

Traveller Friends

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Edited and Introduced by Micheal Ó hAodha
with Photographs and Words by Paul Harrison

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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Paul Harrison, Co. Tipperary. August 2009.

FOREWORD

JOHN LONERGAN

It is a pleasure to write the foreword for this most amazing and very special photographic collection of proud travelling people. Every photo and every face tells its own story. Paul Harrison has done a brilliant job by capturing through the lens of his camera so many different features of the travelling community along with highlighting their interests and traditions. The end product is indeed a work of art and confirms once again the power and magic of the photograph - that once-off moment in time recorded forever.

This publication will not alone prove to be a most valuable and treasured collection for the travelling community but it will also help to inform and perhaps even educate members of the wider community to have a better insight, understanding and appreciation of the unique culture and lifestyles of the travelling community. A community of people who are Irish through and through and who are entitled to be fully integrated in the broader community with equal rights and opportunities.

A number of the photographs feature children at various stages of their childhood and the reader can almost feel their great sense of freedom, enjoyment and adventure as it emanates from the photos. All appear to be healthy, happy and contented young people with huge potential. This also raises a very important question, which is: do all children born into the travelling community have the opportunity to grow and develop to their full potential on the same basis as their peers in the wider community? Their current reality is a long way short of this target.

The circumstances of birth must never decide the future prospects of any child. If cherishing all the children of the nation equally means anything at all it means that all children have the right to grow and develop to their full potential. Of course, to achieve this they must have open access to all services and supports, for example, decent living accommodation, high quality health and welfare services, all levels of education, work and training, recreation activities and basic equality in all other spheres of life.

All such services and facilities must be seen as basic human rights issues and not favours or gestures. Until we treat our minority groups with respect and dignity we should not expect them to respect us.

As a society we have failed the travelling community in many ways, we have failed to provide them with adequate living accommodation, we have failed to provide them with the levels of care and services that they are fully entitled to as ordinary citizens of society and we have, in many instances, continued to isolate and ostracise them from main-stream society.

The big challenge now is to integrate the travelling community into society while at the same time fully respecting their unique culture and quite different lifestyles. An essential first step in this process is for both sides to get to know each other and to clearly understand the issues involved. We must start on the basis that all people are equal and all have the same rights as citizens. We must support and encourage the travelling community in this process and we must fully accept their right to choose. Change can only occur through dialogue and by agreement and we must not try to force society's solutions on minority groups. I suggest the philosophy attributed to Lao Tsu, China, way back in 700 B.C. as a good model for this process.

Go to the People
Live with them,
Love them.
Start with what they know.
Build with what they have.

But with the best leaders
When the work is done
The task accomplished
The people will say,
"We have done this ourselves".

John Lonergan
Governor, Mountjoy Prison, Dublin.
August 2009.

AN INTRODUCTION TO PAUL HARRISON'S ART

The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.¹

—Guy Debord

The late-twentieth century has witnessed a particular prominence assigned to the discourses of “difference” and “Otherness”. An examination of this “othering” discourse as related to the Irish Travellers, enumerates the projective function of the “Othering” process, a form of rejection and marginalisation that is the institutionalisation of ideas and images which are seldom challenged. The history of Traveller and Gypsy “Othering” in Europe points to the constant re-articulation of reductionist stereotypes as applied to a wide range of nomadic peoples and the creation of a mythic Traveller/Gypsy prototype that is based on a series of endlessly repeated generalisations which gradually assume the status of an objective “truth”. This discourse of representation has culminated in powerful institutional attitudes, many of which have influenced official and policy responses to these minorities. This book is, in part, a response to this cycle of negativity and rejection. The “Othering” tradition in an Irish context is more complex than most. It relates to a definition of Irishness that accompanied independence, a construction that was monologic. A history that was unitary or homogenous in nature served the demands of a postcolonial nation where history itself was both an adaptive mechanism and a form of legitimation. The consequences of this exclusion of the Other, including Irish Travellers from this homogeneous and constructed definition of Irishness are only now being seen for what they are. A teleological version of Irish history served to exclude Travellers and other marginal groups and simply replicated essentialist and reductionist views of the Irish as represented under colonialism. One form of “Othering” replaced another and the “hidden histories” of other cultures and minorities was hidden away, shunted to the margins. Thankfully, the discourse is finally changing. We currently live in the era of “difference”, the era of the migrant or “stranger” who waits patiently at the border and the empty train station, bag in hand. Travellers are the archetypal migrants. Long

