

## Scattery Island: Decline of an Island Community, 1850-1978

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An exploration of the history of Scattery Island from the end of the Great Famine until its last inhabitants left in 1978, with particular emphasis on occupations, population trends, marriage patterns and education. The factors that led to growth up to the mid-1930s and decline thereafter are outlined and analysed.

Scattery Island lies in the mouth of the Shannon estuary, about two kilometres from the town of Kilrush, off the coast of west county Clare. In 1855 Richard Griffith's valuation quantified the island at 179 acres, 0 roods and 19 perches, with a total value of £138 and 16s.<sup>1</sup> At this time records show that there were fourteen occupied houses on the island with a total population of some ninety-nine people.<sup>2</sup> It is thought that many of the families who occupied the island at this time did so after purchasing leases from the landlord of the island, Francis Keane, using money they had earned from their salvaging of a merchant ship in 1843, the *Windsor Castle*, which had been abandoned by her crew and had a rich cargo.<sup>3</sup>

### Post-Famine Expansion: 1850-1936

Census records show that between 1841 and 1851 Scattery Island's population increased by around 52%, from sixty-five to ninety-nine people.<sup>4</sup> While the small scale of the island's population means that caution must be exercised when drawing wider comparisons, this was a period when the county of Clare had declined by almost 26% and the national population had declined by almost 28%. In this same period the local mainland parish of Kilrush had seen a decline of over 25% while the population of the recently opened Kilrush workhouse outnumbered those living in the town itself.<sup>5</sup> Further analysis reveals that Scattery Island's population consisted of forty-two males and fifty-seven females, with the increased numbers of females that were living on the island accounting for almost 68% of the decennial population change. The number of houses had increased by five in this period, from nine to fourteen, with a total poor-law valuation of £84,10s for the island.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Griffith's Valuation, *Union of Kilrush, Scattery Island* (Dublin, 1855) pp 403-05 (hereafter *Griffith's Valuation, 1855*): Griffith's Valuation used statute acres which consisted of 4840sq. yards; an acre was further subdivided into 4 roods with each rood consisting of 40 perches.

<sup>2</sup> C.S.O., 'Population by Off-Shore Island: Sex and Year', Table CNA17 (hereafter CSO, CNA17).

<sup>3</sup> Senan Scanlon, *Inhabitants of Scattery Island: Shannon Estuary, County Clare* (2007) p. 12 (hereafter Scanlon, *Inhabitants of Scattery*). Don Scanlan, *Memories of an Islander: A Life on Scattery and Beyond* (Ennis, 2003) p. 1 (hereafter Scanlan, *Memories of an Islander*). Reports in the *Clare Journal* (30 April 1877) state that the Corporation of Limerick had leased Scattery Island to Sir Christopher Marrett 'for ever' and that through familial connections (marriage to his daughter) Francis Keane had in turn leased the island from Marrett in 1830. This lease subsequently passed to Marcus Keane upon the death of Francis Keane.

<sup>4</sup> *Census of Ireland, Clare, 1851*, p. 33 (hereafter *Census of Ireland, Clare, 1851*).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

