

Toxic Turf: How an expanded view of heritage may provide more honest and productive practices for Ireland's peatlands.

“As I write this, I am surrounded by the faint smell of burning turf, turf I bought in a museum shop [...] The smell promises to bring back memories of turf fires and a carefree past.”

(O'Brien, 2020, p.319-320)

Toxic Memories

This evocative and relatable vignette concludes O'Brien's (2020) tour of the gift shops of Ireland's "dark-tourism sites" (p.313). Using a selection of souvenirs (boat-shaped bath toys in the Titanic museum and bullet-laden whiskey glasses commemorating a bloody civil war), the author juxtaposes the difficult and complex aspects of some heritage contexts with the commercial, commodified setting of the museum gift shop. We walk with her accompanied by a familiar incongruity that is encountering a difficult, poignant commemoration of an atrocity to then be confronted by the bright, colourful cheerfulness of a bargain keyring or glitzy snow globe. An experience that O'Brien (2020), understandably, worries is "making light of the tragedies rather than remembering and respecting them" (p.319).

Offered then as source of comfort, the smell of a piece burning turf, bought as a souvenir, transports O'Brien (2020) to memories of her grandmother's house. Here she finds refuge from the discomfiting encounters with the darker side of Ireland's heritage. Certainly, smells and images of turf fires are a familiar and relatable component of many Irish settings. Turf fires are ubiquitous in the recollection and retellings of Irish heritage. They can be seen everywhere, from the family fires in rural cottages to the traditional trope in the 'traditional' Irish pub. But this cosy, comforting picture belies the realities of the problematic and devastating heritage that sits beneath the warming glow of burning turf.

Understood now, in the context of the current climate and ecological crises, peatlands are recognised as complex, vital and rare ecosystems. Remnants of the last ice age, these water-logged landmasses (Byg et al, 2017) and have a crucial role in global climate regulation and are habitat to rare flora and fauna (Joosten and Clark, 2002 in Byg et al, 2107). They comprise only 5% of land area yet they store 33% of terrestrial carbon (Interreg Northwest Europe, 2023). But in the last century more than half of the planet's peatlands have been destroyed (Lee, 2017). Therefore, with Ireland now holding between 50% and 99% of Europe's peatlands (Dept. Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2022), its peatland heritage is an urgent matter.

The following discussion will examine peatland heritage in Ireland by examining Bord na Móna (BnM) (a semi-state charged with managing large swatches of peatlands). After briefly introducing the geographic and historic significance of peatland in Ireland, the discussion will use BnM's website as a key mode of public engagement and consider the journalistic responses to their claims. Using the framework of Authorised Heritage Discourse (Smith, 2006), the discussion will highlight how using nationalist priorities to dictate heritage practices is no longer fit-for-purpose in the face of the Anthropocene. The discussion will conclude by briefly introducing the concept of 'toxic heritage' (Wollentz et al, 2020) as a framework that may contribute to a more honest and productive discourse to prepare us for a future living with peatland heritage.

Neither land nor water

The island of Ireland's geology, temperate climate, and location in the North Atlantic, means its peatlands have developed in ways that are integral to Ireland's ecological landscapes. As mosaics of peatlands sit under 25% of Ireland's landmass, they form a key feature of Ireland's physical geography (Feehan, 1996). As a result, they have been a central feature of human life on the island, contributing to a rich and varied heritage. Well-documented accounts of neolithic discoveries varying from the sacrificial human remains of 'bog bodies' to the storage of bog butter suggest peatlands have long had ritual, spiritual and cultural significance as well as roles in domestic activity (BBC, 2013; UCD, 2019). Folkloric, poetic and literary evidence demonstrates how these otherworldly and dynamic landscapes have long inspired generations of writers, musicians and mythicists (Gavin, 2014).

However, the trajectories of these ambiguous landscapes took a different shape in more recent history. Gaining traction since 1700s, in parallel with an expanded British colonial mission in Ireland, perceptions of peatlands changed to viewing them as 'brown deserts': tracts of barren and unproductive lands only gaining value when reclaimed and repurposed for economic and agricultural purposes (Clarke, 2010; Feehan, 1996). Indeed, these ideas of reclamation and repurposing peatlands to make them useful for human endeavours are seen across Europe. However, in Ireland, industrial-scale exploitation started much later than other areas of Europe (Feehan, 1996).