¹ Guy Debord cited in N. Mirzoeff *The Visual Culture Reader* (1998, 142).

considered as “outsiders” or “strangers” in their own country, the Travellers are a group who have lived on Irish society's margins for hundreds of years. Their marginality, liminality – call it what you will – has both attracted and repelled the non-Traveller artist, be he/she a writer or a visual artist. This fascination came into its own in the Irish literary sphere from the nineteenth century onwards. One need only think of writers as diverse and well-known as J. M. Synge, W. B. Yeats, Pádraic Ó Conaire, James Stephens, Liam O'Flaherty, John B. Keane, Bryan MacMahon, Jennifer Johnston and Richard Murphy, all of whom employed Traveller characters and Traveller tropes, the vast majority of which have usually been made fit a generic image. This image, a frequent mirror-type of the colonial “stage Irishman”, has included that of the happy-go-lucky vagrant, the criminal, the drunk, the storyteller, the fighter and the outcast.

Paul Harrison is a different breed of artist. His photographs are post-modern in their essence because he breaks the established structures and categorisations. He shatters the mould in terms of visual art and the representation of an often-occluded Irish minority, the Irish Travellers, a community amongst whom he has made many friends throughout the years.

His representational studies are of the *Travellers...the migrants of the road...the often-nameless and placeless archetypal Other*. It is only in very recent years that this unique and “outsider” people have begun to achieve some acceptance, some sort of a welcome, some small level of parity of esteem within Irish social and cultural life. Paul Harrison's photographs of this community, a people who time and again have refused to bow to the assimilationist and homogenising pressures of the modern nation-state, are beautiful.

They are beautiful because they are arresting. They haunt the viewer after the first glance. They haunt the viewer because they make us pause in the mad helter-skelter of our day and ask ourselves some difficult questions about our society and our relationship with the “Other” in our midst. His photographs jettison all the trite words concerning modern multiculturalism, integration and respect for difference – respect for our fellow human beings... man, woman and child.

Paul Harrison's art makes us stop and think and no more powerful an accolade can be ascribed to a work of art than this. His work asks the uncomfortable questions that are suppressed in a modern world still frequently crippled by crises of identity.

His photographs are situated in a new post-modern space, that is between one place and the next, on one stopping point of the journey that is neither

here nor there, neither inside nor outside. His subjects – the Travellers – are where the power of his photography lies, a photographic oeuvre that eludes definition and whose only explanation is the shadow world of past and present.

His photos are representative of that new and exciting artistic consciousness that works at the border, on the very boundary where contradiction and challenge meet. He renews the past and refigures it in that contingent space that Homi Bhabha² defined as the third space, that special and “in-between” space that re-interrogates and re-imagines the present.

Paul Harrison’s lens generates a new interrogation and appreciation of the shattered fragments of a postcolonial people – an Irish people of past and present...a Travelling people...it is only through such an exploration that we can form the future in any real sense. His images...are like the wheel-tracks of the old barrel-top wagons in the earth...the forgotten mark of the horse’s hooves. His art uncovers images and voices...laughter and sadness long-forgotten. They are part of a new impulse in Irish artistic culture, a new consciousness...a new language in which to describe Irish culture and Irish society. His photographs speak for themselves. They are both far and near, here today and gone tomorrow. They compel us to break down barriers of the mind and soul and reconsider what it means to be Irish...European...what it means to be a true and decent human being. Paul Harrison’s achievement is the Travellers’ achievement. The achievement of his true friends.

Dr. M. Ó hAodha
Department of History,
University of Limerick.

