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Fishing, Drinking and the Construction of Identity in Rural Ireland

Adrian Peace

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ABSTRACT Although the consumption of alcohol is a frequently-encountered property of social life in fishing communities, the relationship between fishing and drinking is not much explored. In this paper it is argued that in the small Irish community of Clontarf drinking is to be analytically tackled as an important element in the social relations of fishing production. Having established its cultural significance to be on a par with many other essential productive resources, it is then explained that in recurrent and sustained drinking sessions, men express and legitimize their competence in fishing; that the affinity between fishing and drinking has major consequences for the local construction of gender relationships; and that it is in the course of routine drinking bouts that significant and persistent collective and individual identities within Clontarf are constituted.

In the small Irish community of Clontarf (a pseudonym), heavy alcohol consumption is considered nothing untoward. For most men, any weekend involves a substantial amount of drinking within several of its bars: a proportion of these drink regularly throughout the week; and although at weekends some men would be in the company of their wives, drinking is for the most part a male preserve. Since the adult population of Clontarf is only 450, the fact that no less than eight bars can survive and in some cases prosper, itself indicates that drinking is a major dimension of recurrent income expenditure. The concern of this paper is to couple the analysis of drinking with some exploration of how various social identities are constructed in Clontarf. For whilst social anthropologists have often examined alcohol consumption as a feature of generalised community experience (see the contributions to Douglas (1987)), my concern is to examine drinking's contribution to the reproduction of social identities within the community. Clontarf folk do not consider it abnormal for men to drink heavily: this is considered an element of the community's routine practices. But this is not to say that drinking is not remarked upon: the quality of beers and spirits, the ambience of different bars, changes in individual consumption patterns, the quirks of public house owners, are just a few of the recurrent conversational topics. From this discourse of drinking, constructions of identity emerge.

Fishermen always figure most prominently in this flow of drinking discourse since they drink more frequently and more copiously than any other fraction of the community: and the particular location in which they reside and take their leisure is especially renowned for the role which alcohol

consumption plays. These features too are routinely remarked upon and discussed: fishing and drinking are considered indivisible and there are numerous markers of their interconnectedness. In this paper I examine this especially privileged relation between fishing and drinking and locate their affinity within the material circumstances of production. It will be argued that the relation has important consequences not only for the collective identity of pier folk but also the construction of gender relations within Clontarf. After detailing how the politics of fishing and drinking is related to the politics of gender, we will return to examining the role played by alcohol in this particular form of simple commodity production in rural Ireland.

Fishing Out the Pier

Despite its small size, Clontarf is exceptionally differentiated. Its constituent domains are the country, the village and the pier, each of which has particular occupational concern, an exclusive population engaged in it, and an inescapably idiosyncratic ethos. The country is the preserve of farmers and farm families who possess their own small units of production: the relationship between a family and its farm is always a special and identifiable one; and each family's affairs are always considered private and hallowed. The village is dominated by several large, but not unified, families whose main concern is commerce. As the owners of general stores and public houses, they are especially prominent socially and politically in the village. But this domain is also the hub of community-wide traffic, and by contrast with the country is a very public place indeed where little is secret and much is commonplace.

Although these differences are pronounced enough, it is nevertheless the pier which is considered the most distinctive of the three domains: it is often said that 'things happen at the pier that couldn't happen anywhere else in Clontarf.' Central to this distinctiveness is the concentration of the harbour, the bars, and the domestic residences of pier folk within a few hundred yards' radius. A majority of regular fishermen reside here with their families in houses directly overlooking the harbour. The two bars mainly frequented by them stand, with all due symbolic moment, between the harbour and their domestic dwellings so that all fishermen must at least pass the bars several times each day.

