (2016) in his paper on the psychological reasons for why we tend to want to praise the deceased, finds this is a universal trait and can be traced back to ancient civilizations and is therefore something human societies have probably always done. The underlying reason for doing so (citing Pyszczynski et al., 2010) he connects to the terror death represents to all societies, and that by keeping the deceased's memory alive we maintain the life of the community. I agree with Hayes and would further argue that the positive storytelling in my research, that occurs while the deceased's grave is being dug, is another expression of 'the battle with death' as discussed below. What is also important is this story telling is happening in concert with other people who are also and together staring down the terror and finality of death. By adding in craic into the context of telling the stories about the deceased, I think the participants were standing up to and dissipating the fear of death.

Cashman (2008) in his *Tales From the Northern Ireland Border* records that reflecting on the life of the dead person is used for a wider social purpose. This can include memories that the social group

want to entrench, say of generosity, or to criticise a life not well lived, say because of meanness of character. The data presented here showed a different pattern of commemoration around the graveside. I did not hear anything openly critical about the person whose grave was being dug. This may be because of the depth of my study compared to Cashman, who lived in the community while he was studying it. My assessment of storytelling in this study is simply that when a grave is being dug, this is a time to commemorate the deceased and not to criticise. I think it is reasonable to assume that at least some of the participants held critical views of the person, whose grave they helped to dig. But VGD is a celebratory practice and therefore it would have been inappropriate to turn up to dig a neighbour's grave and then use it as an opportunity to critically remember them.

### **The different roles women and men**

My data establishes that amongst these communities VGD is viewed as an exclusively male task. I note that it was not meant to be seen as excluding women. Rather that women are seen as the main organisers of the funereal arrangements, with gravedigging being seen as just one part of what needs to be done. Conor and James explained that the most onerous responsibilities were running and resourcing the 'wakehouse', with men playing a supporting role by digging the grave and marshalling traffic at the wakehouse. Conor suggested it also provided a context for men to talk/share feeling while undertaking a physical task, something he felt women could do just by virtue of being together.

In two separate feminist studies, Watkins (2019) in South Australia and Jarnkvist (2022) in Sweden, detail the struggles women face to play a full part in funeral undertaking and conducting funeral services, in a world that has historically been dominated by men. Jarnkvist (2022) asks a series of questions to interrogate power relationships between men and women, such as: what is studied and what is not; who is represented and who is not in the studies. In this research women are not represented or studied (see Chapter 9, Conclusions and Recommendations), but it is clear they play crucial roles in running and provisioning the wakehouse, as described by James and Conor above.

What is not clear is, were they doing this as equal partners with the voluntary gravediggers. Does running the wakehouse give them an equal opportunity to express their grief, say compared to Greek women in rural communities who disinter bones five years after burial (Danforth, 1982; Mystakidou et al. 2003) or to commemorate the person who has died, in the ways that men can do, when digging the grave?

When Martin said that VGD was like the modern days *Men's Shed* I have interpreted this to mean that this was one motivation for keeping this practice going, simply as a way for men to meet up with other men. That this is necessary is in turn connected to the rapid fall in the number of men employed in agriculture and therefore around in these rural areas, during the working day (although this absence of other people does not extend to times outside normal working hours, see for example, Chapter 4, *The Gaelic Athletic Association*).

For example, from 1996 to 2016 the number of people employed in agriculture in County Mayo dropped from 20.1% of those in employment to 8.5%, of whom 89.5% were men (WDC Insights April 2019, Western Development Commission). This may then suggest many men in rural Ireland are lonely for the company of other men, (something that disappeared with modern agriculture) rather than motivated by a conscious or unconscious intention to exclude women from the practice of VGD. I would argue this is the case. James and Conor were both explicit that their role in digging their neighbour's grave was ancillary to the wider funereal arrangements managed by the women, who set up and provisioned the wakehouse for potentially hundreds of people who might attend the pre funeral wake. How these women felt about this distribution of responsibility was not explored in this study (see Chapter 9, *Areas for possible future study*).

### **A relationship with death**

Some of the cultural practices described in this study, such as neighbours handling human remains, or treating the gravedigging as a social event, may appear to be unusual to people from outside rural Western Ireland. For the individual participants, the practice brought them face to face with the



reality of embodiment and the finite nature of life. Eamon spoke of the stark reminder that you will, like the person you are burying, return to the clay (see Chapter 6, *Spiritual and Religious Reasons*). In my analysis, the participants and the communities they came from were engaged in a kind of battle with death (which they were winning). By coming together around the gravedigging, they were creating a sense of community that transcends individual death (Durkheim, 1915). James expresses it this way:

There is nothing nicer than to see a bunch of men, fine men, from an area, digging a grave.

(James)

When they told the stories of the life that was the person, they were distilling qualities that would add to the moral and cultural knowledge of the community. This meant that although the physical person was gone from the community the values and qualities they personified were retained within the wider community (Cashman, 2008). When the bereaved families brought food and drink to the gravediggers and everyone had 'the *craic*', they were creating a social solidarity that was affirming and inclusive at a time when people might have felt isolated and bereft.

Of course, there is an argument that the confrontation with death, could be met via the Irish wake, which typically still includes an open coffin. Up until the mid-1970's the preparations for the wake would have also entailed women neighbours laying out and dressing the body of the deceased (My Research Log, 20 September 2023). Now this is now a job entirely done by the undertaker. Therefore, attending a modern neighbour's wake, while still offering a point of social solidarity, does not compare with the visceral experience of digging your neighbour's grave and all this entailed for the individual voluntary gravediggers, including handling or witnessing the discovery of human remains.

I would argue that what these men were doing, as individuals and as a group, refutes the argument originally put forward by Becker (1973) and then Aries (1974) that modern industrial societies, like Ireland, are 'death denying' (Walter, 1991). Blauner (1966) offers a demographic explanation, that death is not denied, it is hidden. He claims this has happened because most of us now die as old

people who are less important to industrial societies and whose demise does not represent an existential threat to the future of the group. Consequently, it is claimed by Blauner that funerals have become individual family gatherings. In this context old people are mostly unknown to all but their immediate family and a few friends.

Connected to the diminished importance of the death of the economically inactive is the concept of social death. Then a person is said to continue to live but 'dies socially' arising from losing sense of identity, or social connectedness or because of bodily disintegration (Borgstrom, 2017, citing Králova, 2015); and/or because the family experiences a secondary loss as friends and wider community withdraw in reaction to the social death the family is already experiencing, as described in the documentary film, *Losing Tom* by Trish Williams (Williams, 2022). My research did not support the claim that the physical death of older people was hidden in these communities or they/their family suffered a social death. Instead, I found a high level of community involvement in the funereal arrangements for anyone who died, including the elderly. This was evident when Paul claimed, everyone gets a good funeral in Ireland. In September 2019 I personally witnessed people in groups of two or three people, as part of a vigil, staying by the bedside of an unconscious and dying 87-year-old woman for 24 hours a day. She died on the twelfth day, with close family and relatives around her. I was part of that circulating vigil of people from the fifth day. When I spoke with others who were also present over the next few days, none seemed to think what we were involved in was exceptional. Instead, they viewed it as just what they did when someone was dying (My Research Log, 1-12 September 2019).

I would argue that what Paul said about everyone getting a good funeral in Ireland and my direct experience of a vigil for a dying elderly person, demonstrate dying people are valued as members of their community, rather than as economic units. The loss of these people is experienced as a family and community loss. That this was occurring is explained by my thesis (see also Chapter 2, *Theoretical Approach*): that even though most people work in post-industrial Ireland they still live in

rural areas where they have held onto preindustrial communities (*gemeinschaft*) where there is still a high level of interdependency and concern for your neighbours, motivated by an underlying 'natural will' or *Wesenwille* (Tönnies, 1887). For these reasons, Blauner's (1966) contention of funerals becoming just private family affairs or individuals and/or families suffering social death, does not apply in these communities. You and your family are not forgotten or left alone.

In her interrogation of when social death occurs, Borgstrom (2017, citing Bloch and Parry, 1982) notes that in some societies social death takes place after physical death and the suggestion that: '...social death may not occur until someone is forgotten'. (Borgstrom, 2017, p6). In terms of VGD, this keeping the person socially alive is evident in the story telling about their life as their grave is being dug and the people who came together to dig their grave and also recall the people previously interred there. In a wider sense it also occurs through the Irish wake at which the dead person is viewed as the most present 'guest'; through the commemorative mass and celebratory and social get together one month and again one year after the person has died, known as the month's mass and year's anniversary mass (McNally, 2021).

But this is not to claim that how people are commemorated, or how rural death practices are configured are the same everywhere. Some of the studies of rural Ireland such as those by Arensberg and Kimball (1940) and Brody (1973) have presented their findings as applying to whole regions or areas of rural Ireland. One of the findings from this study is there are significant differences even between the four Areas (that are clustered in an approximate 30-mile radius of one another) in how the practice is performed. This is an important finding from this study, as it shows there is not a single practice that is VGD. This is best illustrated by two variable practices: the invitation to dig rule, and backfilling when the mourners are still at the graveside (see Chapter 5, *Backfilling and 'making' the finished grave and Hearing a neighbour had died*).

## Agency and changing social structure

At first sight it could appear that when practices around VGD changed these could be explained as free choices made by the volunteer gravediggers and their communities. For example, how three areas had stopped the practice of backfilling while mourners were still at the graveside because it was, as Patrick explained, now seen as uncaring. Alternatively, Michael claimed technology changed the practice, not local people. At a macro level I consider Michael's account better explains the discarding of a prominent cultural practice in one generation. He explained this occurred when residents in neighbouring larger villages and towns started to use paid gravediggers, who mostly used mechanical diggers to dig and backfill the grave. This was something most mourners did not want to witness. In time this also changed VGD, so backfilling did not start until the mourners had left. I would argue this has created a practice that was gentler, but possibly more sanitised, so taking away from VGD, some of its cathartic effect, as described by Sean (see Chapter 5, Backfilling and 'making' the finished grave).