² Bhabha, H. (1994) *The Location of Culture*.

AN INTERVIEW WITH PAUL HARRISON

Can you tell us a tiny bit about your background Paul – where you are from? What brought you to Ireland?

I'm an Englishman. My parents were English, Dad's from Shropshire and Mum's from Essex. I have worked in the film and TV business most of my life, mainly producing documentaries and TV news in places like Iraq, Somalia and Ethiopia. I produced a number of Corporate Videos, including one for Michael Smurfit about his huge organisation in the eighties. For that I travelled with a film crew throughout Europe and the USA as well as Ireland and England. Later I had my own TV production company based in London, producing documentaries and news stories for non-UK broadcasters, mainly North Americans and Germans. I had an Irish business partner and we had a full-time staff of 14 and about 60 freelancers. When we closed the company about ten years ago I went into a depression, which I wouldn't recommend to anyone, but it helped me to understand the Travellers and their situation. I had a stroke, too, caused through anxiety, which slowed me down so now I have to be careful not to get too anxious. I came over to Ireland in 2000 to stay with my business partner's old dad on the family farm in Achill. He was born in 1914. After two years up there I came down to Co. Tipperary, where I live and have made many friends.

How did you first become interested in photography, Paul?

My interest in photography started when Mum bought me a Kodak Brownie Cresta II camera for my sixth birthday. Great lump of black Bakelite plastic the size of a kilo packet of flour! Each roll of film would only take twelve photographs and there was no way you could look at them instantly like we can today. When I took a photo I might not see the result for weeks. And of course it was only in black and white. Mum taught me how to make a 'darkroom' in the bathroom and process the rolls of negative films and print photographs at home. With her encouragement my interest developed and when I left school I went to Watford Art College, then enrolled at Harrow School of Photography. In those days there were only three Photography schools in England: London,

Bournemouth and Harrow. It was a three-year full-time course and I went on to study film production on a course that ended up with a BA in cinematography.

What style of photography do you prefer?

I like photographing people in their own environment. If you see someone's environment you can understand so much more about them than if they are posing in a studio. I have had to do studio work but I prefer to see people being themselves naturally and not striving to manufacture an image. The photographer who influenced me most was a French guy called Henri Cartier-Bresson. His photographs are so simple. He seemed to have a way of catching people 'as they were'. Most photographers in his day used a huge camera almost the size of a microwave oven and often made of wood, brass and canvas, so the photographs were very posed. Sometimes you'd even have people seated using a little headrest at the back of their head to make sure the subject didn't move as the film needed a long exposure. Henri used the 'new' 35mm format and was able to take informal photographs without having to set things up with a huge tripod. He used to take unposed photographs of people in ordinary situations and was considered to be the father of modern photojournalism and the master of candid photography. He helped develop the "street photography" style that has influenced generations of photographers that followed. Another guy who impressed me was Don McCullin, an American photographer who made a name for himself taking photographs for *Time Magazine* in the Vietnam War. To take good photographs you do not necessarily need fancy equipment, you mainly need to 'be there' with a camera to record a situation when it happens. Of course it helps to have a keen eye to spot the occasion. Many memorable war photographs are not particularly good photographs technically, but they would not have been taken if the photographer had not taken the trouble to 'be there'! An eye for composition helps, and this is something that comes with training. It is important to have the subject at ease. To facilitate this, I sometimes let Travellers hold my camera and take photographs themselves. This levels us somewhat and removes some of the unhelpful unease and suspicion, which the sight of a camera can cause.

Can you give us some information about some of your previous projects and what you are working on at the moment?