Technology-enabled extraction of peatlands started in earnest with formation of Bord na Móna in the 1930's and 1940's. Established following the Irish Civil War, Bord na Móna was one of the first national bodies created during the establishment of the Irish national state

independent of British rule (Clarke, 2010). This semi-state body still manages swathes of Ireland's peatlands. Its mission was to transform "the vast waste areas of [Ireland's] bogs into a valuable source of wealth" (Andrews, 2001, in Bresnihan and Brodie, 2023, p.366). In doing so, it established an indigenous source of energy while developing rural economic and community infrastructures across large areas of the Irish midlands.

So, as a body responsible for managing Ireland's peatlands historically and for the future, and given the global significance these peatlands now hold, discussions and debates surrounding this distinctive heritage context are important to Ireland, and beyond (Bresnihan and Brodie, 2023).

Authorised Heritage Discourse

To evaluate these debates, frameworks from Critical Heritage Studies (CHS) are useful. Developed in recent decades in response to traditional heritage doctrines which largely focus on heritage as a top down, artefact-based value system dedicated to preserving the past (Logan and Wijesuriya 2015). CHS instead considers heritage as "produced through socio-political processes reflecting society's power structures" (Logan and Wijesuriya 2015, p. 569). More productive, equitable and just, CHS suggests, is reframing and reconstituting heritage as a process, one in which it is "constantly chosen, recreated and renegotiated in the present" (Harrison 2013, p. 165).

A cornerstone of this reframing is Smith's (2006) Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD). Employed here as a means of analysing Ireland's discourse around peatland heritage, AHD describes a set of practices through which dominant frames of reference are established. By using notions of monumentality, technological expertise and nationality (Smith, 2006) certain discourses are privileged and power structures enabled. And then through paradigms of care and conservation, top-down decisions are made based on "assumptions about the innate value of heritage which [work] to obscure the multi-vocality of many heritage values and meanings" (Smith, 2006, p.12)

Bord na Móna

BnM is an exemplary form of AHD in the case of Ireland peatlands. During its inception as a body representing the newly formed state, by providing BnM with the powers to acquire large areas of peatlands (it is still one of the largest private landowners in the country) and the financial means to develop the requisite technology, the new Irish government sanctioned

industrial scale operations in the Irish midlands. In doing so, it perpetuated the ideas that peatlands in themselves are valueless, boggy brown deserts. And only in the name of the Irish state, through the powers and technologies of extraction, these lands can be reclaimed and radically transformed in to ‘Brown Gold’ so only now can the Irish people benefit from the proceeds of this valuable resource (Clarke, 2010).

Fast-forward to 2021 and BnM has undergone an inspired and radical transformation of its own. Responding to recent political and commercial pressures challenging its role as a provider of fossil fuels, BnM is now a ‘climate solutions company’ (The Journal, 2021). This new guise positions BnM directly, and the Irish state indirectly, within the climate change paradigm. From here it claims BnM has “a part to play [in finding] solutions for a greener future” (Bord na Móna, 2023). Key to this transformation is the ambition to use of peatlands as sites for ‘harnessing’ renewable energy that will “[h]elp Ireland reimagine how it engages with climate action” (Bord na Móna, 2023).

This ambitious transition from ‘brown to green’ is admirable and eco-worthy (The Journal, 2021). BnM press releases abound with large value sums being invested to enable renewable energy projects and community drives (RTE News, 2020) (although it is interesting to note the timing of this rebranding taking place in the middle of a global pandemic when its high impact advertising campaigns only start 2 years later (Ogilvy Dublin, 2023)). As the shift is so recent, the actual impacts will be judged over time however it is not a ‘silver bullet’ for Ireland’s climate agenda and has been met with some scepticism and resistance. BnM’s structure as a semi-state body means it is closely tied with the Government’s policies and action plans. There is a track record (along with a number of other of semi-state bodies) for obfuscating publications on their operations and emissions claims (Green News, 2019). This is in addition to an apparent hesitancy to mandate regulations that would ensure accountability of their commitments (Irish Farmer’s Journal, 2023). Combined with the fact that peatlands are still being significantly mined, despite changes to legal and licensing requirements (Noteworthy, 2022), it suggests more fundamental changes are needed.