Fishing out of Clontarf is a form of simple commodity production within a small urban industrial society. The boats are mostly between thirty and forty foot wooden-hulled vessels and fibre glass dinghies (or 'punts'). The former require a crew of three and it is from them that most fishing is done throughout the year. Characteristically a three-man crew comprises the boat's skipper-owner and two others called sharemen. All three receive an equal share of the boat's catch with a further two shares reserved to cover improvements to the boat, new gear and the cost of fuel. Boats are privately-owned and in addition to this being the skipper-owner's major capital asset, it is the only source of his own and his dependent's livelihood as well as being

the main focus for all fluid capital and labour. These small boats are sometimes tied up for days on end due to inclement weather, yet there is endless maintenance work to be done. Even when a boat is tied up, its owner will be on board discussing 'her' strengths, 'her' weaknesses, and 'her' foibles with other fishermen. The discourse about fishing is tangled, ramified, and never-ending, especially among owners.

The reputations of skippers and sharemen are wholly determined by the performance of their boats. An owner-skipper's standing is the subject of regular review as is that of a shareman who stays with a particular boat for some time. Usually between a dozen and a score large boats and punts are working out of the pier: since all (bar one) are restricted to a single day at sea at a time, each evening their boxes of fish are on the pier awaiting collection by a fish buyer. The success of a boat and its crew is therefore instantly and publicly estimable in a way that no other local population's output could possibly be. Insofar as the skipper owns the boat and is personally responsible for every decision taken on it, so his personal reputation comes under the closest possible scrutiny.

Relations between fishermen are consistently egalitarian and recurrently conflictual. By virtue of being self-employed men in possession of their own productive resources, an ethos of egalitarianism is inescapable. The idea that every man is as good as his neighbour is a consistent thread informing most important codes of interpersonal conduct. This is not to suggest that there are few material inequalities amongst Clontarf's fishermen (though neither are there marked disparities), it is rather to acknowledge that the emphasis on equality concerns moral attributes rather than material assets. The ethos is variously signalled by nicknames, greeting styles, the use of epithets and the sustained abuse of those who, despite all, insist on proclaiming themselves superior to others.

This itself creates conflict: but most is produced by other considerations. Fishermen fall out over how fishing should be done, they quarrel over details of the share system, they vie for harbour moorings, they accuse one another of incompetence, and when drift nets or lines of crayfish netting become inadvertently tangled out at sea, boat owners find themselves publicly at loggerheads. Once differences are in the public domain, they inevitably become wrapped up in matters of reputation and prestige from which many find it impossible to step down. Since there are always in this condensed arena of work, leisure and residence, dormant past tensions and volatile current ones in place, it does not require a spectacular addition to provoke escalation. The most telling index of this potential is the street brawl. Elsewhere in Clontarf, physical violence between grown men would be unthinkable: yet at the pier, every now and then, a fistfight breaks out and does much to reinforce the pier's image of a rough place inhabited by truculent residents.

Notwithstanding the tough, manual nature of fishing, it requires a great deal of knowledge to be pursued successfully. For a start there are the copious quantities of local knowledge about fishing conditions which older men have

acquired over the decades: these focus on the movement of different fish at different times of the year, under different climatic conditions and in different locations (or 'marks'). Most men have favourite marks where they frequently fish, others will stay clear of particular locations – and these may be one and the same. More currently, there is the ever-changing information about other Clontarf boats which any skipper follows assiduously, connecting this information with relative size catches at the end of the day. Relevant too is the location of Irish, French, Spanish and English trawl fleets for the arrival of these off shore can spell drought conditions locally as the general area is 'fished out.'

Again, current knowledge concerning fishing authorities is indispensable, especially during the summer months of salmon fishing, for most boats the more lucrative period of the year. It would not be so were not every rule surrounding salmon fishing actually flouted: so it becomes imperative to be familiar with the current activities of the bailiffs. Of like consequence is up-to-date information about market outlets. The sale of fish is not here centralized (on the lines of, say, a cooperative arrangement), but divided between at least three independent buyers who compete for the clientage of boat owners and then sell directly to consumers in the regional market place, or to other buyers, including overseas ones. Boat owners must therefore keep a weather eye open for all current prices inside and outside Clontarf in order to decide whether present arrangements with a buyer should be maintained or broken off. Similarly fluid are the relations between skippers and sharemen for there is no effective contract between them, only a verbal agreement to work together until such times as one party determines otherwise. As a result, skippers keep well abreast of how sharemen on other boats are performing, and sharemen are always well informed about the relative fortunes of every other skipper in Clontarf.