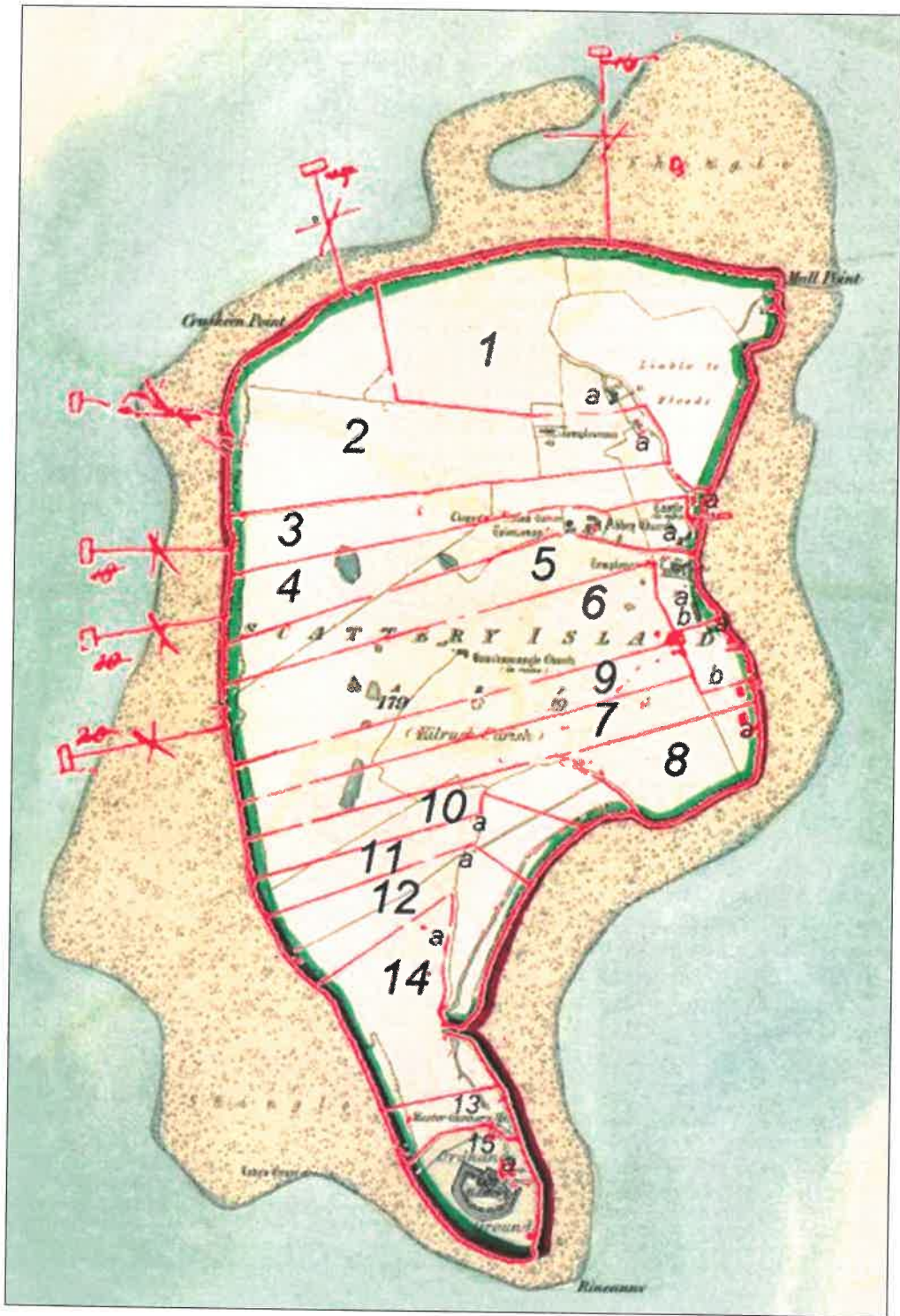


Fig. 1 Griffith's Valuation Map 1855

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Griffith's valuation books from 1855 show that many of the island's tenants at this time were indeed men who had used salvage money to lease properties on Scattery,<sup>7</sup> having come from some of the poorest areas in Ireland.<sup>8</sup> Records show that there was inequality among the islanders in terms of size of holdings, in quality of land held and in the value of their dwellings.<sup>9</sup> The largest landholder was Patrick Brennan who held just over thirty-one acres (Fig. 1, Property 1) at the north of the island. Despite the size of his holding, Brennan's land was valued as the poorest on the island, at around 8s 10d per acre, which may have been due, in part, to its susceptibility to flooding. Brennan's immediate neighbour Jeremiah Hehir's property (Fig. 1, Property 2) was one of the most valuable on the island, rated at about 18s, 12d per acre, and the subsequent properties listed from No. 3, Michael Scanlan's, up to and including No. 9, Felix Brennan's, are the most valuable on the island with rates ranging from 14s 10d per acre (No. 9) to 16s 4d per acre (No. 8). This would suggest that the most arable land was to the centre of the island, with the northern and southern extremes least suitable for cultivation. Contemporary reports of Scattery Island had noted the rich quality of the land with Samuel Lewis remarking in 1837 that much of the island's land was 'remarkably fertile'<sup>10</sup> and the *Parliament Gazetteer* of 1845 describing the soil as 'good, well stocked with cattle and abounding with rabbits and wildfowl'.<sup>11</sup> Fig. 3 also provides evidence of the striped field formations which were beginning to replace the rundale system of farming which had predominated in Ireland. Aalen argued that these formations had the benefit of giving each tenant access to the varying soil resources and it would appear to support the valuations data which suggests that the most arable land on Scattery was towards the centre of the island, running from north to south.<sup>12</sup> The remaining properties to the south of the island received lower valuations suggesting that this land, too, was inferior in quality to that in the centre of the island. Analysis of the townlands comprising the electoral division of Kilrush revealed that Scattery Island's land valuation was ranked tenth out of twenty-seven in the electoral division indicating that it was some of the best quality land in this part of west Clare. The striped method of field formation also had the function of permitting a 'nucleated settlement pattern' and in the case of Scattery Island this is apparent in the concentration of houses on the east of the island.<sup>13</sup> It is likely that the island's houses were built here to provide shelter from the Atlantic ocean on the west side of the island and proximity to the pier and Kilrush would also have been an important factor. This concentrated pattern of housing constituted a village and it indicated a distinct community and a sense that the islanders were comfortable with close, communal living.

The island's subsistence agriculture was supplemented by the main source of cash income to the islanders which was boat piloting. The port of Limerick could only be reached by the navigation of the river Shannon which contemporary accounts described

<sup>7</sup> Scanlon, *Inhabitants of Scattery*, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> T.P. O'Neill, 'Clare and Irish Poverty', in *Studia Hibernica*, 14 (1974) p. 22. The original pilots who settled on Scattery came from Kilbaha and Carrigaholt on the Loop Head Peninsula. O'Neill stated that these were some of the worst hit areas during the food crises of the 1820s & 1830s. In 1837, for example, Carrigaholt was 'again the centre of distress' in the area with no potatoes for sale there while they were readily available in Kilrush and Ennis.

<sup>9</sup> *Griffith's Valuation, 1855*.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (London, 1837), Inniscattery.

<sup>11</sup> *The Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland, Inniscattery* (1844-1845).

<sup>12</sup> F.H.A. Aalen & Hugh Brody, *Gola: Life and Last Days of an Island Community* (Cork, 1969) p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

as a 'wat'ry labyrinth' in which navigation is most intricate and dangerous'.<sup>14</sup> Thomas Steele noted the perils that the narrowness of the channel, the rapid tides and the unpredictable currents in the river posed for pilots.<sup>15</sup> Piloting was regulated by the Limerick Harbour Commissioners and pilots were divided into two separate divisions, the eastern division which consisted of the Limerick port pilots and was based at Grass Island, and the western division which was based at Kilbaha or Carrigaholt.<sup>16</sup> In 1854 the Commission issued a series of bye-laws clearly defining the duties and responsibilities of pilots.<sup>17</sup> Pilots were obligated to come to the aid of any vessel flying a flag for assistance and were bound to remain on board that vessel until discharged from its service by the vessel's captain. Pilots were also obliged to produce their licence to the captain upon boarding any vessel and this was in order to combat the proliferation of unlicensed pilots, or hobbler, which existed at this time.<sup>18</sup> Of the eighty or so pilots licensed by the Limerick Harbour Commission at this time records show that at least seven of the twelve tenants of Scatterry Island were members of the western division.<sup>19</sup>