As a researcher looking in on these communities, I can see individual participants were choosing to alter or not to alter traditional practice. This is particularly true when it comes to the decision as to whether or not to induct their sons into the practice. At a community level there is also evidence that groups of VGD were banding together, exercising collective agency in order to maintain the practice, even when people in nearby villages were happy to let it fade away. Elbasha and Wright (2017) warn there is a danger in just focussing on individual or group agency to explain the behaviour of individual actors and that it can lead to what they refer to as a micro-myopia, a failing to take account of how the macro and micro interact and affect social behaviours. For example, Paul explained that in modern Ireland everyone 'gets a good funeral' and I know from my research that a 'good funeral' is an extensive affair (see Appendix 1) and, I assume, a more expensive gathering, compared to a recent past. Michael outlined how in the late 1960's funerals were a modest affair and usually only involved your neighbours and close relatives in the village/townland. After the funeral

Dara explained people just went home. This change in perception and also expectation of what constitutes a good funeral in rural Western Ireland correlates to economic change. So, in 1973, when Ireland joined the European Union (then the Common Market) its per capita income was 64.2% of the European average. By 2003 this had risen to 120% (see Chapter 4, *Economic Change*). My assumption is that as the income of the individual family and the nation changed, so did expectations of what constituted a 'good funeral'. But I assert these individual choices were also driven by macro social and economic changes.

Amongst many of the participants there was concern that these wider social and economic changes would sweep away important cultural practices, that included VGD. Consequently, some of my participants were fearful that the practice they viewed as precious, was bound to die in their generation as Ireland continued to modernise. I would argue this is an example of the interplay and connection between structure and agency (Giddens, 1982; Elbasha and Wright, 2017). This interplay finds expression in throw away remarks. For example: when Eamon refers despondently to the present generation of young men as having no idea about how to handle a shovel and therefore how to dig a grave, he is also referring to a younger and educated generation, who are being prepared to 'dig with their pen' (Heaney, 2009 [1966]); or when Martin describes neighbours who do not dig graves because their paid leave was for the exclusive benefit of their family, not for their neighbour who had died.

Some voluntary gravediggers were sure that the practice would continue, as normal, unhindered by wider changes in Irish society or its economy. Their contention was it was up to them and their communities to maintain VGD – that is, they thought it came down to individual and group agency. I doubt this can be entirely true, especially as they have moved from a generation who were 'reared to' dig graves for their neighbours to one where a new generation had to consciously choose and learn how to dig graves. This is not to doubt that these participants have agency and can use it to maintain VGD, but they did not do so in isolation from the gravitational pull of social structure and

the constraints it places on individuals and groups of people. This said, by their determination to maintain this practice they were involved in an interplay with wider social structures, challenging how people should relate to one another at a community level, and specifically Irish and national rituals around death or deathways (Howarth, 1997).

## **What Brings Men Together**

### **Culture expressed as tradition**

When I asked participants why they were involved in VGD, tradition was given as the single most common explanation. But it was evident that tradition was really being used as an umbrella term to express more deeply held cultural values, beliefs and practices - even when most participants were not conscious this was occurring. Sometimes these deeply held views became visible to the participants when I politely challenged them. For instance, the taboos on using a mini digger rather than digging by hand; accepting or offering money connected with VGD. In these interactions with me as an outsider, it often occurred that participants 'noticed' their culture when it became something they had to explain or defend to someone from outside it (Westmarland, 2016).

Tim's comment 'That you should have known we do all these things' (see Chapter 5, *Normal?*) also suggests that by noticing, I had inadvertently made participants and possibly the wider community more consciously aware of and appreciative of this cultural practice. When I began this study in 2018, I had what was a passing conversation with two young cousins aged 33 and 24. At that point both were adamant that VGD was nothing to do with their generation. Eighteen months later I met both of them again, this time helping to dig their grandmother's grave. I do not know if this means they were now more generally committed to this cultural practice but I think my study did encourage them to reconsider their position, although I never suggested they should. In 2019 I was invited on two occasions to help dig a neighbour's grave. My contention is this was partly an expression of appreciation of my study that had made local people more consciously appreciative of VGD. Hugh,

the youngest participant, age 36, thought my study would impel him to encourage other and young men to become voluntary gravediggers (see Chapter 5, *'Reared to it'*).

The importance of maintaining traditional death practices is also shared by other and growing communities in Ireland, such as Muslim and Jewish people. The Jewish religion recorded 2,557 persons in 2016 up from 1,984 persons in 2011 (28.9% increase). In 1991, there were 3,875 Muslim people in Ireland; by 2016 this had risen to 63,443, with 55.6% of this group being Irish nationals (CSO i, 2016). The practices of both Muslim and Jewish faiths have much in common with Irish death practices and VGD. They include the burial of the deceased soon after death, the backfilling of the grave while mourners are present and the importance of community support to the bereaved family (Davies, 2017). In the Jewish religion this is expressed through the tradition of the wider community visiting the bereaved family for seven days after the burial (including bringing gifts of practical support, such as meals) and is known as *sitting shiva or shivah*. These practices are culturally similar to many Irish death practices, such as by supporting the bereaved family in taking responsibility for setting up the wakehouse.

### **Changing Practice**

Although VGD was seen by most of the participants as a constant tradition, some participants noted it had changed and oscillated in response to wider social and economic change. The consumption of alcohol is an example of a changed tradition. When participants talked about drinking alcohol at the gravedigging it was described in moderate terms, such as taking a nip or having a few cans, or not drinking alcohol at all. The incapacitating drunkenness as described by Eamon (see Chapter 5, *The craic and the slagging*) was largely seen as a thing of the past. It is probable that this is connected to wider social changes around the consumption of alcohol, as well as in the law, and specifically the Road Traffic Act 2006. This gives the Gardaí considerable authority, including the powers to conduct random breath testing and the power to eliminate the offence of drink driving (Citizen Information, 2024). These and other developments suggest this practice is capable of changing in

response to wider social and economic movements, reflected in legislative changes. The challenge will be whether such changes will alter the practice so as to take away its spontaneous and unregulated character, especially the formal instigation of health and safety regulations. In some parts of Ireland these changes have come close to outlawing the practice of VGD (Roseingrave, 2011) but have been met with fierce opposition in defending this traditional practice. The Covid-19 epidemic that hit Ireland between March 2020 and July 2022 and the whole world, at first threatened the future of this practice, but in the end illustrated its resilience (see Chapter 10, *Postscript*).

Connected to the continuity of this practice was whether the inherent ongoing obligation to continue it was experienced as oppressive by participants. I found no evidence to support this view. On the contrary, participants felt proud and honoured to be part of something that has its origins before their time and would continue after they were gone. In Tim's account you can detect a sense of amusement and wonder. He spoke of digging the graves of people he had dug graves with, who had also dug graves for his parents and grandparent. If there was an element of burden to this practice, it was the responsibility to keep the tradition alive.

## **History**

It has been argued that Irish people have a strong sense of history and their place in it (see Bartlett, 2010; Byrne, 2012; Moane, 2017). Byrne in particular connects this to a distrust of and a folk memory of a recent colonial overlordship. This, she argues, and I agree with her, results in people putting their highest trust in those they lived closest to, their neighbours in the townland (hamlet). This study shows that reciprocal and obligatory relationships are one of the ways that people knit together the past, present and future. They are not burdensome, but a reflection of the interconnectedness between people. Cillian's account that went back three generations demonstrates this. He recounts how neighbours dug the graves for his parents, then he helped to dig the grave for one of those who dug both his parent's graves and this included reintering the remains



of an earlier generation, already buried in this grave. Sadly, and ironically, given his status as a VGD, it also demonstrated the vulnerability of these relationships and the space for miscommunication, when his grave was eventually dug by a paid gravedigger (My Research Log, 10 March 2019).

Even without miscommunication, onward transmission of this practice is likely to be more of an issue in the future, as follow-on generations will have learnt about these obligations, rather than being just unconsciously 'reared to' know about them. This study has recorded VGD at a point of generational transition. It is unclear if it will survive this switch-over and whether the importance of this study will turn out to be more as an archival record of a soon to be extinct cultural tradition, than an account of an ongoing and deeply embedded social practice.

## **Story**

As a volunteer gravedigger, part of your responsibility was to listen to and/or recount the stories of the person whose grave was being dug. Petra Nordqvist (2021) has explored why we choose to tell stories. She states: 'Storytelling is a fundamental part of human interaction; by telling stories about ourselves, our community and even our nation, we define who we are' (citing Plummer, 2019; Poletta, 2006). It seems this is what the participants in this study were doing, when they were telling stories about their recently deceased neighbours. In this situation neighbours are in a very powerful position to define the deceased, but I note this power is circumscribed by the requirement that all the stories were 'good' stories. It therefore means that these accounts may capture the positive elements in people's lives, but will necessarily leave out the messiness and the contradictory aspects that comprise an individual life.

