THE IRISH TINKERS Second Edition

The urbanization of an itinerant people

George Gmelch

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The Urbanization of an Itinerant People

SECOND EDITION

George Gmelch
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Prospect Heights, Illinois

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Cover Photo. Travellers moving across Dublin to a new camp. (Photo by Pat Langan)

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Foreword

No human group today, with the possible exception of a few small populations in the most remote regions of the earth, remains unaffected by other peoples and current world events. The studies comprising this series reflect this basic state of the human condition in the latter part of the twentieth century, and they focus on a common theme: the ways in which members of contemporary societies respond to, and develop strategies for coping with, modifications of their social and/or physical environments. Each study in the series is based on original field research by the author.

Gmelch's study is concerned with the Irish Tinkers, a once itinerant people comparable in many ways to the well-known Gypsies of Europe. For centuries the Tinkers travelled the Irish countryside, and their adaptation to their environment was unique. They had a symbiotic relationship with the settled rural dwellers, performing services for farmers in exchange for food and other items. They were an integral part of rural Ireland, and their social relations with the settled Irish were relatively fixed and unchanging. In the last three decades, however, altered economic conditions affecting most of rural Ireland have brought an abrupt end to the Tinkers' traditional nomadic lifestyle and have forced them to establish semipermanent camps on the fringes of Ireland's cities.

Gmelch's study, we believe, is significant in several ways. His analysis reveals that the Tinkers have successfully employed some of their traditional strategies for gaining a livelihood in their new urban environment. At the same time, the Tinkers have been defined as a "problem" by national and local government and welfare agencies. The urban Irish view the Tinkers as a poverty-stricken people who obviously require assistance and who must be transformed into more "respectable" citizens. As a consequence, welfare measures planned and implemented by others are part of the urban environment with which the Tinkers are now attempting to cope. Gmelch provides a careful analysis of the strategies the Tinkers are developing to adapt to these new forces in their lives and to the uncertainties of the urban setting; he calls our attention to strategies which appear to be adaptive in the short run but can only be destructive over a longer time span. Gmelch goes beyond the details of his own data and suggests some comparisons with other itinerant peoples in Europe and certain populations in America.

ROBERT C. KISTE

EUGENE OGAN

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About the Author

George Gmelch was raised in the San Francisco Bay area. After completing his undergraduate studies in anthropology at Stanford University, he took his graduate training at the University of California at Santa Barbara where he was awarded a Ph.D. in 1975. While working towards his undergraduate degree he played three seasons of professional baseball in the Detroit Tigers farm system. Professor Gmelch has taught at McGill University, Memorial University of Newfoundland, the State University of New York at Albany, and Union College, where he and his wife are currently associate professors of anthropology. Besides his research on Irish Travellers, he has also studied ritual among professional baseball players, nomadic or "long distance" Travellers in England and Wales for the English Department of the Environment (1980-1), and return migration in Ireland (1978), Newfoundland (1979), and Barbados (1983). Most recently, he has completed studies of resource use in coastal southeast Alaska (1982, 1983). Professor Gmelch has published four books, several reports, and numerous articles on Travellers, poverty, urban anthropology, migration and return migration, and baseball magic.

Acknowledgments

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I owe many things to many people. Charles Erasmus, Tom Harding, and Elvin Hatch, my thesis supervisors, gave invaluable advice and encouragement throughout my fieldwork and several drafts of this book. Jim Eder helped me think through the initial organization of my data; Richard Nelson regularly renewed my inspiration to write; Mike Carroll and Bob Kiste offered valuable suggestions on the text; and Rich Felson typed the manuscript.

I am greatly indebted to many people in Ireland. Special thanks are due to Patricia McCarthy, Eithne Russell, Vincent and Margaret Jones, Joe and Betty Barnes, Victor Bewley, Tom Furey, George Bowles, Luan Cuffe, Michael Flynn, Tom Murphy, Joyce Sholdice, Father Tom Fehily, Eilis McCullough, and Eric McGrath – all of whom are involved in itinerant settlement work – for their insights, hospitality and friendship. Pat Langan of the *Irish Times* taught me a great deal about photography which proved useful in my fieldwork. Cyril White at University College Dublin, helped with my questionnaires, and Sean O'Suilleabhain tracked down important archival materials.

The individual to whom I owe the most is my wife and colleague, Sharon Bohn. She provided moral support in the early stages of fieldwork, when gaining acceptance among the Tinkers was difficult, and she collected a great deal of data, especially on the female side of itinerant life.

This study has also benefited from discussions with David Smith, Judith Okely, Willy Guy, and Hugh Gentleman, my British colleagues who have carried out research among English and Scottish itinerants.

My greatest debt of course is to the Irish Travellers, especially the people of Holylands who not only permitted me to live in their camp and endured my endless questions, but made me feel at home. I am especially grateful to Mick and Katie Connors, Mick and Nan Donoghue, Jim and Biddy Conners, and Paddy and Nan Maugham. Without their trust and acceptance this study would have been made much more difficult, if not impossible. Out of respect to individuals who may wish to remain anonymous, all names mentioned in the text are pseudonyms.