At this time pilots used the traditional boat of the island, the currach, to board ships which required piloting. Scatterry Islanders were renowned currach handlers with both men's and women's crews regular winners in the regional currach racing championships that were held in later years.<sup>20</sup> While the islanders used the traditional two and three man currachs for fishing and transport specially constructed four-man canoes were used by the pilots when boarding ships.<sup>21</sup> Boat piloting on the Shannon required a lengthy apprenticeship and was an occupation that was handed down from father to son making it very likely that many more Scatterry islanders were engaged in this work and that a significant proportion of the households on Scatterry were earning cash income from piloting boats on the Shannon at this time.<sup>22</sup>

Fishing played an important role in Scatterry's economy. In 1862 the Select Commission on Fisheries (Ireland) Bill report indicated that there were a total of eight fixed engines being operated on Scatterry Island for salmon. This consisted of two stake weirs and two flynets, one each on the west and north-west of the island, and four bag nets, with one on the west of the island and the remaining three on the north-west side.<sup>23</sup> Records show that in 1862 these weirs were being operated by Denis McAuliffe, John Comyns and Frank Connell who leased the fishing rights from tenants of Scatterry

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Steele, *Practical Suggestions on the General Improvement of the Navigation of the Shannon Between Limerick and the Atlantic: And More Particularly on the Part of it Named by Pilots the Narrows: With Some Remarks Intended to Create a Doubt of the Fairness of Not* (London, 1828) p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Scanlon, *Inhabitants of Scatterry*, p. 56.

<sup>17</sup> *Abstract Return of Bye-Laws and Regulations Relating to Pilots and Pilotage*, H.C., 1854-55 (516) xlvi.481 (Hereafter *Abstract Relating to Pilots and Pilotage*, 1854-55).

<sup>18</sup> Tom Cunliffe, *Pilots: The World of Pilotage Under Sail and Oar. Volume 2: Schooners and open Boats of the European Pilots and Watermen* (Kent, 2002) p. 335.

<sup>19</sup> *Griffith's Valuation 1855; Abstract Relating to Pilots and Pilotage*, 1854-55.

<sup>20</sup> *Irish Times*, 'Kilrush Regatta' 1 August 1931; *Irish Press*, 'Kilrush Regatta', 17 August 1936; *Irish Times*, 'Currach Crews get Trophies from Taoiseach', 9 September 1957; *Irish Times*, 'Large Sums Wagered at Currach Races', 7 September 1959.

<sup>21</sup> Críostóir MacCárthaigh, *Traditional Boats of Ireland: History, Folklore and Construction* (Cork, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> HC, *Select Committee on Pilotage*. In his evidence to the Select Committee Scatterry pilot Patrick Brennan stated that apprentices must serve 'four years in the Shannon, and four years going to sea to learn the management and handling of a vessel'. He also concurred with the committee member Dr Fox's observation that 'pilotage on the lower Shannon is confined to certain families.... that the pilots go from father to son'.

<sup>23</sup> *Index to the Report from the Select Committee on the Fisheries (Ireland) Bill*, H.C., 1862 (360) ix.289, 360-1. (Hereafter H.C., 1862 (360) ix.289, 360-1).

Island.<sup>24</sup> Denis McAuliffe leased rights from Patrick Brennan, Michael Scanlon and Michael Griffin for £5 each per year while Francis Connell leased rights from John Melican for £5 per year and from Jeremiah Hehir for £10 per year.<sup>25</sup> While the revenue obtained from the lease of these fishing rights provided a valuable cash income to the relevant islanders it can be further supposed that, as the owners of the weirs were the owners of other such weirs throughout County Clare, they most likely employed people from Scattery to operate the Scattery weirs.

It is perhaps not difficult then to understand why Scattery Island's population increased in the post-Famine period of the nineteenth-century. Contemporary reports indicated an island with arable, fertile soil, well stocked with livestock and small game. Tenants' leases gave them rights to 'cut, gather and save sea-weed upon the shore for manure'<sup>26</sup> a privilege which was much coveted among farmers in Ireland at this time.<sup>27</sup> Records indicated that the land on Scattery was among some of the best in the Union of Kilmursh and the island was well supplied with fresh water from the eight clean spring wells that were situated on the island.<sup>28</sup> In 1869 a school was established on the island consisting of a substantial stone building almost 23 feet long by 18 feet wide and with a thatch roof.<sup>29</sup> Children paid one penny per week to attend and a contemporary report noted that there were fifty-three children on the school's register at this time, with a further increase of ten more envisaged.<sup>30</sup> Census returns for the island indicated a balanced demographic profile with many young families living on the island. While limited in many ways by its physical location the island economy appears to have had a stable source of cash income from boat piloting while fishing also contributed to the island economy. Overall, Scattery Island had a diverse and varied economic and social structure at this time and the careful and determined exploitation of the island's natural resources by the island's inhabitants bore many similarities with Aalen & Brody's and Royle's accounts of life on other offshore Irish islands.

#### Consolidation in the twentieth-century

At the start of the twentieth century Scattery Island's population was much the same as it had been throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. While the numbers actually declined, from 141 in 1881 to 96 in 1901, this was largely accounted for by the closure of the gun battery on the island and the subsequent exodus of the soldiers and their families.<sup>31</sup> This sudden 32% decline illustrated the susceptibility of small-scale communities to random events demonstrating the difficulties encountered by the historian when comparing local and national trends and the potential pitfalls when contextualising the experiences of small-scale communities.

By 1901 the population of Scattery Island consisted of fifty-three males (55%) and forty-three females (45%). At this time the island had eighteen houses, all of which had

<sup>24</sup> H.C., 1862 (360) ix 289, 360-1, p.125.

<sup>25</sup> Salmon Fisheries (Ireland) 'Nominal Return of Every Salmon Fishery in Ireland and the Poor Law Valuation of Each', H.C., 1862 (227), viii.

<sup>26</sup> 'Landed Estates', Court Rentals (O'Brien), 7 Nov 1865 Marrett (N.A.I., MRGS, 39/038, Vol.78 (70)).

<sup>27</sup> Henry Coulter, *The West of Ireland: Its Existing Conditions and Prospects* (Dublin, 1862) p. 53 (hereafter, Coulter, *The West of Ireland*).