Drinking to Social Difference

The pressures of private boat ownership, the uncertainty of personal reputations, the aggressive competitiveness of fishing, and the imperative of up-to-date knowledge are, then, some salient features of the occupation which economically and culturally dominates the pier. In combination they put men regularly and recurrently in Clontarf's bars so that drinking becomes as much a means of production as the boat and the gear to fish with. It is an occupational imperative amongst Clontarf's fishermen to maintain a solid footing in the discourse distilled in the community's public houses. The two bars adjacent to the harbour are the preeminent sites in which this discourse is composed, but two others in the village are also popular with some. Accordingly, fishermen are continually in motion between these bars and may well visit all four of them (and others besides) in the course of a night or a weekend of solid drinking. Especially in the village bars, fishermen rub shoulders with farmers, business folk, wage-earners and the unemployed: but

by the end of a night's drinking, it is usually the case that fishermen have fallen in with their own. Be that as it may, it is a virtual cultural requirement that to be a fisherman it is necessary to drink well. As is the case in Houat, south Brittany, multiple constructions surround the notion of a 'real fisherman' (Jorion n.d.), but the idea that an effective and successful fisherman could keep himself to himself and not drink well would be considered out of the question, whilst these are two quite common and expected characteristics among the community's farmers.

It is assuredly within the commensal setting of the bar that any fisherman constructs his personal reputation – or, one might say, chases it down since in this setting all reputations well proceed their bearers. Erving Goffman once wrote (1959:33): 'People are obliged not only to carry out their tasks and routines, but also *express* their competence in doing so.' It is in drinking sessions that a fisherman does this and thereby legitimizes his mode of operation. Fishing is a craft occupation requiring an inordinate amount of experience and knowledge which can be exercised in a wide variety of ways: there is no set programme for catching fish. A fisherman therefore articulates the discrete and particular rationale behind his way of doing things in conversation and debate with his peers, including even those major decisions which all have to take every year. When to cease salmon fishing, for example, and put down tangle nets is a decision which all owners of larger boats must take: but the transition often enough occurs over a two month phase, such is the range of variables which has to be considered.

Particularly since a skipper's ultimate decisions on major issues have fundamental ramifications not only for his family but also his sharemen and their dependents, so they warrant accountability: and this is exactly what transpires in extended drinking sessions throughout the year. Accordingly it is in the milieu of the bar that the reputations of skippers are made and unmade over stout and whiskey chasers. Of course it is boxes of fish which ultimately determine any fisherman's worth: but it is also a central part of local belief that a good deal of fishing depends on luck. In order to account for a good spell in terms of personal ability and expertise rather than chance, any fisherman needs provision his own account and explanation in the public milieu of the bar: and quite as important as the consolidation of his standing in such circumstances is the hardening of his self-confidence, by no means a negligible asset in this competitive location.

Evidently related to this consideration is that the bar is the outstanding site in which to conspicuously display one's productivity. Although a boat's output is evident enough by virtue of being despatched from the pier, there are important exceptions. Fishermen go to great lengths for example to hide the quantities of salmon they have on board, likewise with crayfish, for these are the most valuable of catches and a boat-owner known to be doing well at a particular mark can expect others to move in and crowd him out. (On secrecy in fishing, see contributions to Andersen and Wadel (1972), Smith (1977) and Pálsson (1982).) Considerable satisfaction can come from having

effectively disguised the details of such successes whilst on the other hand publicly broadcasting one's high return through drinking heavily oneself and buying rounds for others. The early 1980s saw a relative decline in the returns from fishing with the result that expansively buying rounds fell into disrepair as a regular ritual. It is therefore now all the more noteworthy when a fisherman does so. It is following a sustained bout of high productivity that one expends more money than usual on oneself and one's closest associates – as when, for example, in 1988 one young fisherman on a share in a successful boat managed to spend well over £100 on spirits in a drinking spell which lasted two full days.