Hmm... previous projects... in the sixties when I was in my teens I took a lot of photographs of bands. I photographed The Who smashing a TV screen on stage, which they did as part of their act. The bouncers made us all stand back a bit because of all the flying glass! You wouldn't be able to do it today because of the Health and Safety regulations. Lots of my mates seemed to be making music in those days although I'm no musician myself. I used to photograph friends who had bands, just for the experience and to get into dances for free! The first serious projects I worked on would have been about twenty five years ago in Ethiopia during the famine of summer 1984, making films and taking photographs. I came back and went out again at Christmas with Bob Geldof. I remember sitting on the end of his bed in his room in the Addis Hilton. He was lying sprawled out across the bed making phone calls. He was chatting very animatedly, telling someone "You've gotta help us, this situation is terrible, people are dying." Then he put the phone down and told me "Great! Stevie Wonder has agreed to play!" Bob was calling top musicians all over the world from his little black book to persuade them to take part in what became Live Aid! He met Mother Theresa there for the first time, too. She was leaving Addis airport as he was coming in. I arranged that through Fr. Kevin Doheny, a Holy Ghost priest friend of mine from Ballinalacken, Co. Kilkenny. Kevin knew Mother Theresa well and between them they managed to get Emperor Haile Selassie's daughters out of prison in Addis. They were real princesses, daughters of an emperor, and were imprisoned by President Mengistu. Kevin was a great guy. I travelled to many places in Africa and elsewhere making films with him and his brother Mike Doheny, who was one of the founders of Concern back in the days of the Biafran War in Nigeria in the 1960s. Kevin was a personal friend of author Frederick Forsyth who wrote *The Dogs of War* which mentions Kevin. They were giants of men, those missionary priests, they taught me an awful lot. In 1985 I published a book *News Out Of Africa* about my experiences making news in Africa. It became a recommended university course book but the news business has evolved a lot since then.

At the moment I am writing a book about my experiences in Ireland and the huge changes that I have witnessed over the last thirty years. It has taken a lot of research and there is still more to do. Travellers are central to the theme. I find them very inspirational. They are great people to be

with. My best mate in Ireland is a Traveller, Jim Ward from Athenry. I would trust him with my life.

I am also filming a pilot for a six-part documentary series on Irish Travellers. We have already filmed a lot of material and people are being very enthusiastic and encouraging. I spend a lot of time talking with old Travellers and eight of the people who I have interviewed on camera have since died. The history that these people hold in their heads... their memories... it's evaporating before our eyes! They couldn't read or write and they retained it all in their heads. The first episode is planned to be about the tradition of the King of the Travellers. There are lots of odd notions that people have about it, but it is a tradition that goes back a long way. The film will include old interviews and sequences of bare knuckle fighting in Ireland. It goes on all the time for one reason or another.

What are your interests/hobbies outside of photography?

My first love has to be sailing. I just love being out of sight of land, with just sea and sky... propelled by the wind and knowing that if I die at sea it is just my fault for not somehow connecting with the forces that are out there. I really feel alive and I especially love it when the weather is rough... at night! I know that may sound a bit nuts but the sense of all those forces of nature, the wind and the water surging around me, the stars above... it's a huge feeling. I feel the wildness of it will help me on my way to where I want to go, if I tune into it and work with it. Sailing is very sobering; you quickly learn not to fight the elements, but to work with them. I bought my first boat when I was 24 and used to sail to the northern French ports for weekends with pals. I did the Yacht Master's course so I felt confident enough with the seamanship and navigation. Although I am really crap at maths we always managed to arrive alive in the end! In 1979 I took part in a yacht race from Plymouth, England to Perth, Australia, with a stopover in Cape Town to take a rest and re-provision. It was a trip that took us through numerable gales and storms and one hurricane which blew us 450 nautical miles south of Cape Town... we just couldn't stop! And as we didn't have enough food to continue to Australia we had to go 450 NM back north to Cape Town. We were eating flying fish that we caught in the mainsail at night. They couldn't see the mainsail in the dark and would just go flying into it: splat! You could hear them slithering down, so in the morning when it was light I'd pick 'em up out off the cockpit floor, cut their heads and tails off, gut 'em, roll 'em up in flour and fry 'em in butter! They are very small, just the size of a sparrow. I would never make a master chef but we ate 'em anyway! Oddly enough, we had a

lot of butter and Flora-type artificial butter on board. When we crossed the Equator the Flora separated out and was inedible but the butter was fine. All our bread had gone blue and mouldy so we just used the butter for cooking. The eggs lasted forever too. Not many went bad. It took ten weeks at sea to get to Cape Town. My boss was paying me to make a film of the race and wanted me to come back and do some real work in the studio because he thought I had had enough of a holiday! He called me back to England from Cape Town so they replaced me with an Ozzie crew member. I never made it to Australia.