This does not mean that the contradictory and negative memories about the deceased are censored out from communal memory, only that when their grave was being dug was not an appropriate time to do so. Behind the telling of these stories is the intention that they will be heard and remembered as a celebration of the deceased and their importance to the wider community. Cashman (2008) refers to this social process as being incorporated into the vernacular memory, although in his study

this can include critical memories of a deceased neighbour, such as being remembered as a lazy or mean-spirited person. For Cashman this is important as it signifies story telling is being used in two directions: to praise and incorporate pro social qualities into the communal memory and to criticise and jettison what are perceived as negative traits in the remembered individual. For the participants in this study, it was necessary to celebrate as well as commemorate. They did this by bringing together the stories about their neighbour, in one place, at that significant time. Many of the stories will have been new stories, even to people who thought they knew the deceased well, from different times and strands of the person's life, whereby they created a kind of social braid, forming one story from many and a kind of retrospective order, only really visible at the end of one's life.

The story telling about the deceased started the night before at their wake and then some of these accounts were picked up and continued the next day at the gravedigging. My understanding was that stories in the context of gravedigging were seen by the participants as a drawing together of the strands of the life of the deceased, at what was their final resting place. It is reasonable to assume that the nature and the type of stories told at the digging differed to some extent from those told at the wake when the deceased was 'present' and included men and women. There may have been a gendered element in the recounting, in the sense that the story telling at the gravedigging was an all-male affair, although none of the participants identified this as a significant factor.

## **Time**

One of the most striking features of this study was how participants consciously and critically reflected on time in the context of a neighbour dying. They attributed specific and unusual qualities to time and to how it was understood and used in rural Western Ireland, compared to say Dublin or the UK. Here, it meant much more than simply a period to mourn when a neighbour dies or setting aside time to come together to tell stories about them. They were also arguing they used and experienced time differently; that it took on different qualities and by implication, other people could learn from them about how to give and understand time when someone dies. Walter (1991), citing

the anthropologist Edmund Leach (1961), notes he identifies two kinds of time: repetitive/cyclical time such as harvest time or bed time and linear/irreversible time. This is when something happens that is unchangeable, such as a neighbour dying. In this study I found participants were frequently referring to it in this later sense. They also viewed this time as focused, with a definite social and practical purpose. Šubrt (2021) describes this sort of time as 'time for'.

When Patrick talked of time standing still (see Chapter 6, *Time*) when a neighbour died, he was being poetic but also referring to it in the context of death as being irreversible. He was arguing, and this study supports his contention, that when a neighbour dies, cyclical time can wait and there is no need to keep things going; that death should be, and was experienced as, disrupting it. Writing about the Irish wake, Grainger (1998) makes a similar assertion that time is constituted so as to create an environment in which it is both unruly and disruptive, but at the same way to create a safe and supportive environment in which to express grief. Martin described death as 'something ok', that needed time and should not be rushed through. He spoke of treating death properly. I thought that in the way he talked about death he was personifying it, so that death became a person and a relationship you gave time. His was a positive contention: that if you do not rush through the sadness and loss when someone in your community dies, you will experience it as something positive, even if sad.

Alternatively, Sean argued if you tried to sidestep death by attempting to rush through it, grief would remain as unexpressed grief that would eventually catch up with you. He expressed this delayed and inevitable encounter with grief as a 'rest due down the line'. Similarly, Liam speculated whether large numbers of English people suffered unresolved grief because of their desire to fit funerals, and by implication death, around pre-existing family arrangements, such as a holiday. I thought both these reflections, by Sean and then Liam, were psychologically wise ways to view and use time, in the context of loss.

In rural Western Ireland this study has recorded a death practice that does not let go of its dead until they are buried or cremated. My observation is that between death and disposal, the dead person is still part of the community and are literally still seen and touched by family, friends and neighbours. Even when they leave their home wake, the dead person is usually to be seen by an even larger number of neighbours at the funeral home and then reside in the body of the Church overnight, until their funeral the next day (see Appendix 1, *Practical details of voluntary gravedigging*). Even when their grave is being dug by neighbours they may be remembered through stories about their life. When they are buried, it is by their neighbours, the people who Dara referred to as the ones who have known you all your life. These practices contrast markedly to death practices in the UK, where bereaved families are routinely expected to leave their dead in a mortuary, until a time is available for their cremation or burial. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to make a judgement about which country has the better practice. On a personal note, I know that if I had the personal choice of choosing the Irish or English deathway for a member of my family, I would choose the Irish way. But I and other English people do not have that choice. But we do have a culture that has evolved to cope with an administratively suspended grief – just as people in Ireland have a way of suspending time as usual, as experienced over three days.

But how people relate to one another in Ireland is not necessarily constant. Martin and Sean identified an emerging fault line in modern day rural Western Ireland. They saw a tension between individualism and the pace of life, against continued concern for your neighbour - with the number of VGD as a kind of proxy indicator for this. Martin talked about giving up some of his paid leave in order to dig his neighbour's grave, but noticed many people would not and this attitude threatened the practice; Sean noticed a speeding up in the pace of life, influenced by the ubiquity of the motor car. This meant neighbours were no longer spending meaningful time together and instead just waving as they passed, effectively describing a more atomised life. Most of the twenty-six people I interviewed for this study talked about VGD in very practical, workaday terms. However, when participants spoke of time in relation to this practice, the tone of the conversation frequently became

distinctly philosophical. It left me with the impression that many of them held deep and complex views about the importance of time in relation to the death of a neighbour. There was also an appreciation of time given by neighbours, when a member of their family had died. Overall, this gave time a reified quality, expressed as a gift that was vicariously given and gratefully received, by the simple act of VGD.

But how is it possible for people to hold these views about giving time to death in a modern capitalist state? I would have predicted death should be given low priority in order to fit in with a market economy, but this study finds the opposite. I thought this because on the surface the old and agrarian Ireland I had known as a child, where the pace of life was driven by seasons rather than clocks, seemed to have disappeared. Ireland is after all, amongst the most globalised economies in the world and has positioned itself at a crossover point between the UK, Europe and the US (Ó Riain (2017). Galway City, Castlebar and Westport are all important sites for foreign companies involved in computer technology and pharmacology and are locations adjacent to my study four study areas. Three participants in this study worked for US companies in the area, but all held these values about fitting time around death and not around work. Their stated view was that if a neighbour died, they would, if at all possible, find time to dig their neighbour's grave. That this contradictory situation exists I think can only be accounted for by a culture that holds strong values about the importance of community and especially neighbours, values that trump the pressures of a market economy. This study has found these two seemingly contradictory drives sitting side by side.

## **Individual Motivations**

### **Self Esteem: honour and regard**

For an individual in the four communities that comprise this study, I found VGD was both an honour to offer to a family and also an honour to take part in. As observed by Brennan and Pettit (2004), who refer to the supply and demand of esteem, people generally wish to confer and receive honour, but

in particular wish to avoid the disesteem of being left out. For these participants the concept of honour must have meant that at some level (conscious and unconscious), they were entering an arena of complex negotiated social meaning and knowledge (Bergmann and Luckmann, 1966), an intersubjectivity with their neighbours about just what it was to be and/or to pay honour (Gillespie and Cornish, 2010). In trying to achieve this shared understanding it seemed that at times they were walking a tightrope of meaning, whereby the same action could be construed as both honouring and dishonouring the bereaved family by different individuals and in the four different Areas. This finding aligns with Berger and Luckmann (1966, p37) when they observe the complexity and yet ease by which actors/group of actors achieve intersubjectivity:

My 'here' is their there. My 'now' does not fully overlap with theirs... Most importantly, I know there is an ongoing correspondence between my meaning and their meaning in this world, that we share a common sense about reality.

In most communities in Ireland gravedigging is undertaken by a paid person and all that is involved is a commercial transaction. Bereaved families and voluntary gravediggers in these communities seem to assume their neighbours would, of course, want to help/be helped and were motivated by a sense of neighbourly kindness. This may partly explain why the participants are content to lay themselves open to the possibility of no one coming forward to dig the grave or of not being invited to dig, or the potential for misunderstanding.

### **Kindness**

Like Brownlie and Anderson (2017) I have found the concept of kindness is useful in describing an unconditional regard for another person, without any expectation of kindness in return. Similarly to them, I also found it impossible to categorically separate out kindness from other motivations the participants had for their actions, that might for instance have included multi generation reciprocity or friendship. The level of commitment that participants demonstrated towards their deceased

neighbour, without expectation of monetary reward, is I would argue, an act of kindness and my data showed was one the reason why the participants were committed to this practice.

Acting kindly and to such a degree is connected to the historical origins of the practice VGD in subsistence farming communities and traditions such the *meitheal* and *cooring*, as described by Brody (1973) and Arensberg and Kimball, (2001, [1940]). In the four communities in which this study was centred, families could not, even as late as the 1950's, survive without the mutual aid of their neighbours. This included basic activities like gathering or 'saving' the hay to feed their animals over winter, or cutting and transporting turf for heating and cooking. These communities correspond to what Tönnies (Tönnies, F., Harris, J. and Hollis, M. 2001 [1887]) described as *Gemeinschaft* communities, built around an accompanying spirit of *Wesenwille* (natural will) (Tomley et al., 2015), where individuals want to act in the interests of the wider social group. In this study, many of the values associated with that way of life, such as a closeness to and dependence on neighbours remain, even though subsistence farming has gone.

Tom was the only participant who specifically claimed that kindness existed in an elemental way, unconnected to other motivations. He referred to ...' the generosity in the person'. I would argue that he and other participants were also implying, by their actions and thoughts, the individual quality of kindness also existed and sprung from within the group and in unison with other people. For kindness to be a socially significant factor it further indicates there must be a critical mass of people, a community, who in this study were usually referred to as 'the village', who support and value its various expressions of unrequited regard for other people. This I think makes the argument for a culture of kindness, with VGD, that seemed to happen so effortlessly, being one of its expressions.

### **Death in rural Western Ireland and death elsewhere**

The ten participants who had lived and worked abroad were in many ways in the best position to evaluate the differences between the kindly way 'death is done' in rural Western Ireland and other parts of the world (see also Chapter 4, *Economic Development and 'The Funeral Director'*, 2019).