The important properties of alcohol are that it is publicly consumed and that it is available in specifiable quantities (see Collman (1988), chapter 6). Since fishermen well know what all others customarily drink, any marked variation is not only noted but some explanation is sought. Not all such changes however can be directly related to success in fishing. A frequent (but certainly not universal) claim amongst established fishermen is that, provided the essential requirements of the family are met, they are relatively indifferent to money, even contemptuous of it. Certain drinking sessions appear virtually set in motion to display precisely that. In late 1988 the most spectacular (and then, infamous) binge involved four brothers, all in middle age, with families to support. Together they consumed an exceptional quantity of stout and spirits from a Friday afternoon through to the Sunday evening, breaking only for an occasional meal. The drinking session had taken off in impromptu fashion, as does all 'good crack' in Clontarf: but the pier population was assuredly impressed by the brothers' conspicuous indifference to their immediate financial circumstances. None of the four was fishing successfully, two were – if anything – performing badly.

It is in such sessions as these that men display their ability to hold their beer well and demonstrate their physical toughness: a good deal of physical horseplay accompanies any serious drinking bout. As we have seen, this quality is indispensable to small scale fishing out of Clontarf for there are none of the comforts which are now so widely available on modern trawlers (as described by Cohen (1986) for Shetland Island vessels). On most Clontarf boats in the early 1980s even the engine driven hauler was a recent addition: in winter months conditions at sea can be acutely uncomfortable; and all fish processing is done at sea and by hand. Accordingly, to be a fisherman it is necessary to be hard. Less obviously, the chances of other fishermen driving over one's salmon nets, taking a knife to the top or bottom ropes of drift nets, or cutting away lines of lobster pots, are now increasingly high, given the competitive nature of this occupational niche. One is less likely to be the target of such sabotage if it is well known that outright physical confrontation will result, and accordingly some readily demonstrate their physical prowess to signal that they should not be unduly provoked.

Yet above all else, it is the knowledge which is condensed, compounded, and constantly refined in the bars which is most essential to effective fishing

over time. One simply does not get proper access to this scarce resource unless one's membership of the occupational cadre is established and on-going. Even blow-ins who have bought new boats into the harbour have faced near-insuperable obstacles in their initial, and hostile, induction phase. So access to this resource cannot be other than as part of a generalized exchange process. One is expected to provide information which will be of value to an extended circle of others, quite as much as theirs will be to oneself. But this has to be done whilst observing other implicit codes for conduct at the pier, such as that which requires a primary sense of obligation to one's present crew, even though it is understood that its composition will be short lived, or that which demands loyalty to one's close relatives, despite the fact that male siblings and cousins find themselves in direct competition with one another. The consideration which cannot be over emphasized is that all such information is frequently changing and needs to be quickly acted upon. The movement of shoals of fish is not only rapid but exceptionally unpredictable on this section of the Irish coastline. Unless a fisherman rapidly learns of their presence and acts on it, the opportunity is lost. Market prices change considerably and within relatively narrow periods of time: so too do selling opportunities to particular buyers inside and outside Clontarf. In the summer months, the sudden advent of bailiffs either over the horizon by boat or by the single main road into Clontarf can only be anticipated by access to an inter-community network of contacts which locally terminates in Clontarf's bars. Under such circumstances, there can be no effective alternative to regularly being there in the bars; whilst some specific, clearly demarcated information may be readily available, the great bulk of it is built into the routine flow of a wide variety of verbal encounters. One has to extract the information which one needs and act on it accordingly. It is for these reasons that a recurrent presence has to be maintained. Unless a fisherman makes a couple of visits to his favourite bar each day and spends in them several evenings each week, he is marginalized from that flow of drinking discourse on which his means of livelihood substantially depends.

The Boundaries of Place and Gender

The processes described thus far are central to the reproduction of the pier's collective identity as a distinct domain inside Clontarf. Elsewhere I have described how a collective identity of Clontarf as a community finds consistent expression without undermining the sense of internal heterogeneity (Peace 1986). Presently the important issue is that the interconnected economic and social relations which turn upon drinking and fishing are themselves integral to the pier residents' distinct identity within the community at large. To sum up the major influences, in addition to the pier being physically distinct from the village and the country, fishing is its conspicuously paramount occupation and is pursued by a handful of prominent families concentrated there. The rough character of pier life, from physical aggression

through to a notable earthiness in daily speech, is especially marked by comparison with the ambience of the other two domains. The role played by drinking in the social life of the pier is relatively pronounced too, and is at times condemned as reprehensible by villagers and farmers who consider themselves more restrained. Above all, as will now be evident, the drinking discourse focussed upon pier bars is so very dense and detailed that it is beyond the capacity of non-fishermen to contribute to it. To a greater degree than the farmers in the country or business folk in the village (both of whose occupational discourses are far less notable), the sheer detail and volume of constantly changing information results in the fishermen realizing a distinct, bounded discourse around the pier domain which others find difficult to penetrate.