When I got back to Blighty I was back to sailing my own boat at weekends, which was much less exhilarating after the ocean and the hurricane but it was still great fun. I was lucky and my boss kinda understood when I was sometimes late for work when I was stuck out at sea with no wind. They just took it off my holidays! There were no mobile phones in those days and I didn't have the money for a VHF radio.

Later I sold the house and bought a bigger boat. I lived aboard with my wife and my five year old daughter for about two years. We sailed to France, down through the canals and came out into the Med. From there we sailed down to Rome, Italy. Clearly I love travelling! Who doesn't? Look at all the folk now who just can't wait to board an aeroplane to get the hell out of wherever they are and go somewhere else! It's natural.

I love ballooning. I first got my balloon pilot's license in 1976 when we flew a balloon sponsored by Japan Airlines. Hot air ballooning is so quiet and peaceful. In the summer we'd often be up before dawn at about four o'clock, drive to a take-off field, inflate the balloon at first light about five thirty, take off and fly till about seven in the morning, then we'd pack it all back into the trailer and dash back to be ready for a day's work at nine o'clock, feeling on top of the world!

I fly with Irish friends who have balloons. There are about twenty balloons here but only twelve licensed pilots in Ireland. Flying is very relaxed as there are very few navigational restrictions because there are not many airfields and there is no Irish Air Force blasting through the skies playing killing games like in England.

What attracted you to photographing the Irish Travellers?

I had never heard of Irish Travellers until I came to Ireland. In England we tended not to distinguish between Travellers and Gypsies, although now I know they are different. Most middle class English folk would simply not encounter Gypsies at all. I hadn't really met any Gypsies or Travellers in England, our paths had never crossed.

There are two main reasons why I was attracted to photographing Irish Travellers. Firstly, because it seemed that they were all that remained of the old Ireland. They are what foreign tourists expect to see! Secondly, I could not believe the dreadful way that I witnessed they were being treated by the majority Irish population of which they are a part. It shocked me.

When I started taking photographs there were more caravans beside the road than there are now. I could see that the numbers were diminishing, as the genre of caravan dwellers was being driven to extinction through a variety of forces, and I thought something ought to be done to make sure there was a record made of them. I asked settled friends: "Who are these Travellers?"

Sr. Cait Gannon, a Mercy Nun based in Thurles, is a friend of many Travellers. She is a great lady who is well loved and respected. She introduced me to some Travellers she knew, and things moved on from there. Most country people told me that Travellers were dangerous and that I should not go near them, so I was attracted even more. I am a sucker for a challenge, which is perhaps why I have spent time filming in Iraq, Somalia, Ethiopia and other places that smarter people than me have the sense to avoid. In fact I have not found the Travellers at all dangerous. To the contrary, they have been the most receptive and welcoming people I have met in Ireland. I have visited many sites in the Republic, in the North and in England. I have met and been well received even by ones with reputations like the Caseys and Carthys in Limerick and have great friends among the Wards of Galway. There is not a site in the country that I would not visit and probably be offered a welcome cup of tea.