<sup>28</sup> Scanlan, *Memories of an Islander*, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Report Upon Application for Aid Towards Payment of Teacher's Salary, and for Supply of Books, Scattery School in the County of Clare, 1869 (N.A.I., ED 1/11/108).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Scanlon, *Inhabitants of Scattery*, p. 8.

solid walls and thatched rooves with the exception of houses numbered one, two and sixteen which were probably slated.<sup>32</sup> Most of the houses had between two to four rooms, with two to three windows at the front, all suggesting a large degree of uniformity and equality in the islanders' homes. All of the houses on the island at this time were family homes with the exception of number 21 which was occupied by Sinon Mahoney and two boarders, all of whom were listed as fishermen.

When one examines the demographic trends on the island at this time a clear pattern begins to emerge with regard to the age profile of the islanders. In 1901 almost 43% of Scattery's population were eighteen years of age or less, with 61% under thirty years of age. Just 7% of the population at this time were sixty-five or older making Scattery an island of young families, a fact underlined by the 32% of those recorded in this census as scholars. However Scattery Island's demographic profile at this time was not unique. Peig Sayers had noted that further south on the Great Blasket the young people were marrying and settling down while 'fourteen cradles rocked infants' on an island of 145 inhabitants.<sup>33</sup> On Gola, too, a similar profile existed with almost 51% of the island's inhabitants eighteen years of age or less in 1901.<sup>34</sup> Of the fourteen matrimonial households on Scattery Island at this time however, just four of these families were still of a reasonable child-bearing age and had produced offspring in the previous three years. A further three of the island's households comprised siblings living together. It could be argued that Scattery Island was a place of maturing families in 1901 and while there was abundance of potential marriages among the island's inhabitants it must be noted that at this time less than 30% of females of a reasonable child bearing age (17-40 years of age) were married.

Farming, sailing and boat piloting were the main sources of employment for the islanders at this time (Fig. 2). If one included fishing and lighthouse-keeping then almost all of the islanders main sources of cash income came from the sea. With regard to boat piloting it is interesting to note that of the eighteen heads of households that were listed seven had that as their main occupation. In total eight people on the island listed their main occupation as pilot and no less than five of those listed farming as a secondary occupation. In his 1888 statement to the Select Committee on Pilotage Patrick Brennan had noted the reduction in income earned by the pilots of the western division.<sup>35</sup> He argued that the commercial use of larger boats had not been matched by increased pilotage fees and as a result average pilot income had dropped from around £50 per year in 1878 to an average of £29 by 1888, forcing many western pilots to engage in secondary activities to supplement their incomes. Royle has argued that this sort of 'occupational pluralism' was a feature of insular life with the small scale of the island economies requiring a wider skill set among inhabitants than that of the mainland.<sup>36</sup> Towards the end of the nineteenth century the Limerick Harbour Commission established a pilot station on the island.<sup>37</sup> Despite this records show that by 1907 the number of Shannon pilots had been reduced to twenty-nine, with just fifteen western division pilots, who now averaged

<sup>32</sup> *Census of Ireland 1901*, Scattery Island.

<sup>33</sup> Peig Sayers, *The Autobiography of Peig Sayers of the Great Blasket Island* (Dublin, 1974), p. 170 (hereafter Sayers, *Great Blasket*).

<sup>34</sup> CSO, CNA17; CSO, Ireland, 1901.

<sup>35</sup> HC, *Select Committee on Pilotage*, p. 219.

<sup>36</sup> Royle, *Periphery of the Periphery*, p. 39.

<sup>37</sup> Scanlan, *Memories of an Islander*, p. 41.

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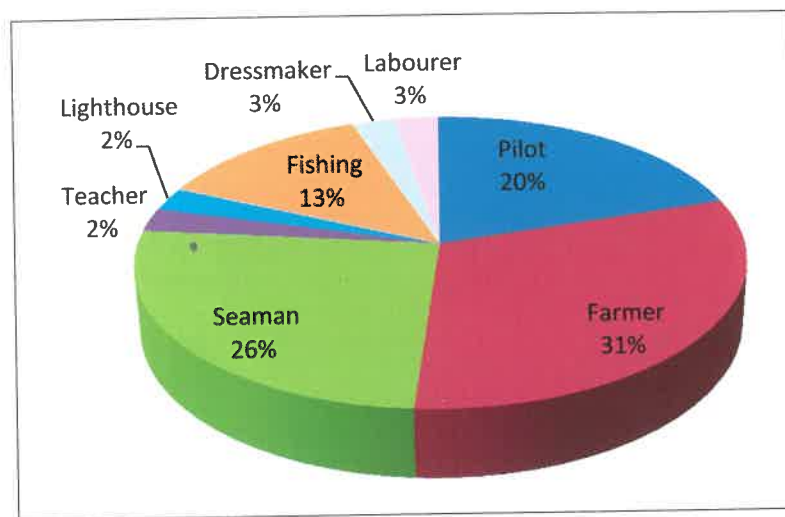


Fig. 2 Occupations, Scattery Islanders, 1901 (Census of Ireland, 1901).

£64 10s per year with earnings remaining steady over the next few years.<sup>38</sup> As we can also see from Fig. 2 above, fishing provided an occupation for five people on the island at this time. Despite the closure of the weirs on the the west side of the island in 1864 the island's landlord, Marcus Keane, had successfully reapplied for a licence to erect weirs on the island in 1879. Initially leased out to Daniel Molony, the weirs were taken back under control of Marcus Keane in 1889.<sup>39</sup> The weirs consisted of three stake nets of 138, 300 and 525 yards long respectively and had a valuation of £60 per year in 1896.<sup>40</sup>

The sequential nature of the 1901 and 1911 census returns enabled a glimpse at the short-term changes that occurred in Scattery Island's community within this period. Figures show that at this time the population of the island enjoyed a small increase, from ninety-six to one hundred people, while the gender ratio remained almost identical.<sup>41</sup> This period was, demographically, the most stable in the island's post-Famine history with little variation in the quarter-century after the 1901 census, and only a minor adjustment from 1926 to 1936.