The same constellation of fishing-drinking relationships has profound impact on the construction of gender relations inside the pier domain. The result is a marked divide between the work sphere dominated by men and the domestic sphere directed by women. Once again the prevalent consideration is relative for this distinction is not one which obtains elsewhere in Clontarf. On the community's agricultural properties, farmers and their wives cooperate closely, the latter frequently taking charge of milking, the responsibility for calf rearing, and the raising of small animals for sale. Joint enterprise is even more pronounced amongst the commercial enterprises which predominate in the village. The three village bars for example are all family enterprises in which husband and wife cooperate to the full, not least to minimize the need for non-familial labour requiring wage-payment. As with the farms, public houses and village shops are run by pooling all available family labour so that sons and daughters are recruited as soon as possible into the routine operation of these enterprises.

By contrast it is not unusual for the wives of fishermen to claim that they know little about their husband's work; a few pronounce their indifference. Even if this is not to be taken quite literally, within this particular form of commodity production there is no role occupied by women, nor evidence to suggest that in the past women processed fish on lines described for somewhat similar communities in the British Isles and beyond (Thompson 1983; Sider 1984). Contemporaneously then, the pier woman's predominant role is a service one, wholly embedded in and circumscribed by the parameters of the domestic household. Whereas the social relationships of men are focussed upon the harbour and the bar, those of women are centred upon the home, or more strictly speaking, the relations between several domestic units which are concentrated together above the harbour.

In that most pier residents were born either in Clontarf or its vicinity, younger and middle-aged women frequently have their own or their husbands' parents reside nearby. Accordingly, in addition to the evidently major task of bringing up children, the first specific component of the woman's service role is that of providing for the aged since the chief burden invariably falls on married women and requires a considerable number of resources to

be devoted to their care (particularly since regional welfare facilities are located at a good distance from this small community.) Also by virtue of being locally born, most women have a number of siblings resident in Clontarf or neighbouring settlements; and in this context, the bonds between siblings are always intimate. Whether of the same gender or not, the relationship is wholly privileged by contrast with all others. And to these relatives are to be added the husband's siblings with whom any woman is expected to be (minimally) on cordial terms, some of whom will be around the same age as the fisherman's wife and either have had children or are still in the child-bearing phase.

A pier housewife is thus typically surrounded by relatives to whom she is affinally or consanguineally related. For fairly evident reasons, her routine social network is dominated by the female relatives with whom she shares household chores, the minding of infants, escorting older children to school, and providing meals for all concerned. So when one talks with, or simply listens to, pier women from fishing families discussing their daily affairs, the indelible impression is that their domestic lives are about juggling with time. They are involved in a never-ending process of imaginatively and creatively structuring the hours of the day in order to mediate the competing pressures put upon them by children, husbands, parents and parents-in-law, as well as neighbouring siblings. If the point seems an obvious one, all that can be rejoindered is that it proved striking to this ethnographer since by comparison their menfolk are relatively indifferent to the clock. Apart from the haste of casting off from moorings at the commencement of a trip, and even that is an exercise subject to inordinate delay often enough, fishermen frequently have time on their hands whilst their wives struggle with its scarcity.