I don't say that because I am at all brave, because I am not. I say it because I feel that Irish people are missing out on so much by chasing tigers and not meeting up with the people who are living in a lifestyle that is utterly Irish, but of a different era. Wherever I have met Irish Travellers in their homes, whether it is a trailer (caravan), a portacabin, or a regular house, I have always been received with the greatest of old fashioned Irish welcome. I can say that categorically. I mean, I would just go knocking on the doors of complete strangers and say "Excuse me, I hope you don't mind me coming, my name is Paul Harrison and I'm trying to find out the history of Travellers, you might be able to help me." When strangers would meet me for the first time they'd wonder who on earth I was with an English accent knocking on their door! They would be a bit apprehensive that I might be an undercover cop or some breed of council person or taxman seeking them for working while they are on the dole or having no TV licence or something, but soon enough they would be reassured that I was just me, the doors were opened, the tea was poured and the white

sliced bread and ham sandwiches were offered. In my personal experience they are a living example of the wonderful Irish hospitality of which I have heard so much and seen less and less these days. The only people who I have found unhelpful in my research are the non-Travellers. Some of the less educated ones don't want to have anything to do with me at all when they know I am researching Traveller history.

Were you aware of the general prejudice against Travellers in society from a young age? Did you have a negative image or a “romantic” image of the Travellers when you were growing up - or a bit of both?

I was not aware of the general prejudice against Irish Travellers before coming to Ireland. I had never even heard of Travellers before I came to Ireland. Perhaps I had a very sheltered existence, I'm a typical middle class Englishman. I had heard of Gypsies, and had met some in the Camargue area of southern France, riding horses through the swamplands. But I had not heard of Travellers. When I was a kid, sometimes clothes would be taken from the washing line at home and Mum used to say that it was the Gypsies taking them. That's about as bad as it got! Whether it was Gypsies or Irish Travellers who were taking clothes from the line, I don't know. Mum used to simply say: “They probably need them more than we do!” The image I had of Gypsies would have been the usual romantic notion of flamenco-dancing dark-haired maidens swirling to the tunes of guitars by the fireside under the starlight!

What is your own very first memory of prejudice in life and why did it make such an impression on you?

My first memory of prejudice in life? Hmm, I'll have to think on it. Nothing comes to mind. There were black kids at school in England but we paid no heed. Some were black, some were white, some were even Irish! I had no Irish friends at school but one of my best pals was half-Iranian.

In England you would see postcard-size posters on the doors of some of the lodging houses in London with “N.I.N.A.” written on them. It meant “No Irish Need Apply”. There was some prejudice against the Irish as they had a reputation for being drunk, rude, disorderly, violent... the things that people in Ireland accuse the Travellers of now! It's a funny old world, isn't it!

Once in rural South Africa in 1979 I wandered into a black-only bar by mistake and ordered a drink. I could see that they were not keen to serve

me but they did. The conversation stopped when I entered and not a word was spoken until I left. Nobody would speak to me. I tried to make conversation but nobody would speak to me or even catch my eye. This was during the apartheid regime and I think they might have thought I was one of the feared secret policemen! In Israel, crossing the Allenby Bridge over the river Jordan in the early 1980s, I saw Palestinians treated disrespectfully by Israeli soldiers.

It hurts to say it, but I suppose the most shocking experience of prejudice I have witnessed at close hand would have to be here in Ireland. In all my travels I have been refused service in a bar three times in my life. Each time was in Ireland. Each time I entered the bar with a Traveller who wanted a Seven-Up! It's surprising how many do not drink at all. I suppose when they were younger they didn't have the money to buy alcohol and so they never developed the drinking habit.

Can you tell us something about how the idea of your various Traveller-based photography projects came about and how you got to know and make contact with these Traveller communities yourself?

The idea partly came about when I recognised that some Irish people were treated differently to the rest and were living separate lives in enclosures, like animals in a zoo. I just couldn't believe it when I first went into Traveller sites to meet people. I had to park my camper outside the enclosure as there was a tall horizontal metal barrier preventing vehicles from entering. It reminded me of photos I had seen of Bosnians in concentration camps during the recent Bosnian war. The only times I had been in similar situations was when visiting black homesteads such as Soweto in South Africa during the time of apartheid and when filming refugee boat people behind barbed wire in Hong Kong internment camps.