Toxic Discourse

When examined from the perspective of AHD, this nation-sanctioned discourse around peatlands contains the pervasive and problematic themes inherent in AHD. Ultimately, BnM is still centred around a nationalist mission, it positions itself as having a central role in helping “Ireland achieve net zero by 2050” and prioritising biodiversity (Bord na Móna,

2023). In this way, BnM is very much intertwined with and interdependent on the state's politics. The narrative describing how this will be achieved perpetuates colonial ideas of 'improvement' supporting a national agenda (Bresnihan and Brodie, 2023). But when the national agenda means Ireland is behind the European average for reducing its carbon emissions (EU Briefing, 2021) and the state is "the biggest transgressor of environmental law" in the country (Irish Times, 2021) it is difficult to not be drawn to the contradictions.

These contradictions are especially challenging when confronted with the scale and urgency of the Anthropocene. As a way "to mobilize deep time and recast climate change from a risky future to a very real and perilous present" (Yusoff, 2018, in Davies et al, 2022, p.409), the Anthropocene necessitates new ways of understanding and conceiving human impacts on the environment (Morel and Ammerveld, 2021). Therefore, we are tasked with confronting AHD, reconsidering its standard classifications (Krieg et al, 2015) and moving beyond concepts based on human-controlled processes and management practices (Venovcevs and Bangstad, 2023).

In the case of BnM, the proposed remediation for the destruction of peatlands and their biodiversity is by 'working with nature' through the 'management of natural assets' (Bord na Móna, 2023). Here, 'nature' is situated as separate from BnM (and therefore the nation), and nature provides 'assets' to be managed. This classification is one the multiple persistent dualisms inherent in AHD that now not fit-for-purpose (Harrison, 2015).

Toxic Futures

A more tenable approach requires radical changes heritage practice that involve developing an expanded frame of reference that works across species (Harrison, 2015) with the potential future states current heritage creates (Venovcevs and Bangstad, 2023). This expansion would move us beyond a model concerned with preserving aspects of the past and instead create a more honest and holistic approach that encourages us to consider heritage as a process or a tool, not a product; a process in which we acknowledge and question the intended and unintended heritage created now and for future generations (Morel and Ammerveld, 2021).

Wollentz's notion of Toxic Heritage (2020) provides a useful and challenging paradigm here. Proposed in the context of nuclear waste, there are parallels to be drawn with peatland legacies. The literal toxicity of drained peatlands, which continue to emit CO₂ longer after top layers of peat extracted (Bresnihan and Brodie, 2023), is akin to the toxicity risks in managing nuclear safety. Confronting the legacy of these extractive practices and the realities

of long-lasting environmental, social and cultural impacts would “allows us to comprehend these threats as lived reality rather than hypothetical trajectory” (Morel and Ammerveld, 2021, p.276).

In addition, Wollentz et al (2020) suggests that it is the wider forms of toxicity that are found in these heritages which must be contended with. Not limited to the toxins themselves, Wollentz et al’s (2020) Toxic Heritage framework calls out the idea that the toxicity stems also from how heritage is managed, the dynamics at work and the voices which are heard (and by implication those which are not). Therefore, it is imperative that the voices of communities affected by these legacies are acknowledged, and that these voices look to the human and more than human spheres (Lorimer, 2015). The nature-culture binaries embedded within AHD preclude diverse perspectives and so limit the potential of a more comprehensive understanding of the impacts of toxic heritage. BnM relies on positive narratives and romanticized histories instead of tacit acknowledgement of the negative impacts and complexities associated with its toxic sites.