With regards to the demographic breakdown of the island at this time, by 1911 the demographic stability that had been noted earlier was still evident and the island's profile was still primarily dominated by young people; 42% of the population were under eighteen years of age, with 62% under the age of thirty. In comparison with the 1901 census returns, the number of people listed as scholars had fallen from 32% to 22%. Of the fifteen matrimonial households on the island, eleven were of childbearing ages and the majority had produced children in the previous couple of years. It appears that the potential for marriages, which had been noted in 1901, had been translated into numerous young families and, in comparison with the 1901 figure of just 30% of marriage for

<sup>38</sup> *Abstract Returns Relating to Pilots and Pilotage in the U.K., Port of Limerick, H.C., 1910-1912 (247) lxl.1., pp 237-42 (hereafter H.C., 1910-1912 (247) lxl.1.).*

<sup>39</sup> *Valuation Revision Books, Scattery (1890-1896), p. 192.*

<sup>40</sup> *Valuation Revision Books, Union of Kilrush, Scattery Island (1896-1911), p. 60.*

<sup>41</sup> *Census of Ireland 1911.*

females of child-bearing age (17-40), the figure in 1911 now stood at a healthy 62.5%. It was this group who were ensuring that the demographic profile of the island was remaining young.

Further analysis of females in the key 17-40 year old group reveals that of the twelve Scattery women who were of child-bearing age, but unmarried, in 1901 just four of them had married and remained on the island in the intervening period. All of them had married Scattery men and research to date has failed to uncover any instances of Scattery women marrying non-island men but remaining on the island.<sup>42</sup> A further seven (58%) of this group were not listed on the island in 1911 and it would be safe to assume that many of those not listed had emigrated.<sup>43</sup>

With regards to males in this same 17-40 category in 1901 this cohort had contained a similar number of males with an identical instance of non-marriage. By 1911 however, of the twelve unmarried males in 1901 seven had succeeded in marrying while just two (16%) were no longer listed. While three of these had married Scattery Island women, more significantly, four had married non-island women. Scanlan noted that in this period many women came to the island having married Scattery men, adapting very well to the island life and its customs.<sup>44</sup> While the lack of any reciprocal marriages, i.e. non-island men marrying Scattery women and coming to live on the island, may simply have reflected economic imperatives it is also conceivable that the subordinate status of women in rural Ireland was also a factor. With regard to employment, we can see from Fig. 3 below that the percentage of islanders who listed farming as their primary occupation had risen from 31% in 1901 to 39% in 1911. Records show that the island continued to be subdivided into the same fifteen plots that had been apparent in 1855, indicating stability of holdings.<sup>45</sup> The majority of land was still leased by the same families, although in many instances the names on the leases had changed to reflect generational changes that had occurred in land tenancy. With regards to the numbers boat piloting, the traditional occupation of Scattery men, this had increased from 19% in 1901 to 23% in 1911. In real terms the number of pilots had risen from eight in 1901 to a total of eleven in 1911, although four of those listed piloting as their secondary occupation after that of farmer. Records show that in the years from 1907 to 1911 the gross amount received for inward pilotage on the Shannon had remained stable at £1,161 and £1,154 respectively, while pilots wages had, likewise, remained stable at £64 6s and £62 11s per year.<sup>46</sup>

The sequential nature of the 1901 and 1911 censuses made it possible to examine the demographic and social changes that occurred on Scattery Island in this period. Analysis suggested that the population remained stable, regulated by effective systems of succession and marriage which, combined with emigration, ensured that the population stayed at appropriate levels. Social norms were flexible, and marriages between island men and non-island women were as popular as inter-islander marriages.

The demographic profile on the island was predominantly young and by 1911 many of the potential marriages noted in 1901 had been translated into matrimonial households

<sup>42</sup> Annie Scanlan married William Moran but Moran was not listed in the 1901 census on Scattery so was therefore not part of the 17-40 male cohort analysis.

<sup>43</sup> CSO, *Census of Ireland, 1901 & 1911*. Interestingly, the four Scattery Island girls who married Scattery men between 1901 & 1911 were four of the youngest in this 17-40 year old category. One would therefore be cautious of Margaret Moran's marriage prospects in 1911 as she was now 28 years 'old' and unmarried.

<sup>44</sup> Scanlan, *Memories of an Islander*, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> *Valuation Revision Books, Union of Kilrush, Scattery Island (1896-1911)*, pp 57-61.

<sup>46</sup> H.C., 1910-1912 (247) lxl,1, pp 240-1.

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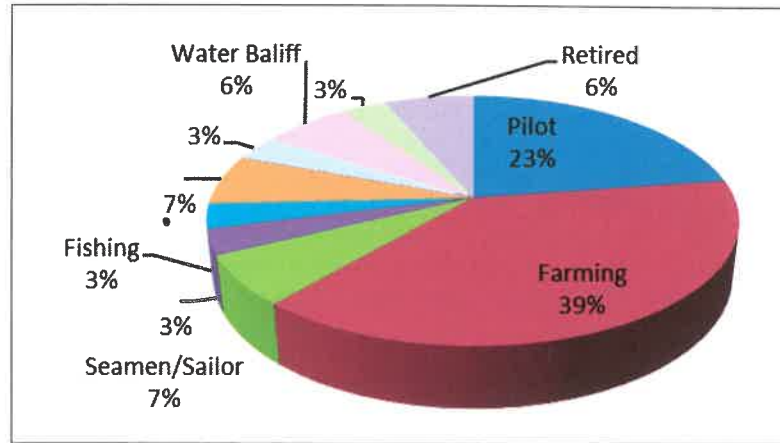


Fig. 3 Occupations, Scattery Islanders, 1911 (Census of Ireland, 1911).

with young children. The favourable agricultural environment of the island continued to be supported by the primary source of cash income, boat piloting, and the numbers of Scattery men learning this trade from their fathers was increasing. The positive economic climate had translated into better living standards for the islanders as housing conditions improved and a considerable amount of building work had been undertaken.