I decided early on that I would deal directly with Travellers and not involve the Traveller support groups. How did I make contact with Travellers? Well, I would simply knock on the door and announce myself. I got bitten by a few dogs but no humans ever threatened me! Then I was asked to help the Tipperary County Museum to produce an exhibition about Travellers. It tickled me that they asked me, a foreigner, to take photos of Irish people, but I accepted that many Irish people did not feel safe with Travellers. I simply asked Traveller friends for help and they were all keen. I couldn't have done the exhibition without their support. I took a number of photos for that exhibition and made a short DVD too. I still see the Rileys, Donoghues, Carthys, Doyles and many others who helped make that exhibition. I am proud to count them as friends and it

saddens me that most of my non-Traveller Irish friends will not visit the sites with me. Lads, you don't know what you are missing!

What were your first impressions of the Travellers?

I admit that the first encounter with some Travellers can be a bit daunting. They can look pretty fierce and grumpy, they can be very gruff and they are not used to having visitors... and I would be there alone, on a strange site, with big tough-looking blokes and dogs barking and baring their teeth! They can have a very threatening appearance... one guy came out at me once with a bull-whip. Soon enough though I would be invited in for the 'tay'. Many Travellers are painfully shy at first, like many Irish used to be in England. Many Irish used to feel very out of place on their first visit to England years ago. They felt unwanted and somehow intimidated by the English, who they felt were acting superior with different ways and mannerisms. We English often appear arrogant, perhaps it's a national trait! In truth, many English did tend to look down on the Irish more in those days. I feel that somehow today the Travellers feel that same sense of being unwanted, but it's worse for them, as here they are in their own country. It's easy to see that many are depressed and somewhat lost. They seem not to understand why they are treated differently from mainstream Irish people, but they accept that they are treated differently and feel that there is little that they can do about it. They try and get on with life although I sense that they feel that things are unfair, for example they have been denied education for many generations and many are only now getting proper housing. I am not allocating blame in any direction for this, but it seems clear to me that these issues and the sense of unworthiness that result are a cause of pain which is transmitted beyond the Traveller community and creates a breach in the broader society.

What other cultural/artistic or photography projects are you working on now and are you interested in working with/photographing an "outsider" people like Travellers in the future?

I mentioned that I am writing a book which was inspired by Travellers and I am filming segments for a future documentary series. Of course I look forward to doing more with Travellers. I would dearly love in some way to be involved in a project where the Travellers could do much of the work themselves, making films, researching their history, doing genealogy. There is so much to be done. I have spoken with many of them about such ideas and they have always been excited about the prospects, but there is

only one of me and I just have to pace myself. It would be wonderful if an organisation were created – some kind of academy - that would take Travellers seriously and offer them some safe space where they could learn skills and take responsibilities. They are ready for that... more than ready! They have so much potential, so much latent talent, vivacity and positive energy that is bursting out in all directions and waiting to be harnessed.

When I am done working with Travellers I will probably move on from Ireland. They are the biggest reason for me staying here!

Did you find that working with the Travellers changed your outlook on life in any way or do they or their society have aspects to their lives that non-Travellers don't – and that non-Travellers could maybe learn from – to their benefit?

I am not aware that working with Travellers has changed my outlook on life. It confirms my belief that we all need and deserve respect. I have not come across any qualities or knowledge that the Travellers possess that has not been in the possession of the larger Irish community in the past. It is more a question of the Travellers having retained much that the 'modern' Irish have lost. If the Travellers finally lose this 'knowledge' or 'way of being' then it will surely be far more difficult for any of us ever to find it again, indeed, their knowledge may be finally lost to us all.

What do you see as the future for the Traveller communities in Ireland and in Western Europe? – Is assimilation a likely prospect as some people claim?

I can really only speak about the Irish Traveller communities. I am still seeking to ascertain the point at which an underclass originated as a 'different breed'. There are many theories and possibilities, but I am seeking to go back further than most records allow in the English language, for example I am seeking more detailed information of the periods when slaves existed as a class. It's tricky stuff! I would love to look at the DNA aspect, but that is very expensive. Until I am through with this I can't satisfactorily answer your question about assimilation. That said, assimilation is inevitable for us all as the global blender spins and relentlessly homogenises humanity! Nigerians and Indians are becoming assimilated into Irish society while the Travellers continue to be rejected. They are Irish, for God's sake! Right now there are eighteen

Chinese in the Irish police force and just two Irish of Traveller origin that I know of!