GEORGE GMELCH
Slingerlands, New York

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This book is dedicated to my wife, Sharon, whose companionship and counsel have been invaluable, and to my Irish friends, both Traveller and non-Traveller, for their help and hospitality.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The People and the Problem

Although little is known about them, itinerant, outcast populations exist on the fringe of society in many European nations. In Holland they are called the Woonwagonbewoners, in Norway the Taters, in Sweden the Tattare, in Britain the Travellers, and in Ireland the Tinkers or Travellers. In most cases these people descend from early itinerant tradesmen and peasants who were forced from their lands by famines, war, or poverty. Many intermarried with Romany Gypsies who arrived as migrants from India in Western Europe around the fifteenth century. Today, the distinction between indigenous itinerants and the Gypsies is in many instances obscure, although this is not the case in Ireland where Gypsies were only occasional visitors.

Traditionally, itinerants travelled through rural areas performing a variety of trades and services, including tinsmithing, peddling, horse dealing, and seasonal farm labor. Most travelled regular circuits within a relatively small area of the countryside, camping in tents and wagons on the outskirts of the towns and villages they sought work in. In recent decades, modernization has eliminated the need for many of their traditional skills and with it much of the basis of their rural, nomadic way of life. Most itinerants have been forced to migrate to urban areas in search of new sources of income, and this change has had important consequences on other areas of their lives.

This book concerns one such group—the Irish Tinkers.[1] Ireland, geographically isolated at the edge of Europe and still recovering from centuries of domination by the English, did not begin to industrialize on a large scale until after the Second World War. Consequently, Tinkers were able to play a useful role in the rural economy until very recently, and they continue to be one of the most traditional itinerant groups in Western Europe. As late as 1961, all but 6 percent of Irish Tinkers were living in tents and/or horse-drawn wagons (RCI 1963:40). In contrast to other groups, Ireland's itinerant population has migrated to urban areas only in the last twenty-five years. And only in the last decade have significant numbers settled.

The focus of this study is the urbanization of Irish Travellers—their migration to urban areas and the economic and social adaptations they have made there. Anthropologists first turned their attention to the processes of urbanization and urban adaptation in the 1950s, when students of peasant societies began to follow the movement of their villagers into urban areas and to observe the changes brought about by the new environment. In some ways the present study is similar to other urbanization studies. The rural-to-urban migration of Irish Tinkers resembles that of many peasants in that both have been forced from rural areas by the mechanization of agriculture and the resultant unemployment, while simultaneously being drawn to urban-industrial centers by new economic opportunities there. But in the urban setting itself the similarity is less pronounced, for unlike many peasant migrants who settle among urbanites and take wage labor, most Tinkers remain markedly outside mainstream society, subsisting primarily on welfare, scavenging, and begging. Like residents of some Latin American squatter settlements, most Tinkers live in camps on the outer edges of urban areas, physically separated from the residential estates of the settled community. Their interaction with settled society continues to be restricted to economic

[1]The terms *Tinkers* and *Travellers* are used interchangeably throughout this book. "Tinkers" is the term used by settled Irish and the name by which most foreigners know the group. "Travellers" and "Travelling People" are the terms the people themselves use, and "Itinerants" is the government designation and the term used by the news media.

dealings—asking for scrap items and alms—and to such formal institutional settings as courts and hospitals. Thus the concern here is not so much with the assimilation of Travellers into urban society, as is often the case in studies of peasant migrants, but primarily with their adaptation to life in large urban camps, at the margins of settled society.

The general frame of reference of this study is ecological, in that cultural behavior is examined as a mechanism for coping with the demands of a changing environment. In other words, culture is viewed as a flexible system of adaptive responses. Here I can do no better than quote John Bennett's description of this research orientation:

> A second meaning of the term ecology emphasizes adaptation or *adaptive behavior.* Here we refer to coping mechanisms or a way of dealing with people and resources in order to attain goals and solve problems. Our emphasis here is not on relationships between institutions, groups or aggregates of data, but on patterns of behavior: problem-solving, decision making, consuming or not consuming, inventing, innovating, migrating, staying (Bennett 1969:11).

Most anthropological studies of adaptation focus first on the interrelationship between a group's technology and the physical environment, and second on the behavior patterns required in the exploitation of the environment. Meggars (1971), for example, describes how two different Amazon environments affect the population size, marriage patterns, and other socioeconomic aspects of local Indian cultures. A fundamental difference between the present ecological study of adaptation and most others is that Irish Tinkers represent a population which has always adapted more to a social environment than to a physical one. As itinerants, they were dependent not so much on the wild plants and game of the natural environment as on the resources of the rural farming population who provided them with their subsistence (farm produce, second-hand clothing, and cash) in exchange for labor and services. Thus Tinkers originally adapted to the needs of individual farmers and to the agricultural cycle. Today they have adjusted their life to the urban house-dwelling population, especially to the housewives and charities who give them alms and scrap items and who purchase the things they sell. The resources Travellers exploit are not natural ones but what Bennett (1969)

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