Their overall conclusion was that the rural Western Irish way of responding to a death in their community was much better than in other countries they had lived and worked in and people could learn from how they 'did death'. Nine of these ten participants had worked in England. I note all of the ten participants who had worked abroad, had done so in Anglophile countries, where traditionally there has been a more emotionally restrained death culture (Howarth, 1997). Therefore, the points of comparison between death cultures were more limited than it would have been with for example China (Watson, 1993) or rural Greece (Danford, 1982).

The reflections of voluntary gravediggers on what happened to you when you died in England suggested they felt that the English, as a society, were emotionally cold about death - unless the death was particularly tragic. Then it was possible to openly grieve in the way they would have, following even the death of a neighbour. Walter (1991b) shares the same observation, writing from an English perspective about the Hillsborough football disaster of 1989, when 97 people died. This resulted in a mass outpouring of public grief, something that would not normally be acceptable. He writes: 'Overt Celtic expression of grief is abhorrent to most English people, for it conspires with the inner pain of grief to overwhelm English values. The closer to home it is, the more threatening...' (Walter, 1991b, p607).

Others have argued that this view of the English is outdated and now English culture is much more comfortable with the public expressions of grief, triggered by the outpouring of public grief following the death of Princess Diana in 1997. This argument is taken up again in a BBC, UK radio debate (*Thinking Allowed*, 24 June, 2013, presented by Professor Laurie Taylor) where sociologist Professor Vic Seider and Bea Cambell, a cultural critic, argue Diana's death culturally changed the UK. It changed, they argue, because people identified with Diana and a gentler way of living, one less deferential to royal authority and the tough legacy of Thatcherite Britain. They do not however, offer any evidence that this has made British people more open to the public expression of personally experienced grief – or that English people have become more Irish, in their capacity to publicly



express grief. James (2008) challenges this notion, citing wider public opinion as captured via the Mass Observation unit at Sussex University around the time of Princess Diana's death as: '...not being real grief, but grief with the pain removed, grief-lite' (Thomas, 2008, citing Jack, 1997). Penfold-Mounce (2017) argues that what we as the general public were involved in, with the death of Princess Diana represented a step change in reporting, is 'mediated' rather than factual reporting of death. Here people receive 'coverage that is sculpted and packaged by the media for public consumption' (Penfold-Mounce, 2017). When Padraic suggested that English people (men and women) do not have the 'sadness in them', I suggest it would be more accurate and fairer to say, that the public expression of grief in England is only switched on in certain well understood circumstances and is 'mediated'. It is not necessarily absent (Walter, 1991), but dormant.

Although not specifically stated, I think participants were conscious that in Ireland the range of emotions it was acceptable for them to express around death was much wider for Irish men compared to people in England. This study records participants talking about a wide range of emotions when a neighbour died, from laughter to crying, while digging their neighbour's very grave. Ireland has changed socially and economically since the 1970's. Currently VGD only exists in some parts of rural Ireland and everywhere else the process of digging graves is fully commercialised (see Appendix 3). Now the difference between death practices in rural and urban Ireland are also marked. Hearing participants speak about the gulf in death practices between rural and urban Ireland, almost made them sound like an internal diasporic community.

Three participants, Adrian, Mikey and Tom questioned where these fault lines in Irish society were located. They thought that the breakdown in the number of people willing to be volunteer gravediggers was not just between rural Western Ireland and the rest of Ireland, but between an older and tradition bound generation - and their adult children. They were well educated and many had drifted away from rural Western Ireland, so creating long term demographic decline and reducing the future viability of these communities. Without them, as Tom pointed out, the tradition

will be of no use if the communities are so reduced that there is no one fit to dig a grave. At a purely practical level this argument holds up. However, it ignores the view of at least 10 of the 26 participants believed and evidenced, VGD had a future beyond older men (in their fifties and beyond). They did not accept and neither do I, the argument that an increasingly educated population is a less traditional one. The history of Ireland in the last 100 years demonstrates Ireland became a modern and technological country and still held onto traditions customs, with the GAA, the Irish language and traditional Irish music being just three examples of what is possible.

## **Belonging**

Although only two participants specifically mentioned belonging and personal identity as motivations for their involvement in VGD, the data demonstrates they could be seen as expressive threads running through all of the reasons the participants gave for their involvement in this practice. Woodward (2004, citing Mercer, 1990) notes that identity, only becomes an issue when the identity of a group is in crisis. That so few participants linked these factors directly to their involvement in VGD, I think suggest they had a secure sense of identity and belonging and VGD was not being consciously used to enhance who they were and their place in their community.

Their accounts of what happened when a neighbour died, aligns to what Guibernau (2013) described as *communities of belonging*. In taking part in this practice the participants were making a statement about belonging in their communities and VGD was one expression of this sense of belonging. But, as described in this study, participants belonged in these communities because they had been born into them and *reared to* become voluntary gravediggers. It was never as simple as argued by Guibernau (2013) to be an entirely free and dichotomous choice, whereby the individual readily traded their individuality for the comfort of belonging to the group (Yuval-Davis, 2014; Taylor, 2013). There were personal costs in belonging in these communities. This practice drew participants into ongoing obligations, which they may have happily accepted, that would then be passed on beyond the individual, as a family's reciprocal obligation.

Kuurne and Vieno (2022) citing May (2011) claim that belonging is the missing link between the self and society. They go on to argue that belonging is an everyday and active process, that people have to work at it, consciously and unconsciously. Drawing on Marx's (2001) concept of work, they then described this process as *belonging work*. Based on what participants told me about the level of commitment involved in VGD, from the planning, equipping, digging and then burying their neighbour, it does practically and socially fit with and illustrate belonging work. From observing men dig their neighbours' grave, then listening to them as individuals talk about how it made them feel to be joined with other men in their community, this research is also a practical illustration of belonging and linking the individual to their community. Above, James succinctly captures this sense of the individual and the community coming together and men experiencing a sense of belonging. In contrast, when Mikey and Tom observed that education and employment were taking away a future generation of voluntary gravediggers, they identified that belonging was a two-way street; that member of a community can both affiliate and disaffiliation from belonging to a community and its cultural practices (Kuurne and Vieno, 2022).

Although there was an obligatory element to VGD, this study did not find conclusive evidence of the negative side of belonging, of deliberately excluding people, or of creating a group of people who did not belong. There were though two cited examples of when VGD did not happen: once when no one was invited to dig the grave, even though people were standing by and ready to help (see Chapter 6, *Reciprocity and Obligation*); and another occasion when neighbours failed to respond to a family request for neighbours help dig the grave (see Chapter 7, *Neighbours*). In contrast, there were examples of including people who might otherwise have been seen as outsiders in helping to dig graves (including me on two occasions); of moving the boundary of a graveyard to 'include' someone originally buried outside the graveyard (My Research Log, May 2018) and digging graves for people who were new to the area, in one case involving a tragic death. This inclusiveness also extended to former and long dead neighbours, contrary to Grainger's (1998) contention that for the living,

something has gone wrong if the dead intrude in their world. Instead, dead neighbours were still included by some participants as 'living' members of the community – they also belonged.

Overall, these inclusive attitudes suggested these communities were confident about their death practices, confident enough to include 'outside' people, that in less secure communities might have been seen as 'other'. I observed there were three forces propelling this tendency to want to be inclusive and to avoid othering. Firstly, the wider social, religious and economic changes in Ireland, especially since the early 1990s, has resulted in a more open society that is positively interested in different ways of living (see Chapter 4, *Ireland Today*). Secondly, the memories of former religious orthodoxy were still present in participants memories, of people being divided into Catholic and non-Catholic communities, and members of their own families being separated between consecrated and non-consecrated places of burial. Thirdly, the ten participants who had lived and worked away from Ireland had in different and common ways experienced 're-belonging'. On their return to Western Ireland, they had a heightened sense and appreciation for rural cultural practices, especially VGD and the sense of belonging it gave them.

### **Religious beliefs**

The clearest finding from this study was that just one of the twenty-six participants thought, and then only as a speculation, that people were motivated to be VGD as an expression of their Catholic faith. This is surprising, given that 69% of the population still describe themselves as Catholic, (CSO a, Census 2022). Even so, this should not be taken as evidence for the contention that Ireland has become a post Catholic country, as described by Ganiel (2016), where Catholicism is no longer a central social element in explaining daily life, or that a more secular country is necessarily less spiritual or religious (Ruane, 1998). Although some participants were critical of the past behaviour of the Catholic Church, none mentioned they had become an ex Catholic.

When participants did talk about their beliefs, these were expressed as spiritual beliefs or superstitions (pisreogs), often connected to local and ancient places; to their neighbours, who

happened to be dead, but were still their neighbours and in communication; or sometimes via animals. These spiritual beliefs were not as suggested by Inglis (2007) drawn from a worldwide *smorgasbord*, but rather from local beliefs, based in their landscape. These beliefs were rooted in ancient, pre-Christian and local places and may pre-date the arrival of Christianity in Ireland. When participants did make a connection with gravedigging and the Catholic Church it was critical in relation to the unconsecrated places of burial, known as cillíni. Dara was the participant who most eloquently captured the abiding injustice of what had gone on by his reference to the Catholic Church of making 'two halves of a family'. Interestingly I now understand these cillíni always were and still remain, sacred and ancient places that were outside the control of the Catholic Church. Grace Mulqueen explained that wider Irish society can misunderstand the nature of the cillíni as necessarily negative places. She explained

This means we do not recognise that these places, such as holy wells, ring/fairy forts, had spiritual significance to local people, even though they were not formally recognised as consecrated burial grounds by the Church. (Grace Mulqueen, Curator at Knock Museum, correspondence, 22 May 2024)

This therefore meant that when my participants mentioned members of their family who were buried outside the Church graveyard, they were describing a physical and emotionally painful separation of members of their family. They were however still seen as held within the bosom of the community (My Research Log, 1 May 2019) because cillíni were held to be spiritually significant places for the community, outside the domain of the Catholic Church.