#### Modernity and Decline: 1936-1979

While Scattery Island's population had declined to eighty-four by 1936 this did not represent a significant reduction in a community that had remained steady for the previous thirty-five years.<sup>47</sup> Records show that at this time the numbers of schoolchildren on the island had increased, from eighteen in 1925, to highs of over thirty pupils in the early 1930s<sup>48</sup> and Don Scanlan fondly recalled the 'laughter and joy' on the island in this period.<sup>49</sup> However what the population reduction that was recorded in 1936 did represent was the beginning of an inexorable decline that would only end in 1979 when the island was listed as deserted. From 1951 onwards, Scattery Island had reached minimum threshold and depopulation had become inevitable. This marked the end of a period when many of the traditional avenues of employment had been moved away from the island and the school had been closed making family life on the island far more difficult for those with children of a school-going age. This also coincided with a period when standards of living in nearby Kilrush had improved considerably.

On 27 October 1932 the Commissioner of Irish Lights converted the lighthouse from oil to an acetylene system making the position of principal lighthouse keeper on the island redundant.<sup>50</sup> Records show that from 1919 onwards the lighthouse had been served by successive principal keepers who lived on the island with their families and who had always integrated into island life.<sup>51</sup> Principal keepers were considered important mem-

<sup>47</sup> CSO, CNA17.

<sup>48</sup> 'Schoolchildren Scattery Island c. 1925-1948', Personal Correspondence, Senan Scanlon.

<sup>49</sup> Scanlan, *Memories of an Islander*, p. 36; *Irish Press*, 'Kilrush Regatta', 17 August 1936.

<sup>50</sup> Michael Costoloe, 'Scattery Island-Inis Cathaigh', Courtesy of the Commissioner for Irish Lights, 2002.

<sup>51</sup> Scanlan, *Memories of an Islander*, p. 44.

bers of any community and the job entailed various privileges such as fuel, travel and medical allowances which conveyed a certain status on the keeper and would have meant occasional work for the island's currachs.<sup>52</sup> The automation of the light marked the end of the presence of lighthouse keepers on the island for the first time since 1872 and, while the job of maintaining the light would pass to island residents, this event was only the first over the next thirty years which would see Scattery lose much of the status and employment that had been linked to its strategic geographical location.

Salmon fishing, which had been a traditional source of employment on the island since the nineteenth-century, was another casualty of modernisation in this period. In 1929 the ESB opened the Ardnacrusha hydro-electric generating plant on the river Shannon and according to the historian Louis Cullen its output was instrumental in rectifying the 'serious lag in electrification' that existed in Ireland at this time.<sup>53</sup> The presence of Ardnacrusha may have remedied the problem of electricity shortages but it also had an effect on the numbers of salmon in the catchment area of the Shannon and Cusack has argued that in the seventy-five years since the inauguration of the hydro-electric plant stocks of salmon have fallen by up to 50%.<sup>54</sup> Under the terms of the 1935 Shannon Fishery Act the ESB took over and abolished the salmon weirs on the west coast of Scattery Island and, despite the fact that the 1935 act made provisions for compensation, it resulted in the loss of employment to three Scattery Island men.<sup>55</sup> While this number is small it takes on extra significance in the context of the small scale community that existed on Scattery Island and represented the sudden and immediate closure of an indigenous industry that had been almost continuously present on the island since its post-Famine history began.

In 1948 the island's school closed forcing any island families with children of school going age to arrange for schooling in Kilrush. The school on Scattery had been purpose built in 1896, replacing the old school which had been located in space rented from one of the islanders.<sup>56</sup> While the early years of the school had been marked with frequent changes in the teaching staff, in 1935 Nora Culligan was appointed principal and would hold that position until the school closed in 1948.<sup>57</sup> Records show that it was around this time that the number of children attending school on the island started to decline, from a high of thirty-three in 1933, to just nine in 1943, reflecting the changing demographic profile of the island at this time. Culligan's salary was, apparently, linked to the numbers of pupils enrolled in the school, numbers which had declined on four successive occasions since 1940.<sup>58</sup> In later years many islanders were to claim that not enough was done by official sources to prevent the decline of the island community on Scattery and any policy which inextricably linked the provision of education services on the island to the number of pupils was surely evidence of this. The closing of the school led to the immediate departure of two island families with young children, those of Stephen Brennan and Simon Scanlan.<sup>59</sup> While some of the island's inhabitants attempted to manage the withdrawal of

<sup>52</sup> Personal Correspondence.

<sup>53</sup> Louis Cullen, *An Economic History of Ireland since 1660* (Dublin, 1972) pp 173-5.

<sup>54</sup> Eamon Cusack, 'Submission to the Joint Committee on Communications, Marine & Natural Resources: Commercial Salmon fishing and Salmon Angling', The Shannon Regional Fisheries Board (2003).

<sup>55</sup> Scanlan, *Memories of an Islander*, p. 14.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Anonymous source, 'Scattery Island Memories', courtesy of Eve Brennan (hereafter Anonymous, 'Scattery Island Memories').