Did you have any contact with other Travelling groups other than the Irish Travellers on your travels or during your photography projects – were the Travellers you photographed belonging to any one particular Traveller group, etc.?

My sole interest has been in Irish Travellers. To try and trace their roots is a heavy project and I do not want to dilute my energies by looking at Gypsies, etc. I have visited Gypsy sites in the UK with the aim of distinguishing between them and the Irish Travellers. The two groups have similarities but have a distinctively different heritage. I have found that there is very limited contact between the two groups. They know where each other live, but would not visit each other. I got the impression that if one side were to visit the other, it would be seen as provocative. I did not find it helpful to tell one group that I had visited the other as this seemed to encourage mistrust of me, as if I were seen as a spy!

I have met Irish Travellers from all over Ireland, Northern Ireland and the UK, but there are so many over in Britain so I have largely restricted my work to the island of Ireland. I have met and photographed Travellers with more than two hundred family names. Some recur more than others, and in my experience they tend to follow the regional groupings that can be found in McLysaght's reference books. They also seem to retain some traits that go back though centuries, for example the Wards are descended from the Mac an Bhairds who were the poets of the O'Donnell High Kings around the 5th Century; although it is not always easy to make the observations as time blurs many things.

How did the Travellers find the photography process? Did they express any opinions about the work you were doing or ask you why you were doing it?

The Travellers have been very supportive in the work I am doing and presented me with ideas and inspiration throughout. In the main I feel that they are flattered and delighted that anyone takes an interest in them. I have always made it clear what I am about and have explained that I do not want to work with anyone who is not happy with what I am doing. Generally there has been a huge interest in what I am doing, even if people don't quite understand why I am doing it! When I would first meet strangers I would be keen to clarify their genealogy, asking questions

going back into their family. I explained that I was trying to find the origins of Travellers and asked for their opinions. The usual answers would be that they came from the times of Cromwell when they were kicked off the land. This is true in many cases, but not always. Some were on the road before Cromwell, some started travelling after his visit. I have still not been able to ascertain the definitive Traveller origins. They are as varied as the mythical beginnings of any Irish folk!

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL HARRISON



Rileys of Kilkenny

Liam Riley's family have been in Ireland for generations. They were in Ireland before any Vikings or Normans came to visit. Riley is one of the ten most common Irish names.

There was a time when only men of distinction owned and rode horses. Later, horses were used for work as their strength was valued. Today they are replaced by machines and horses are now only of recreational value in Ireland. Many feel they need the power of a hundred horses snorting under a bonnet. The old single horsepower ways are proudly maintained by young Liam and other Travellers on this site in Kilkenny.



Ned Delaney of Tipperary

Ned Delaney was brought up beside the road in Co. Tipperary which is where he lived when we first met. Ned shared a trailer with his brother Jimmy. The dogs slept in simple kennels made of wooden pallets nailed together and the horses were tethered in fields close by. Recent judicious landscaping by the council has rendered the roadside camp uninhabitable. Ned's life changed when his family was moved to a house just outside Tipperary town in 2004.



Delaney Tipperary

Jimmy Delaney shares his brother's love of animals. Despite living in a caravan beside the road for most of his life, Jimmy scrubs up well. He looks the kind of guy who will break the hearts of many young ladies.

Jimmy now lives in a house just outside Tipperary town.



Rileys of Tipperary

Bright-eyed Joanna and Geraldine are the first generation of this Riley family to go to school regularly. They were brought up in a caravan outside Clonmel. The threat of eviction was ever present until the family moved to a site which was constantly under threat of demolition by the council.

In 2005 their parents were offered a suitable house on the outskirts of Clonmel. As attitudes become more enlightened towards Travellers, Joanna and Geraldine may have better education and career opportunities than their parents were able to enjoy.