### **Tragic death**

Although every death is a loss, some are particularly hard to bear and call for a compassionate response from the communities in which they occur. In this study, tragic deaths have been classified

by participants as such if they involved the death of a child, suicide or an unexpected death, say as a result of a road traffic accident or drowning. Mosse (2021) writing about loss arising from the suicide of a close family member, notes the importance of wider social support – but comments that this can be the ‘scarcest thing’, including practical support around organizing the funeral. Chapple et al. (2015) mention that this kind of wider social support is vital in helping the family adjust to their loss. They report most families found it difficult to publicly grieve, for personal as well as social reasons, including for the death of a child, although if the death was connected to a very public loss, such as a train crash or terrorist attack, public support was common and often included wider community commemoration of the death(s). Turner et al. (2023) writing about the death of a child, talk about the existential changes this brings about in the lives of the immediate family, and citing Janoff-Bulman (2010) of the ‘shattered assumptions’ about the wider world, their place in it and life without their child.

All of these accounts of tragic death have in common a wider perception of communities drawing back from tragically bereaved families and/or families withdrawing from contact with their wider community. If this understandable behaviour can be characterised as holding back from the ‘gunfire’ of tragic grief, the participants in this study pointed to an opposite inclination, of running towards unbearable grief. Here they described how communities drew closer, practically and emotionally, to families who had suffered a terrible loss. This was expressed in various ways. Maude described how when her husband took his own life the community ‘wrapped itself’ around her and her children, even though she and her husband were not from rural Ireland. James described how when his 5-year-old son died, 36 men turned up to dig the child’s grave. Various participants mentioned decorating the inside and bottom of the grave with laurels and flowers as a mark of distinction and compassion and to ease the pain of the bereaved family. In voluntarily digging a grave in these circumstances the participants were doing what they would always wish to do, but saw it as ‘most important’ when the death was tragic, as an expression of solidarity and support for the bereaved family and their extraordinary loss

In general, the practice of VGD can be described as celebration of the person who has died. It involves telling stories about them, people gathering, the consumption of food and drink and having the *craic*. It was a joyous event. In contrast to this, when a person died in tragic circumstances the central intention was to offer emotional and practical support to the family who may be suffering excruciating loss. Then the atmosphere was serious (see Chapter 7, Compassion and tragedy) and there was no mention of *craic* or storytelling. Viewed from the outside the logic of VGD in these circumstances is not obvious and may seem counter intuitive, but this study demonstrates it is evidently helpful and wise. It shows that when families experience what must be the unbearable loss associated with a tragic death, they were comforted by the practical and emotional support they receive from their neighbours; that they did not necessarily want or expect to be left in privacy with their grief. What it also demonstrates is these communities were collective in outlook and therefore could easily and naturally come together to support a family in grief. Hockey (1990) citing Hertz (1907) says: 'If the 'success' of death rituals can be discussed at all usefully, it is with respect to its power to express and to recreate a society's central values or issues in a convincingly authentic fashion' (pp 28-29). When observed from the outside this 'gathering around' does seem natural and unforced, as well as a practical expression of the values and abiding customs participants thought were paramount.

The Lancet Report (Sallnow et al. 2022) on *The Value of Death: bringing death back to life*, notes that whatever happens to the community also happens to the individual, a point that became starkly clear during Covid 19 crisis (2020 -2022) in the UK and Ireland, when people often became cut off from wider community support (Ronan, 2021). The Lancet Report points to the wider costs if we expect people to deal with loss arising from death, without proper support from their wider community. The challenge is whether and to what extent this level of intimate community support is transferrable when people live in towns and cities. This study demonstrates people in these communities had relationships with their neighbours that were sufficiently close for them to accept this level of support when they experienced a tragic loss.

Why participants in this study particularly wished to offer this level of support in the event of a tragic death, rather than leave it to a paid gravedigger, was most eloquently explained by Padraic. He said the village (the community) would want to express their sadness for the bereaved family, and digging the grave was a way to do this. To involve a paid gravedigger seemed to him (even as the paid gravedigger in the area) and many of the other participants, strange. That this was not obvious to me as an English person was also an illustration of how culturally differently death practices can be; that they can be hidden in plain sight, especially for someone looking in from the outside. To the participants in these communities their death practices, especially one involving a tragic death, made sense in their culture and so did not require further explanation.

## **Summary**

The participants in this study had a number of reasons for volunteering to dig the grave when a neighbour died. Their explanations were practical (ostensibly), social and deeply personal. That they wanted to do this was directly connected to being members of communities that had always done this. Because of the late and particular way capitalism has developed in Ireland it has meant they could continue to live in close-knit communities where VGD was a traditional expression of the closeness they felt for their neighbours. Up to now the people who became volunteer gravediggers partly did so because they were 'reared to it' as an expression of their belonging. The follow-on generation, who have been taught how to dig graves, will need to consciously commit to keeping the practice going, if it is to survive in its present form. In the next and concluding chapter, I present my main findings and areas for possible future study. Overall, I argue that what has been recorded by this study is four communities that have maintained a way of living with each other in the ubiquitous presence of death, by living with death together. That this has been possible is a reflection of the special regard these people have historically and up the present day held for their neighbours.



## 9. Conclusion and Recommendations

### Introduction

At the beginning of this study some participants suggested, and I think they genuinely believed, that when they dug a neighbour's grave they were just involved in a purely practical task. In fact, all three findings chapters demonstrate this practice is laden with meaning about how people see and face death, as individuals and as members of their community. It also carries wider meaning, particularly about the importance of neighbours, friendship and the importance of 'closing the wagons' around families facing a tragic loss. For one participant it was an expression of kindness, a kindness that he thought was endemic to these communities. While only overtly mentioned by two participants, I thought it also meant that in offering or being invited to take part in VGD you were seen as someone who belonged. For the ten participants who had lived and worked away from the rural West of Ireland their involvement was at some level experienced as an expression of re-belonging. Because this practice is tied up with loss it was also meaning-making, about each death and what this meant for their family and the wider community. The main way in which this happened was while digging their grave and bringing together stories about the life of the person who had died.

This thesis has its origins in a chance encounter in 2011 when I came across a group of men in the rural West of Ireland voluntarily digging the grave for a recently deceased neighbour. Over time this turned into a research study that has sought to answer just two questions: first, why these were men still voluntarily digging graves, a practice associated with a pre-industrial/agrarian society, when they were living and working in a modern economy? Secondly what did the views and experiences of the men who carried out these practices tell us about modern-day rural Western Ireland and its direction as a society? In this concluding chapter I seek to answer my research questions by presenting my six main findings, three areas for suggested follow-on research, and my final thoughts on the importance of this study.

When I started out on this research my aims were modest. I was concerned that I had stumbled on an important cultural practice that I thought might disappear very soon and someone ought to at least record that VGD was still occurring. That was 2011 and by 2017 it was clear that the 'someone' who would do this work was me. The results of my thesis, are I believe, a new and original contribution to what we know about this almost completely unstudied rural Irish death practice. It was chance that brought me to this research but it was intellectual and emotional curiosity that stopped me in my tracks and propelled me to ask why this practice was still occurring and what did it mean for its practitioners. I am proud of this study and to have taken it to the point where I can present this thesis for examination, and later, to share the conclusions with the participants and their wider community.

## **Main findings**

### **First study of VGD**

My first finding: this study is the first detailed academic account of the practice of VGD in Ireland, as far as can be ascertained. Among many of the participants it was not initially seen as a significant death practice and instead was viewed as just something practical they did when a neighbour died. This study has demonstrated a significant cultural practice, that upon investigation, held important social meanings for all 26 participants. It is also a clear example of how a major cultural practice can be in plain sight and still be unnoticed. This study has made a largely invisible cultural practice visible (Alexander, 2003).

### **Death is collective and accepted**

My second finding is that VGD is a collective death practice. It is a practical and emotional expression of the belief that death should be experienced in conjunction with other people and not just within the immediate family of the deceased. When someone died in my study area the social expectation

was that the wider community would gather around the family, especially during the three days following death. I note this practice of VGD occurs within a wider context of other collective death practices that include: the setting up and provisioning of the wakehouse; the wake that includes an open coffin and attended by family, friends and neighbours; time the deceased spent at the funeral home being visited by an even larger number of people who are not just neighbours, but also people who knew the deceased or members of their family; being brought to the church (usually in a processional way) to remain there overnight; a funeral on the third day that will be attended by neighbours and an after funeral reception. The common feature of this death culture was that death should be addressed in unison with other people; that families were not and would not have expected to be left alone when a member of their family dies, especially if the death is considered to be a tragic death (see Chapter 7, *Compassion and tragedy*).

In my judgement all the participants had what can best be described as a relaxed and accepting relationship with death, as well as its with its ultimate claim on human life (Seale, 1998). Martin was the participant who most succinctly explained this relationship with death when he said that they treat death as something okay. At a most basic level, all but one of the 26 voluntary gravediggers were comfortable about handling human remains. When participants spoke about digging graves, and I personally witnessed it, they wanted me to understand VGD is also a social and celebratory event that involves story telling about the person who has died, ribbing one another, consuming the drink and food brought to them by the family of the deceased and generally enjoying one another's company, best described by the Irish phrase – 'having the craic'. When the death was viewed as tragic the mood was solemn. Participants mentioned that in these circumstances they would often try to beautify the grave, by for instance, lining it with flowers or laurels. But whether the coming together was celebratory or supportive (in the case of a tragic death) the emphasis was on facing death with other people: family, friends and neighbours, and not alone. What people have told me about VGD and its connection to how they treat death, demonstrates this was a dynamic and

impressive tradition. It can encompass very different moods and circumstances and evolve as the values of the community change. This bodes well for the survivability of the practice.