Other Legacies

If taken seriously, an exploration of alternative narratives would invert the politicised, top-down approach currently in place and give more space to practices which centre communities and environment they live in. Giving more space and voice in the national platform to grass-roots practices could foster more inclusive and critical understanding of heritage definitions and values (Morel and Ammerveld, 2021). Examples are emerging from within other heritage practices across Ireland. A local environmental voluntary group, Friends of Ardee Bog, are seeking to establish a ‘rights for nature’ approach. This model hopes to foster a broader recognition of people as part of nature, not distinct from it. That the more than human world itself has agency and people have a responsibility to represent nature for nature’ sake (Friends or Ardee Bog, 2022). A further example can be found in the Móin Fhionnurach Development Association. Here, residents of the village of Fenor which is located beside a peatland, purchased the land on which the peatland sits in order to secure its ongoing health and to save it from development or exploitation (IPCC, 2023). In this case, the community are looking to protect the peatland for the peatland’s sake, not for human preservation or recreation but centring the ecosystem itself in its local heritage discourse.

Such examples demonstrate that by challenging Ireland’s peatland AHD and its dominant narratives can contribute to a more holistic, inclusive and diverse approach to heritage

practices. These may contribute to the urgent and radical solutions needed to address the environmental, social, and ethical dimensions of our past actions. Heritage in general, and toxic heritage in particular are not static relics of the past. Instead, it is mechanism through which we can develop new ways of thinking of and living with the new realities created within the Anthropocene.

Bibliography

- BBC News (2013) World's oldest bog body hints at violent past Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-24053119> Accessed on [14 May 2023]
- Bord na Mona (2013) Helping Ireland reach net zero emissions by 2050 - Company Website Accessed at [<https://www.bordnamona.ie/>] Accessed on [14 May 2023]
- Bresnihan, P., & Brodie, P. (2023). Data sinks, carbon services: Waste, storage and energy cultures on Ireland's peat bogs. *New Media & Society*, 25(2), 361–383. Accessed at [<https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221149948>] Accessed on [14 May 2023]
- Byg A., Martin-Ortega, J., Glenk, K., and Novo-Nunez P (2017) Conservation in the face of ambivalence – public perceptions of peatlands as ‘the good, the bad and the ugly’ *Biological Conservation*. 206. pp. 181-189
- Clarke, D., (2010) *Brown Gold: A History of Bord na Mona and the Peat Industry in Ireland*. Dublin, Ireland. Gill & Macmillan Ltd.
- Davies, T. (2022). Slow violence and toxic geographies: ‘Out of sight’ to whom? *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 40(2), 409–427. Accessed at [<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2399654419841063#bibr162-2399654419841063>] Accessed on [14 May 2023]
- Dept. Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2022) European Peatlands Initiative: a step towards government-supported collaboration. Accessed at [<https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/de023-european-peatlands-initiative-a-step-towards-government-supported-collaboration/>] Accessed on [14 May 2023]
- EU Briefing (2021) Climate action in Ireland Latest state of play. EPRS European Parliamentary Research Service. Accessed at [[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/690580/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)690580_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/690580/EPRS_BRI(2021)690580_EN.pdf)] Accessed on [19 May 2023]
- Feehan, J., O'Donovan, G., Renou-Wilson, F., & Wilson, D. (2008). *The bogs of Ireland: an introduction to the natural, cultural and industrial heritage of Irish peatlands*. University College Dublin. Environmental Institute. Accessed at [<https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/entities/publication/7e656399-0617-4d13-ac3a-0a7deb879e69/details>] Accessed on [19 May 2023]
- Flint, A., and Jennings, B. (2022) The role of cultural heritage in visitor narratives of peatlands: analysis of online user-generated reviews from three peatland sites in England, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 28:2, 163-179, Accessed at [[10.1080/13527258.2021.1941198](https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2021.1941198)] Accessed on [19 May 2023]
- Gladwin, D (2014) The Bog Gothic: Bram Stoker's ‘Carpet of Death’ and Ireland's Horrible Beauty *Gothic Studies* 2014 16:1, 39-54 Accessed at [<https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/10.7227/GS.16.1.4>] Accessed on [14 May 2023]
- Green News (2019) Bord na Mona refuses to release biomass sustainability documents. Accessed at [<https://greennews.ie/bnam-refuses-release-biomass-docs/>] Accessed on [19 May 2023]