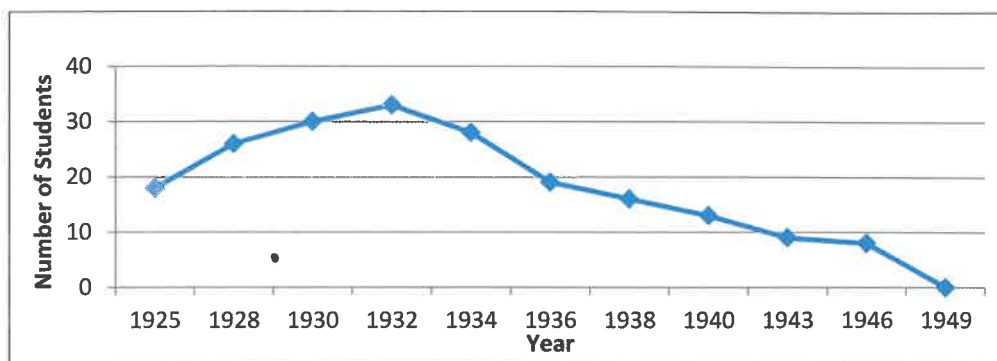


Fig.4 Estimate of Schoolchildren, Scattery Island 1925-49 (Senan Scanlon).

educational services by sending schoolchildren to board with mainland relatives during term, the closure of the school nonetheless represented a major milestone in the decline of Scattery Island's community.<sup>60</sup> Stephen Royle has argued that the loss of an island community's school is an 'acknowledgement that an island has no future' and in the case of the Copeland Islands the closure of the school preceded the island's depopulation by around twenty-years. Records show that this timescale was almost identical in the case of Scattery Island with no families, and just three people still resident, by 1966.<sup>61</sup>

Boat piloting which had been the main source of stable cash income for many islanders since the post-Famine period also began to decline in this period. Don Scanlan recalled that there were nine Scattery pilots based at the island station from 1925 to 1939 and, although he estimated the number of ships that travelled to Limerick as upwards of one thousand per year,<sup>62</sup> pilotage returns from this period indicate that this figure was considerably less than that.<sup>63</sup> While the pre-war years saw sufficient traffic on the Shannon to provide pilots with a decent wage the years 1940-5 saw a serious reduction in shipping to Limerick. Records show that in the years from 1927 to 1939 pilots earned an average of £182, 10s per year, with a high of £227 in 1934 and a low of £123 in 1940 just as the effects of World War II were beginning to become apparent.<sup>64</sup> As we can see from Fig. 5 the inter-war years meant that shipping on the Shannon came to a virtual standstill and it wasn't until 1948 that shipping began to return to pre-war levels and pilots started to earn something like what they had in the 1930s. Don Scanlan showed that the war had another unfortunate effect on Scattery Island's community, listing the names of twelve Scattery men who lost their lives on ships that were sunk during the war. As he quite correctly noted, 'it was a heavy loss from a small island'.<sup>65</sup>

As has already been illustrated, shipping on the Shannon recovered after 1945, no doubt due to the post-war economic revival which saw Ireland's economy expand at a greater rate than Britain's, but within a few years the island community of Scattery received another blow with the news that the Limerick Harbour Commission were to relocate the pilot station on Scattery to nearby Cappa harbour on the mainland in

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

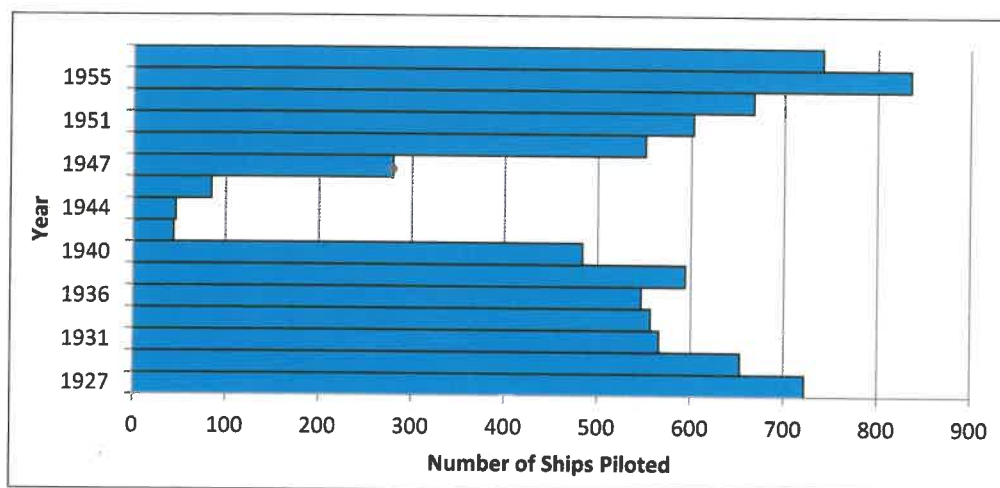
<sup>61</sup> CSO, CNA17.

<sup>62</sup> Scanlan, *Memories of an Islander*, pp 42-3.

<sup>63</sup> Abstract Returns Relating to Pilotage, 1925-1943, (N.A.I., TSCH/3/S7379A).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Scanlan, *Memories of an Islander*, p. 66.



**Fig. 5** Number of ships piloted on the Shannon 1925-56  
(N.A.I. Abstract of Pilotage Returns, 1925-56)

Kilrush.<sup>66</sup> In 1952 a new diesel powered pilot boat *Patricia* was commissioned from Arklow shipbuilders Tyrell's and by April 1953 it had replaced the currachs that had served the western pilots for more than 100 years.<sup>67</sup> While the Scatterry pilots mounted an initial campaign of resistance to this change census estimates from 1956 show that by this time just four pilots remained on the island.<sup>68</sup> Sources also indicate that by this time some of the pilots who worked from the station on Scatterry Island were already living on the mainland in Cappa meaning that opposition to the relocation was confined to those few pilots who still lived on the island.<sup>69</sup>

If we examine the demographic profile of Scatterry Island in 1956 it becomes apparent that the population structure that was evident throughout the nineteenth, and the early twentieth centuries, had changed dramatically. While earlier periods indicated a demographic profile that was heavily weighted in favour of young people, especially those under the age of eighteen, by 1956 there was only one person in this age group living on Scatterry Island. While this no doubt reflected the lack of educational services on the island it meant that it had changed from an island of predominantly young people, with thirty-three schoolchildren in 1932, to one with an ageing population. Of the ten households on the island at this time just four were matrimonial households, with none of the married women of childbearing age. Therefore the possibility of more children being born on the island was becoming more and more remote. If one looks at the age profile of the island at this time we can see that the average age of the islanders has increased significantly from that of earlier censuses. While the average age of Scatterry Islanders was 25.96 and 27.39 in 1901 and 1911 respectively, by 1956 it had increased to 42.2 years.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Cullen, *Economic History of Ireland*, p. 181.