### **The importance of neighbours**

My third finding is that although this study has been focused on a death practice, one of the most important findings is not necessarily connected to death. It is instead that neighbours are extraordinarily important in rural Western Ireland and VGD is one of the most tangible and abiding expression of what it means to be a neighbour in these communities. Why neighbours come to be so important in the first place is connected to Irish history and rural life. Irish history has, as for the Muscogee Creek Nation people in Oklahoma (Walker and Balk, 2007) been marked by extended periods of colonisation, oppression, and forced migration. One of the side effects of this has been to create a population, especially a rural population, that is resistant to outside pressures (Bartlett, 2010; Moane, in Inglis, 2017) and places its highest trust in those who are perceived to be local (Byrne, 2012).

The tradition of VGD has its origins in a now disappeared agrarian Ireland, composed of subsistence level farms. Here there was a complex system of exchanging and effectively banking labour between neighbouring farms known as *cooring* (Brody, 1973). This occurred within a culture that stressed the importance of caring for your neighbours known as the *meitheal*. Although farmers no longer depend on *cooring* to say, cut turf or 'save' the hay, participants (most of whom were not farmers) described how these traditional practices and supporting values had been repurposed and expressed in social and person to person support. For example, in the embedded practice of volunteering to help run and provision the wakehouse when a neighbour dies; running sports programmes through the local Gaelic Athletics Association or immediately responding to your neighbour in distress. Because Ireland has effectively leapfrogged the usual pattern of industrialisation by going from being an agrarian to becoming a post-industrial economy (see Chapter 2, My Theoretical Approach), this has meant it has been possible for participants to work in the nearby towns and villages, often for

multi-national companies, and still live in small rural settlements. Here traditional practices like VGD can continue in much the same way as they have for past generations.

One of the elements that cemented these neighbourly relationships was reciprocity. Participants were aware that they were part of a continuous and unbroken line that went back generations of men digging graves for earlier generations of their family, and when needed, they would do the same for those families (Shils, 1981). They spoke of this duty as though a kind of baton from the past that they must receive and pass onto another generation, not as a burden, but as an honour. Ten of the participants had worked and lived abroad, either in the United States or Australia, with nine of them having also done the same in the UK. All but one participant recalled the way that death was treated in these countries was emotionally and socially cold and lonely. There it was claimed, death was seen as something that happened to you as an individual and just involved your immediate family. In my judgement these experiences heightened their appreciation of how death was collectively addressed in rural Western Ireland. Further, I would argue it can be assumed, it would have affirmatively buttressed the importance of the practice amongst all its practitioners, including those who had never lived away from rural Western Ireland.

A concern in recording the relationships participants had with their neighbours was that I might end up describing something that was idealised and therefore did not register as a study of participants in four real communities. I do still contend that compared to what one might see in most towns and cities in Ireland, the level of care participants felt and practically demonstrated towards their neighbours was extraordinary and a tangible expression of how socially cohesive these communities are. But people were also aware of the benefits they got from living in such mutually supportive communities as well as what they gave to others in return. However, these communities are real places and neighbours do fall out and can be unneighbourly.

## **Belief**

A fourth finding from this study is that the practice of VGD was not directly connected to a specific religious belief. Just one participant, Liam, speculated it might be one of the reasons for why men dug their neighbours grave, but 25 others participants did not connect VGD to religious belief. When setting out on this study I had assumed religion would be a major motivating factor for participants involvement in this practice, given that Ireland was and still is, a majority Catholic country. Because participants did not connect religion and VGD, it does not necessarily follow that religion was absent, only that it was not given as a motivating explanation for this practice. Recent legislative and constitutional changes in Ireland (see Chapter 4, *Legislative changes*) suggest Irish people have since the decline in the influence of the Catholic Church, especially since the early 1990s, become more open to change, but their underlying values are rooted in older ones. These were expressed in Irish language terms, such as the *meitheal* and *cooring* (Brody, 1973), and now re-expressed as modern secular beliefs, such as the importance of neighbourliness and showing kindness to other people. In the interview with Simon Reeve (2015) cited earlier, Catriona, (who managed a soup kitchen in Cork City) suggested that values people assumed where rooted in Catholic Ireland were inherent to Irish people when she says: 'Maybe Catholic Ireland was the caring Ireland' (see Chapter 4, The Catholic Church). Inglis (2007) has argued that Ireland has not necessarily become a less spiritual country but is now mixing and matching Catholic teaching with other world religions. This study did not find participants were motivated by other non-Christian religions. Instead, for some, their beliefs were connected to local ancient and pre-Christian sacred places; for some to an ongoing relationship with former neighbours, who happened to be dead, but were still viewed as neighbours.

## **Belonging**

Although only one person specifically made a link between VGD and belonging, my fifth finding is belonging was present in a latent form in several interviews. This was especially the case for the 10 participants who had worked and lived abroad. They contrasted the individualistic way death was

dealt with in other countries in comparison to rural Western Ireland where the dead and the bereaved family were treated as part of the community and their loss was also viewed as the community's loss. There was of course, a price that implicitly had to be paid for this belonging. This included being someone who supported your neighbours in their time of need, with VGD and preparing and helping to provision the wakehouse seen as being tangible expressions of belonging. It was notable that this sense of belonging was inclusive enough to extend to digging the graves of people who were recent arrivals in the area, and even to people who had died abroad but had ancestral connections with area.

### **Kindness**

My sixth and final finding is this study contributes new evidence to the call by Brownlie and Anderson (2017) for a sociology of kindness. One participant, Tom, argued that one of the reasons people were so caring towards their neighbours, including digging their grave, was because of their inherent kindness. Tom spoke of it just 'being in people' and not necessarily part of a give and take relationship. Although it was impossible to separate off kindness from connected motivations for helping other people, I was left with the abiding impression that many of the participants dug graves because it was just the kind thing to do. Hugh said that if you could help someone, and this might include digging their grave, 'why wouldn't you'. In his explanation of the mechanics of neighbourly kindness, Tom also spoke of needing a critical mass of people who were motivated to be kind. This, he claimed resulted in a sort of perpetual motion of care for the people who live around you. Conceptually I understood this to be a kind of 'social flywheel', driven and maintained by its own momentum.

## **Areas of possible future study**

Arising from this study there are three areas for follow-on research I would recommend: the expansion of this research across the whole of the island of Ireland; the role of women in Irish death practices and the views and experiences of bereaved families and VGD.

### **Expanding the study**

When I started this study in April 2018, I was under the impression that the practice of VGD was confined to small settlements along the western seaboard of Ireland. I have since been able to establish that although the practice is fading, it still occurs across the whole of the Irish Republic in small settlements/townlands, and similarly in Northern Ireland. For example, within 30 miles of central Dublin and near to Omagh in County Tyrone (Cashman, 2008). Given this, I would recommend a wider socio-economic study to investigate the practice across the whole of the island of Ireland to establish its prevalence and the personal/social meanings it holds for participants. Ideally, such a study should include an ethnographic element to gain a deeper qualitative analysis of VGD, than can be achieved using semi structured interviews. From March 2020 until May 2022 Ireland was in a state of full or partial lockdown as a result of a worldwide pandemic. The effect of the Covid 19 lockdown on VGD had not been, and could not have been, a planned part of this study. This may be an area for further research, especially the impact it had on relationships between neighbours, a core element of this thesis. Please see Postscript: *The Covid-19 Lockdown 2020-2022*.

### **Women and death practices**

Peppered throughout these interviews are mentions of the wider and greater role women played around supporting the bereaved family; in particular: personal support to the bereaved family; their involvement in organising and provisioning the wake and taking charge of running what is referred to as the 'wakehouse.' It was unclear whether the roles women assumed were gendered and whether and to what extent men were involved in areas of responsibility that might be considered something



that only women did. It would be important to establish how women view the allocation of roles, around rural Irish death practices. I note that up to the early 1970s women were involved in laying out the deceased, a role now assumed by undertakers. It would be interesting to interview some of these women, (one of whom I met in September 2023) to establish their current role(s) when a neighbour dies and their reflections on any changes. On just one occasion I heard from an acquaintance in England a suggestion that women had dug graves in Area 3. I was never able to establish if this was true, but it would be an important question to pursue in further research.

### **Bereaved family members and VGD**

While I was conducting my fieldwork, I met several people who spoke about their experiences of neighbours who had voluntarily dug the grave for a deceased family member. Some of their accounts were very moving, especially those involving a tragic loss of a family member. These accounts are of equal importance to those who voluntarily dig graves and might be a separate study or form part of an Ireland wide study about VGD.

### **Final thoughts**

When I first encountered VGD I was concerned it might disappear in the near future, without any record of what was involved in digging a neighbour's grave and why men did it. This study has answered many of these questions. All 26 of the audio recorded interviews will be offered to the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin, plus a copy of this thesis. They will then become available for the public and scholars to use. Just one interview will have a small redaction because it has not been possible to gain next of kin permission relating to a death in tragic circumstances. In this thesis I have chosen to anonymise the participants because what were separate contributions were merged, compared, and sometimes contrasted. However, the original interviews will, as agreed with all participants, be held as recorded and in the participants' real names and voices

Prior to this study the practice of VDG was known to its participants and their communities but unknown in much of urban Ireland, the UK and beyond – or assumed to be an extinct practice. This thesis has demonstrated this practice is very much alive. The roots of VGD may be in an agrarian past but it holds continuing and newly interpreted meaning in a post-industrial and rural Ireland. Beyond its importance as a rural Irish death practice, it is also an extraordinary demonstration of kindness, friendship and the abiding importance of one's neighbours. I hope this practice continues well into the future, but even if it does not, my judgement is, it was important to record it was still happening. It held personal and social meaning for its participants, who generously shared some of their insights with me.