- Harrison, R. (2013). *Heritage: Critical approaches*. New York: Routledge.
- Harrison, R. (2015) Beyond “Natural” and “Cultural” Heritage: Toward an Ontological Politics of Heritage in the Age of Anthropocene, *Heritage & Society*, 8:1, 24-42, Accessed at [DOI: [10.1179/2159032X15Z.00000000036](https://doi.org/10.1179/2159032X15Z.00000000036)] Accessed on [19 May 2023]
- Interreg-North West Europe. (2023) Care-Peat - Restoring the carbon storage capacity of peatlands. EU Report. Accessed at [<https://www.nweurope.eu/projects/project-search/care-peat-carbon-loss-reduction-from-peatlands-an-integrated-approach/?tab=&page=2#tab-1>] Accessed on [20 May 2023]
- IPCC (2023) Fenor Bog Water. Accessed at [<http://www.ipcc.ie/discover-and-learn/ipccs-peatland-nature-reserves/fenor-bog-waterford-visitor-map-guide/>] Accessed on [14 May 2023]
- Irish Farmer’s Journal (2023) Environmental lobby seeks mandate changes for Coillte and Bord na Móna. Accessed at [<https://www.farmersjournal.ie/environmental-lobby-seeks-mandate-changes-for-coillte-and-bord-na-mona-749904>] Accessed on [19 May 2023]
- Irish Times (2021) State is ‘biggest transgressor of environmental law’, says report. Accessed at [<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/environment/state-is-biggest-transgressor-of-environmental-law-says-report-1.4486715>] Accessed on [19 May 2023]
- Logan, W., and Wijesuriya, G. (2015). The new heritage studies and education, training, and capacity-building. In W. Logan, M.N. Craith, U. Kocke (eds.), *A companion to heritage studies*, 557-573. Malden, MA: John Wiley and Sons.
- Lorimer, J. (2015). *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation after Nature*. University of Minnesota Press Accessed at [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt14btgjq>] Accessed on [19 May 2023]
- Morel, H & Ammerfeld, J. (2021) From Climate Crisis to Climate Action: Exploring the Entanglement of Changing Heritage in the Anthropocene, *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice*, 12:3-4, 271-291 Accessed at [<https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080%2F17567505.2021.1957261>] Accessed on [19 May 2023]
- Noteworthy (2022) Peat was cut at 280 plots in protected bogs last year without State consent. Accessed at [<http://www.noteworthy.ie/peats-sake-pt3-sac-plots-5650149-Jan2022/>] Accessed on [14 May 2023]
- O’Brien, G. (2020). *The Darkness Echoing. Exploring Ireland’s Places of Famine, Death and Rebellion*. Dublin, Ireland. Penguin Books
- Ogilvy Dublin (2023) ‘More than Mona’ Campaign Accessed at [<https://www.instagram.com/ogilvydublin/>] Accessed on [19 May 2023]
- RTE News (2020) Bord na Móna seeks €1.6 billion to fund renewable energy projects Accessed at [<https://www.rte.ie/news/leinster/2020/0923/1167065-bord-na-mona/>] Accessed on [19 May 2023]
- Smith, L., (2006). *Uses of Heritage*. Routledge Press. London.

- The Journal (2021) 'We've made tough decisions': How Bord na Móna became worth €1.25 billion in less than two years. Accessed at [<https://www.thejournal.ie/bord-na-mona-changes-climate-change-5599640-Nov2021/>] Accessed on [19 May 2023]
- UCD (2019) Irish bog butter proven to be '3500 years' past its best before date Accessed at [<https://www.ucd.ie/newsandopinion/news/2019/march/14/irishbogbutterproventobe3500years pastitsbestbeforedate/>] Accessed on [14 May 2023]
- Venovcevs, A., & Bangstad, T. R. (2022). Living with Heritage: Involuntary Entanglements of the Anthropocene – An Introduction. *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology*, 9(1), 1–6. Accessed at [<https://doi.org/10.1558/jca.23988>] Accessed on [19 May 2023]
-
- Wollentz, Gustav & May, Sarah & Holtorf, Cornelius & Högberg, Anders. (2020). Toxic heritage: Uncertain and unsafe. In: *Heritage Futures*. UCL Press. pp.294 – 312. Accessed at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343264666_Toxic_heritage_Uncertain_and_unsafe] Accessed on [14 May 2023]