As one might anticipate, the production of tension and conflict between pier households is relatively frequent whereas by contrast conflicts between farming families are not only few but also short lived. Disputes between and within related households over children, money, property ownership, and sexual matters incline to be regular amongst pier residences. What is especially striking about them is that, whatever understanding there might be to keep such matters within family bounds, this proves virtually impossible to sustain. It is especially problematic to do so because disputes between women become so frequently interlinked with, and indissoluble from, disputes between their menfolk at the pier. One's neighbour may be the wife of one's husband's shareman: one's husband may be engaged in running battle at sea with one's brother who, with his family, resides hard by; one's friendship with a fish buyer's wife may be put at hazard because husbands are at odds over prices or payments; and so forth. As a result of such multiplex relations, conflicts between pier households become involved and intricate, and they do much to compound the pier's reputation as a disputatious locale. But whilst their husbands are able to engage in varied avoidance and distancing strategies under such circumstances, either by going out to sea or retiring to a village bar, women with their many responsibilities are less able to do so. Put

simply, women have no extra-household milieu to which they can turn if they wish to put distance between themselves and the accumulating tensions of the pier.

Instead their characteristic response is to forge, and then rely heavily upon, close friendships with one or two fellow pier residents. Whilst it is rarely the case for fishermen to exhibit special dyadic associations – but rather to concur with the interpretation of one who said ‘Everyone here’s your friend or your enemy, and in one week he may be your friend and in the next your enemy!’ – their wives form special, enduring attachments which effectively become relations between confidantes. Whether based on friendships from school days, developed specifically in Clontarf, or rooted in sibblingship or cousinhood, it is in such bonds that fishermen’s wives find the resources to negotiate with the intensity of their micro-social world. It is in them too that they elaborate their own discourse of domestic politics by drawing upon and further compounding their characteristic intimacy with the pier. The state of various marriages, the financial circumstances of households, the careers of local associations, the intrigue of extra-marital liaisons – these are some of the issues to be kept abreast of; and their detailed examining in its turn feeds through into their verbal encounters with parents, neighbouring relatives and other co-residents, in a seamless thread of talk and endless currents of conversation out of which the pier as a bounded domain is constantly being constructed.

Of Dramas, Sagas and Drinking

To this extent, the discourse of domestic politics elaborated by pier women and the drinking discourse of their husbands are similarly constitutive of the social boundary which distinguishes their domain from the remainder of the community. The contrasting nature of the daily round of men and women is reflected in their myriad conversational encounters, yet each is equally pier-focussed and is such as to reinforce the prevalent and prideful notion that ‘We are pier folk and we are different.’

Contrasting as they may be however, it is equally the case that these gender discourses are effectively complementary. Simply because the daily round creates some socio-spatial separation does not lead to their lives remaining distinct and separable (although that the one inexorably results in the other is assumed in the classic study by Dennis (1958)). At least in Clontarf, the experiences of spouses are wholly complementary at one level precisely by virtue of their being discrete at another, for in the quiet of the home their experiences can be knitted together in a comprehensive web of interpretation. Their mutual accomplishment is a shared cognitive map of their social domain. On-going events, some of which I would call dramas, others sagas, comprise the governing threads of their disjointed talk, for it is such events out of which the framework of pier politics is fabricated. In my terms, dramas incline to be variations on much the same themes, are of limited

duration, involve restricted personnel, and they can be followed closely without requiring any active intervention. As the term implies, sagas occur on a politically grander scale and are temporarily extended also. Sagas engage a larger body of local figures, several issues are frequently at stake, they have long term consequences, and they generate often heated exchange amongst the broader, attentive audience of pier residents.

The crucial point for emphasis at this point is that the pier, above all other locations in Clontarf and its wider locality, is the especial source of both dramas and sagas. And this is because – returning now specifically to the role of alcohol amongst the fishermen – of the distinctive relationship between drinking and fishing. What is critically common to both is that they are equally generative of the untoward, the unexpected, and the unforeseen event. In concert they thus present a formidable coupling.

Because of the limited ecological niche occupied by Clontarf fishermen, and the competitive circumstances from which their livelihoods are gleaned, scarcely a couple of days pass by without some drama – well-worth broadcasting – having transpired. In the context of the pier bar where a generalized camaraderie coexists constantly with specific enmities, sustained drinking sessions recurrently create their own highlights and dramatic developments. When therefore happenings out at sea are continuously fed into the flow of social interaction at the bar, an especially heady combination results. In other words there is a distinctively homological relationship between drinking and fishing: their correspondence is such as to produce irregular events, unpredictable happenings, uncertain relationships, and unanticipated consequences. In addition to the self-evidently transactional nature of relations within this sphere of simple commodity production, there is much else which defies reduction to such terms. Drinking and fishing create a specific cultural ethos in which uncertainty, luck, chance and capriciousness are always in attendance, and at times seem quite dominant.