<sup>67</sup> *Irish Independent*, 'New Pilot Boat has Arrived', 9 May 1953; *Irish Press*, 'Pilots (Sea) Invited to Air their Grievances', 6 June 1953.

<sup>68</sup> 'Census estimate for Scatterry Island, 1956', courtesy of Senan and John Scanlon (hereafter 'Census, Scatterry, 1956').

<sup>69</sup> Anonymous, 'Scatterry Island Memories'.

<sup>70</sup> *Census Ireland, 1901*; *Census Ireland, 1911*; 'Census, Scatterry, 1956'.

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<sup>71</sup> 'Census, Scat

<sup>72</sup> Scanlan, *Men*

<sup>73</sup> Sayers, *Grea*

<sup>74</sup> Scanlan, *Men*

With regard to employment, by 1956 there were just four active pilots living on the island, none of whom were listed as having dual occupations.<sup>71</sup> It appeared that by this time no pilots worked on the family properties. The ageing profile of the island was also illustrated by the fact that at this time there were almost as many retired pilots living on the island as there were active ones. Farming, which had provided employment for 40% of the islanders in 1911, was now only listed as an occupation for about 7% of the people. Don Scanlan had noted that by 1945 properties on Scattery Island that came up for auction were now being left unsold and while records once showed great demand for island properties now there was little interest in them from any party.<sup>72</sup>

### Conclusion

Scattery Island was home to a small maritime community from the post-Famine period of 1850 up until its depopulation in 1978. This study examined the experiences of the island community itself in this period and set them within the context of other similar island communities, its local mainland urban area Kilrush as well as the wider regional and national experience. The study found that, like other small Irish offshore island communities, Scattery Island resisted many of the demographic, social and economic changes that occurred in Ireland during the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. However from the 1930s onwards modernisation led to a decline in the traditional occupations of the islanders and this, together with service withdrawal and the significant improvement in the social conditions in local Kilrush, precipitated the steady decline of the island's population until it was finally abandoned in 1978.

If we examine the reasons for the growth and consolidation of Scattery Island's community from 1850 to 1936 it becomes apparent that there were a number of social and economic factors which, along with the natural resources of the island's physical location, combined to create a favourable climate for the island's community to prosper. The island itself consisted of very fertile ground, well stocked with wildlife and small game, and its marine location provided it with a natural and easily accessible source of seaweed fertiliser, as well as salmon and shellfish. Peig Sayers recalled the independence of island communities noting that 'with the harvest of the sea the people had sufficient food of their own'.<sup>73</sup> The island also had an abundant water supply and turf was cut, from the small bog on the south of the island near the battery, to supplement what was brought to the island.<sup>74</sup> Insular life also meant that the islanders had great knowledge of the sea in general, and especially of local currents, tides and shipping lanes, and they used this knowledge to secure work as sailors, seamen and boat pilots. Sailing was mainly the occupation of the younger Scattery men and when they had served their time at sea many returned and were trained alongside their fathers and brothers in the main island occupation of piloting. While this occupation provided a steady and reliable source of cash income throughout the modern history of the island it was also a position of responsibility and status which instilled great pride in those who did it.

As well as the natural resources and occupations of the island there were informal social norms which contributed to the demographic stability and growth of the community at this time. Like the rest of Ireland, Scattery Island's community in this period was

<sup>71</sup> 'Census, Scattery, 1956'.

<sup>72</sup> Scanlan, *Memories of an Islander*, pp 36-7.

<sup>73</sup> Sayers, *Great Blasket*, p. 170.

<sup>74</sup> Scanlan, *Memories of an Islander*, pp 7-17.

also characterised by trends towards later age at, and lower instances of, marriage, though with high rates of fertility within marriage.<sup>75</sup> Along with visible patterns of succession in island properties, these practices regulated the island community's numbers ensuring that only a small number of the island's children were ever in a position to marry and remain on the island. Emigration, together with the occupation of sailing which entailed long periods at sea, ensured that those who could not remain on the island made a life elsewhere and that the island community never outgrew the island.

From the 1930s onwards a series of events occurred which made life on Scattery Island untenable for the small community still there. Modernisation led to the closing of the salmon weirs that had provided employment for a small number of islanders and to the automation of the lighthouse which had been on the island since 1872. World War II led to an interruption in the shipping on the Shannon during the war years, and although this would resume in the late 1940s a great many Scattery sailors were compelled to go to sea in this period and never returned. By 1948 the demographic structure of the island had changed dramatically. Cross has argued that the depopulation of Ireland's offshore islands has 'been linked to problems of service deprivation'.<sup>76</sup> While at one time there had been up to sixty children on the island, by 1948 there was not even enough to warrant opening the island school, resulting in the loss of that key island service.

Reports show that by 1948 the island was still without a telephone connection<sup>77</sup> while it had only just had its letter box installed in the 1930s.<sup>78</sup> This lack of service provision and the closure of the school meant that in this period the community on Scattery reached minimum threshold where its long-term future was no longer viable. In 1953 the pilot station was moved from the island to nearby Cappa and while sources indicate that this was not an insurmountable problem, it nonetheless added another complication to the lives of those remaining on the island. While records show that the island was officially deserted by 1979 the previous two census returns in 1971 and 1966 listed just two and three inhabitants respectively meaning that by the mid-1960s Scattery Island had effectively ceased to exist as a home to a community.

<sup>75</sup> Kennedy, *The Irish*, pp 173-5.

<sup>76</sup> M.D. Cross, 'Service Availability and Development among Ireland's Island Communities- The Implications for Population Stability', in *Irish Geography*, vol. xxix, issue 1 (1996) pp 13-26.

<sup>77</sup> *Clare Champion*, 24 January 1948.

<sup>78</sup> Scanlan, *Memories of an Islander*, pp 16-17.