## 10. Postscript: Follow-up

### The Covid 19 Lockdown and Restrictions 2020-2022

The worldwide Covid 19 pandemic broke out in January 2020 and spread to Ireland and the UK by March 2020. It meant travel between the two countries became very restricted. It was not until May 2022 that I was able to travel to Ireland to establish what had happened to VGD. My expectation was it would probably have stopped.

I was then able to interview three former participants, selected on a random basis, about how and if the Covid 19 pandemic had affected the practice. They were Liam (Area 1), Martin (Area 2) and Tom (Area 4). Liam painted a picture of severe limits on movements and contact outside your family group or 'pod', accordingly to what level of Central Government restriction applied. The highest of these Government imposed levels, was level 5, and it lasted until July 2020. During this first period, he said gravedigging continued with volunteers digging in pods. For example, a father and son might dig some of the grave and then stand back to let another father and son dig the next section – and so on until finished. From July 2020 Liam said VGD was again taken over by neighbours. In contrast, Martin and Tom described how little changed even during the height of the Covid 19 lockdown. They related how men still got together, as they had before the lockdown. Tom said they were sensible and wore masks where necessary and were not worried about catching Covid because they were outside. They described how the voluntary gravediggers kept-up the social and celebratory element of the digging, such as telling stories about the deceased and having the *craic*. Martin noticed how many more people turned up at the gravedigging compared to pre Covid times:

You probably had three times the amount of people at the graves – I wouldn't call them all gravediggers now (soft laughter), but they used it nearly as a social occasion to get outside, meet up, have a few cans of beer, or a shot of whiskey, and apart from that (soft laughter) I

don't think there was any change really in the, in the whole, the whole gravedigging thing.

(Martin)

All three participants noted the main change during the Covid restrictions, (overseen by *NPHE*: The National Public Health Emergency Team) was that only immediate family attended the funeral, although neighbours often lined its route, in order to pay their respects to the funeral cortege as it passed by. By the time I interviewed them in May 2022 they had noted two changes they thought may permanently change the rural funeral, although all agreed VGD was unchanged: firstly, warm embraces had largely disappeared at the funeral and people had stopped shaking hands; secondly commiserations to the bereaved family were increasingly being passed electronically, either as messages to mobile phones or via electronic books of condolences, curated by the undertaker.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Practical Details of voluntary gravedigging

Time	Event	Who	Details
Day 1	10.am Neighbour dies	Neighbours, family and friends	<p>Neighbours work with the bereaved family to organize and provision the 'wakehouse', including bringing hot and cold food and extra equipment for cooking and storing food. At this point conversations between neighbours will have begun as to who will be digging the grave, with the following variations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In area 1 people never volunteer to dig the grave but instead wait to be invited by the bereaved family to do so.</li> <li>• In areas 2, 3 and 4 there will typically be a group of 3 to 4 people who usually form the core of the diggers. Tomorrow others will spontaneously join them.</li> </ul>
Day 1	First night of wake	Neighbours, family and friends	<p>At the wake the deceased will repose in an open coffin. During the evening there will be background and informal conversations amongst neighbours about the digging of the grave tomorrow morning. This will include who can help and what time to start. In area 1, extra people may be invited to help at the 'digging', by a member of the bereaved family.</p>

Day 2	The digging of the grave	Neighbours, friends and distant relatives	<p>The gravedigging begins. It will take between 2 and 4 hours to complete the job depending on: the hardness of the ground; any earth collapse problems that require shuttering, flooding connected to the weather and/or the water table. If the grave has been used before all human remains and parts of the coffin will have to be gathered up to either reinter at the bottom of the freshly dug grave or discreetly put beside the coffin at the burial. As there is usually a minimum of 20 years before a grave is re-used, human remains just consist of bone fragments.</p> <p>A member of the close family will bring food and/or drink to the gravediggers. Drink usually includes whiskey and beer, as well as soft and hot drinks. In some areas sandwiches and drink are provided for the gravediggers by the family, at a local bar, after the grave has been dug.</p> <p>In all areas only men are recorded as attending the gravedigging. In area 1, only men invited to attend the digging will be present at the digging. In the other two areas other people will just turn up. If they intend to dig, they will come equipped with their own shovel. Otherwise, people will know they are just attending in order to 'be at the digging' and take part in: the story telling about the deceased, to 'have the craic and maybe 'a nip of whiskey or a can or two of beer' (Martin).</p>
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Time	Event	Who	Details
			<p>If the death is a tragic the gravediggers may also decorate the sides of the grave with flowers or greenery.</p> <p>In the late afternoon/early evening the deceased is usually taken to the local funeral home. A much larger number of people, who may not have attended the wake, will come to visit them (still in an open coffin) and shake hands and commiserate with close family. When this has concluded, the deceased is taken to the local church for a religious service.</p> <p>They will usually remain there until the next morning, although some return home for a second night of waking.</p>

Time	Event	Who	Details
Day 3	The church service, burial and reception	Family, friends, relatives and neighbours	<p>Early in the morning the gravediggers will check the grave for any signs of collapse or flooding. And make good.</p> <p>After the church service (Catholic or Church of Ireland) the deceased is taken straight to the graveyard to be buried.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In area 3, anyone who wants to, can and will be encouraged to backfill the grave.</li> <li>• In areas 1, 2 and 4 the backfilling is completed when everyone, except the men who 'actually' dug the grave have left the graveyard.</li> </ul> <p>In all four areas the gravediggers will neatly finish the grave, replace the turf, net down any flowers to ensure they are not blown away and remove all equipment from the graveyard.</p> <p>Some participants report that the gravediggers say a prayer for the deceased after everything has been taken care of and before they leave the graveyard.</p> <p>The gravediggers will change from work to smart clothing to attend the funeral reception where food will have been saved for them as honoured guests.</p>

## Appendix 2: The Participants

1. **Adrian**, age 78. He is a fisherman.
2. **Ben**, age 74. Is a retired local business-person and a farmer.
3. **Brendan**, age 64. Is a local business-person and undertaker.
4. **Cillian**, age 70. He is a farmer.
5. **Conor**, age 59. He worked as a production manager for a pharmaceutical company for 32 years and is now a part time farmer and run a B&B.
6. **Dara**, age 72. Is a farmer. In the past he spent 14 years working in England as a construction worker.
7. **Declan**, age 57. He is a self-employed builder and part time farmer. He has worked in England for 5 years in the building industry.
8. **Eamon**, age 62. He is a farmer.
9. **Hugh**, age 36. He works in local tourism.
10. **James**, age 53. He is a farmer. For nine years he worked in London (employment not specified).
11. **John**, age 73. He is a manager and engineer.
12. **Kieran**, age in 63. He works as the production manager.
13. **Liam**, age 44. He is a funeral director. As part of his training, he has worked in England.
14. **Michael**, age 70. He is a farmer.
15. **Mikey**, age 78. He is retired from a career spent repairing and maintaining roads.
16. **Martin**, age 51. Is an agricultural engineer.
17. **Padraic**, age 74. He was until recently the local paid gravedigger for the area. He spent much of his younger life as a miner in Australia
18. and as a construction worker in England and Wales. He is now a farmer.
19. **Patrick**, age 49. Is a local government officer.
20. **Paul**, age 69. Spent most of his working life in the armed services and now works as an assistant undertaker.
21. **Redmond**, age 45. Pharmaceutical technician and a part time farmer.
22. **Rory**, age 78. He is a farmer.
23. **Seamus**, age 43. He is a farmer.
24. **Sean**, age 60. He runs a tourist business. In the past he has worked in Dublin (unspecified) and as a bar tender in London and as a labourer in Oxford (while still a student).
25. **Stephen**, age 58. He is a carpenter.
26. **Tim**, age 75. He is a farmer.
27. **Tom**, age 57. He is an oyster farmer. He lived in Dublin for 5 years and in London for 20 years (employment not specified).

### Appendix 3: Background note by Daniel Conway

In July 2022 I had four separate telephone conversations with funeral directors in Western and Southwestern Ireland about the prevalence of voluntary grave digging in Ireland. They all directed me to contact the Irish Association of Funeral Directors as the body who could advise on this matter on an Ireland-wide basis. They eventually put me in touch with Niall Mulligan, a member of their Board and Treasurer.

I spoke with Niall by telephone on 18<sup>th</sup> July 2022 and then summarised our conversation by email. On 19<sup>th</sup> July he replied below, as follows:

Nice to talk to you yesterday

All is fine

Best of luck with your study

Niall



*High St, Trim, Co. Meath*

*Main St, Longwood, Co. Meath*

*Phone: 046 943 8662*

*Email: [heffernansfd@gmail.com](mailto:heffernansfd@gmail.com)*

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On Mon, 18 Jul 2022 at 21:03, Daniel Conway <[danseb@talktalk.net](mailto:danseb@talktalk.net)> wrote:

Hi Niall.

Thank you for contacting me by telephone this afternoon on behalf the Irish Association of Funeral Directors in response to my email dated 17<sup>th</sup> July 2022. In that email I asked the IAFD:

Can the IAFD advise me how common voluntary gravedigging is in Ireland? My anecdotal understanding is it still occurs in rural communities along the Western Seaboard, but nowhere else on a regular basis.