Under such circumstances the fishermen’s constant movement between Clontarf’s bars, the way in which men drop in and drop out of several conversational encounters within the space of an hour, and at the end of a night’s drinking will be comfortably ‘full up’ or somewhat inebriated (the local term is ‘langers’ or just plain ‘pissed’), are open to interpretation as the most effective of improvisations which can come to terms with the uncertainties of their material circumstances. First, it is in the course of such apparent aimlessness that the individual fisherman is able to take rapid yet comprehensive stock of all those social relationships which are of consequence to him. Fishermen themselves often imply that as a way of life fishing would be unrivalled were it not for the fact that it produces such a complexity of relations with other men. But this is in the nature of the occupation, it has to be addressed, and it is through the extensive drinking in bars that this is substantively done. After a weekend’s solid drinking, they emerge with a firm grasp on the fabric of social relations which are so determinant of the way in which they make their living.

In addition to this it is in the context of drinking bouts that fishermen can effect the changes to their social relationships which customary codes of interpersonal behaviour do not facilitate under more normal circumstances. Notwithstanding their often-pronounced renegade activities, most fishermen are as much constrained by established standards of face-to-face conduct as anyone else. Accordingly they find it difficult, for example, to break off the association with a shareman because of his unsatisfactory performance out at sea, or to repair a breach with another skipper when the conflict between them has evidently run its course. Heavy drinking sessions in crowded bars provision precisely the appropriate circumstances for such modifications to interpersonal dealings: for whilst, say, a fisherman would find it impossible to walk up to a rival on the pier and forthrightly suggest that by-gones should be by-gones, the offer of a drink between somewhat inebriated men surrounded by their pushing, shoving, and loud talking peers would be hard to turn down, whatever the nature of past differences. (See Faris (1973) and Firestone (1967) for similar argument.)

Finally, it is in such settings and with several rounds of drink behind them, I propose, that fishermen are able to not only take stock of the social relations around them but also reflexively evaluate their own particular circumstances within that social field and their own social selves. Here in particular it warrants repetition that all fishermen possess their own means of production, that they thus accord themselves a high degree of self-esteem, and that their social reputations are of tremendous importance to them. This being so, it is of real consequence to the self-esteem of the fishermen to be present in the bars and to demonstrate their capacity to hold their liquor well in the company of their peers. Following a night or a weekend of sustained conversation and sustained alcohol consumption, the individual can emerge with a reinforced sense of his productive worth and with his social self fully intact, despite the temporary setbacks and occasional failures to which all fishermen are subject time and again. When fishermen are doing badly for some while then, as we have seen, their public reputations become subject to considerable buffeting: such is the inherent nature of their occupational relationships. But by socializing effectively and drinking hard and well – and in well-knowing that he can do both regardless of immediate circumstances out at sea – he is able to retain full confidence in his calibre as a fisherman and his sense of self as a member of the pier domain.

To express the point somewhat differently, the proposition is that as fishermen imbibe heavily and become somewhat inebriated (bearing in mind that this is a matter of phenomenal degree), they do not thereby lose control over their immediate circumstances or indeed abandon their sense of judgement. To the contrary, it is precisely under such circumstances that they are in a position to effectively grasp the fluid and complex realities of their world in a more comprehensive fashion than is usually the case. As the drink flows, as tongues loosen, as masks fade and the camaraderie takes over, so the experiential realities of fishing out of Clontarf come into clear view. Far from

the individual's judgement becoming, as one might say, clouded or dull through alcohol, the fisherman's sense of not only the social worth of his fellows but more importantly his social self becomes in fact more acute and keen than is at other times possible. In short, a significant role of alcohol in Clontarf's pier domain is to provide opportunities for the fisherman to be especially reflexive when at the centre of those social relations which not only determine his livelihood but are also pivotal to the way in which he constitutes his own social identity.

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