Following on from our conversation I understand voluntary gravedigging still occurs throughout Ireland, but only in rural areas, although even where it does still happen it seems to be a dying practice. Below I have tried to summarise the reasons you offered for why the practice is still continuing in some areas and why it has ended in other places

#### **Reason why voluntary gravedigging persist in Ireland:**

- the graveyards where voluntary gravedigging still happens are owned by the Parish and controlled by communities who wish to continue the practice
- because voluntary gravediggers are involved in reciprocal relationships of digging for neighbours and friends who have dug graves for their family in the past, and this can go back several generations

- those digging the grave derive a therapeutic benefit from helping in this way
- it is seen as a practical expression of sympathy.

**Reasons why the practice is dying:**

- in the past it mostly involved farmers who could work flexibly and so give time to dig a neighbour's grave, but now there few farmers available on this basis
- many parishes have ended the permission to allow voluntary gravedigging because of health and safety fears and resultant insurance liability, should anyone be injured while digging a grave.
- Increasingly graveyards are owned and run by County Councils. They require graves are only dug by a professional gravedigger.

I hope that the above account of our conversation has accurately recorded your response to my query about voluntary gravedigging. Please feel free to make any amendments or suggestions of additional matters I might want to consider. Thank you for responding so quickly to my request. When my doctoral study is complete, I would be pleased to share the main findings with the IAFD.

Best regards,

Danny

Danny Conway

The Open University

Milton Keynes, England.

## Appendix 4: Supplementary questions and prompts

### General approach.

The intention is to allow participants to tell me the story about when, how and why they have been involved digging graves for neighbours and to allow them to relate this as naturally as possible. I therefore intend to keep my interventions to a minimum. If needed, there will be a number of supplementary questions (listed below) that may help to reveal the underlying social purposes, meanings and benefits to those digging the graves, as well to the wider community. I also hope to gather information about the long-term future of the practice. Possible supplementary questions are listed below under four headings.

The general approach will be to start by asking people about the first time they were involved in digging a grave for a neighbour and the hope that this develops into a free-flowing conversation.

### Basic questions

- who organises the VGA
- who is involved in digging and backfilling the grave
- the significance of food and drink bought to the gravediggers
- why and if the practice will persist
- circumstances in which a paid gravedigger is employed
- evolution of the practice during the participants lifetime

### Technical questions

- how is a grave dug
- when is it dug
- how deep is the grave
- the number of people typically involved in the digging
- opening old graves and handling human remains
- participants role during the actual funeral, including lowering the casket and backfilling the grave

### Social

- how does voluntary gravedigging benefit the family of the deceased, the gravedigger and the wider community
- who selects and organises those who are invited to dig a grave
- what is a participant's relation to the deceased
- at what age did the participant first dig a grave for a deceased neighbour and how many graves have they subsequently dug
- is there a network of usual gravediggers – those who are normally asked to dig
- as well as digging what else happens at the gravedigger. Is it totally solemn or is there a place for storytelling, reminiscence, humour et cetera
- when is a professional gravedigger used instead? Is this related to how long the deceased has lived in the community or other factors such as social class or religion



- does the practice apply to neighbours of other faiths or none (most participants are likely to be Catholics)
- is there a role for women in this practice, or is their role seen as in the background: for example, preparing the food and drink to be taken by the gravediggers
- does someone take charge of the digging
- how significant is the food and drink that is sent to those digging the grave

### **Spiritual and emotional**

- it's a practice connected to a folk or religious belief
- how do the circumstances of the death affect the atmosphere of the digging, such as a child's death or an unexplained death
- the particular rules, customs or superstitions that should be followed during the digging

### **Legacy**

- Is this approach being taken up by younger generation and if not does this matter
- has the practice travelled with people who have left Ireland to form a diaspora, say in England or the United States.

## Appendix 5: Participant Consent Form



### Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

#### Consent form for persons participating in a research project

“A study looking at the practice and tradition of neighbours in western Ireland voluntarily digging graves for deceased neighbours/members of their community”.

Name of participant:

Name of principal investigator(s): Danny Conway

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written statement in plain language to keep.
2. I understand that my participation will involve an open ended, semi-structured interview, and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the plain-language statement.
3. I acknowledge that:
  - a. the possible effects of participating in this research have been explained to my satisfaction;
  - b. I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project without explanation or prejudice and to request the destruction of any data that have been gathered from me until the point of transcription commencing 1<sup>st</sup> December 2019. After this point data will have been processed and it will not be possible to withdraw any unprocessed data I have provided;
  - c. the project is for the purpose of research;
  - d. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements;
  - e. I have been informed that with my consent the data generated will be stored at the Open University; that the National Folklore Collection (held at University College Dublin) has also been approached. They may be interested in archiving data arising from my research, relating to Irish folklore;
  - f. If requested any data from me will be referred to by a pseudonym in any publications arising from the research;
  - g. I have been informed that a summary copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, should I request this.

I consent to this interview being audio-taped/video-recorded  **yes**  **no**

(please tick)

I wish to receive a copy of the summary project report on research findings  **yes**  **no**

(please tick)

Participant signature:

Date:

## Appendix 6: Participant Information Sheet



### PARTICIPANTS INFORMATION SHEET

#### Research Title

A study of the practice of neighbours voluntarily digging the graves of deceased members of their community in Western Ireland (focused on the Louisburgh area)

#### Research Period

1<sup>st</sup> March 2018 – 31<sup>st</sup> August 2019

#### Details

My name is Danny Conway. I am conducting research with support from the Open University in England, where I am a Visiting Fellow.

My study is looking at the practice and tradition of neighbours voluntarily digging graves for deceased members of their community in your area. Via a recorded conversation I hope to learn about your involvement in this tradition, how it may have changed and its long term future.

Most of my research will involve recording the experience of people who have dug graves for their neighbours in the past and/or recently. It may also include persons with expert knowledge such as funeral directors and ministers of religion.

In talking about your experience it is possible you may be upset and need to speak with a professional about your feelings. It has therefore been agreed that you should in these circumstances contact your GP or Public Health Nurse. If this occurs out of hours you should telephone Westdoc on 1850 365000

Once my research is complete any recordings will be stored by the Open University for the long term because of their ongoing interest to sociologists, folklorists and future generations. Any confidential information you provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements. I hope my findings will be published as an academic paper. I expect it will also attract wider public and media interest in Ireland and beyond.

#### Permission

Where a person has died during my research period I will first seek permission from their next of kin to speak with the neighbours who dug their grave. In addition, where there are particular sensitivities about a deceased person (regardless of how long ago it may be) I will also seek permission to talk with their next of kin

#### After the Interview

Within 28 days of recording my interview with you I will supply you with a full audio copy. My expectation is that **all** your contribution will be held as a recording that will be accessible to academics and the general public. For this reason you will then have the opportunity to instruct me to:

- delete anything you decide not to include
- and/or anonymise all or part of your interview
- and/or attribute your contribution to a pseudonym.

It would be helpful if any such request is made within 60 days of you receiving a copy of your interview. In all cases you will be free to withdraw from the project without explanation or prejudice and to request the destruction of any part of your interview until the point of final transcription, commencing 1<sup>st</sup> June 2019.

Following our interview, if you decide that there is anything you discussed that you would prefer for me to not include in my report, please contact me via either:

- (email address for Danny Conway)
- (Irish mobile number for Danny Conway)
- (UK mobile number for Danny Conway)
- (UK landline number for Danny Conway)

You are under no obligation to take part in this interview. If at any point during or after the interview you decide that you wish to stop and withdraw your comments, you are free to do so up to the point of final transcription, commencing 1<sup>st</sup> December 2019.

If you want to talk to someone about this, you can contact:

Professor Steve Tombs  
The Open University  
Briggs Building  
Kents Hill  
Milton Keynes  
England  
MK7 6AA.

Email: [steve.tombs@open.ac.uk](mailto:steve.tombs@open.ac.uk)

Telephone: 00 44 1908 274066

If you are happy to take part in this interview, please read and sign the attached Consent Form.

## Appendix 7: Next of kin consent form



### Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

#### Consent form for persons participating in a research project

“A study looking at the practice and tradition of neighbours in western Ireland voluntarily digging graves for deceased neighbours/members of their community”.

Name of next of kin:

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Name of deceased person

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Name of principal investigator(s): Danny Conway

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1. As the next of kin of the named deceased person I consent to Danny Conway interviewing those persons who were involved in digging his/her grave
2. I acknowledge that:
  - a. the possible effects of participating in this research have been explained to my satisfaction;
  - b. I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project without explanation or prejudice and to request the destruction of any data that have been gathered in relation to the deceased person until the point of transcription commencing 1<sup>st</sup> December 2019. After this point data will have been processed and it will not be possible to withdraw any unprocessed data I have provided;
  - c. the project is for the purpose of research;
  - d. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements;
  - e. I have been informed that with my consent the data generated will be stored at the Open University; that the National Folklore Collection (held at University College Dublin) has also been approached. They may be interested in archiving data arising from my research, relating to Irish folklore;
  - f. If necessary any data from me will be referred to by a pseudonym in any publications arising from the research;
  - g. I have been informed that a summary copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, should I request this.

I wish to receive a copy of the summary project report on research findings  **yes**  **no**  
(please tick)

Next of kin's signature:

---

Date:

## Appendix 8: Map of Irish study areas



Study areas and labels added to [Island of Ireland location map.svg](#): [\\*Ireland location map.svg](#):

[NordNordWest Northern Ireland location map.svg](#): [NordNordWest Northern Ireland - Counties.png](#):

[Maximilian Dörrbecker \(Chumwa\) derivative work: Rannpháirtí anaitnid \(talk\) derivative work](#):

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