This chapter considers the concept of place as a product and process of the historical and theoretical dimensions of Irish anthropology. Although place is often used as a key trope in contemporary anthropology, with its connotations of origin, belonging, memory, and deterritorialization, place was not always conceived of in such fragmented, poststructuralist terms. In the context of emerging Irish anthropology, the notion of place was taken for granted historically and conceived in singular terms embedded in discourses of personhood, locality, livelihood, and sociality. As contested anthropological notions of intersubjectivity, selfhood, and attachment expanded, the possibilities of place and emplacedness came to be conceived of in multiple ways, extending across a range of different dimensions, including gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Here I offer an overview of the development of anthropology in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, and I suggest that although the settings for ethnographic research have been responsive to changes in Irish society and culture and to shifts in social theory, “place” and locality remain central to anthropological analyses.

For a brief moment, Ireland seemed to be the fastest changing nation in Europe. It was also among the most fashionable as a place to party, own a second home, and as a proud badge of identity and belonging. The
Celtic Tiger economy, a peace process that settled decades of violent conflict, and an increasingly Europeanized and secularized lifestyle were some of the many factors singled out by commentators as evidence that the island had finally left behind a stagnating rural past rooted in the land and dominated by a backward brand of Catholicism. The choreographed rows of glamorous women in skimpy costumes advancing across the stage in *Riverdance* seemed to epitomize this great march into modernity, transforming tradition through media savvy and popular culture into a spectacle to which the entire globe could relate. The cheerless minority agonized over what might have been lost or gained in the process, lamenting the arrival of a “fried chicken” culture, but most people reveled in the “rebranding” of Ireland and the Irish and began to talk about themselves and their identity with confidence, playfulness, and irony. As one wit joked about the introduction of the ban on smoking in Irish public houses in 2004—a prohibition some saw as “the most calamitous change in the country since the Great Famine of 1847” (*The Guardian*, March 27, 2004)—“Soon the only real Irish pub will be in Brussels!” To which another wag promptly added, “Well, at least they didn’t ban the drinking.”

Anthropology has much to bring to the understanding of such dramatic changes, particularly through its systematic emphasis on what people in Ireland themselves say about how their lives have altered in the context of wider national and global changes. As with anthropology elsewhere, this emphasis in Irish ethnography on firsthand, humanistic accounts of people’s everyday lives and activities, a perspective sometimes referred to as a “view from below,” both complements and provides an alternative to other disciplinary approaches that stress an institutional level of analysis in which a “view from above” often leaves little room for understanding how “global” processes articulate with “local” settings.

I will briefly sketch how anthropologists of Ireland have put this perspective “from below” into practice by outlining how the discipline developed on the island and will suggest that they must continue to listen closely to the voices and values of those among whom they live and work if they are to realize the full potential of their discipline in meeting the challenge of understanding change. I will focus on Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, both of which have strong traditions of anthropology, the former with its origins in British social anthropology and the latter in American cultural anthropology but now with many overlapping and convergent trends. The anthropology of Ireland is characterized by no single
approach, and there have been many contested and complementary interpretations of who and what the Irish and Ireland are. In this sense there have not only been many anthropologies of Ireland but also many Irelands to anthropologize about. What follows is an effort to provide some idea of these multiplicities by outlining how Ireland has been “placed” and “replaced” as a site for ethnographic study.

PUTTING IRISH ANTHROPOLOGY IN “PLACE”

Modern Irish anthropology could be said to have begun in the summer of 1931 with the arrival in Ireland of William Lloyd Warner, a Harvard professor. Warner was not the first anthropologist to visit Ireland—the survey of the Aran Islands by Alfred Cort Haddon and C. R. Browne (1891–93) had preceded him by forty years—but he was the first to promote there (and arguably in Europe as a whole) the systematic application to “modern social life” of the methods and perspectives of anthropology that had developed in the study of societies overseas. His mission in Ireland during that visit was to identify a suitable fieldsite for ethnographic study, one that would complement the investigations of the physical anthropologists and archaeologists who were also part of the Harvard research team. He brought with him the community-based model that researchers influenced by Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown’s (1881–1955) structural-functionalism had been developing in non-Western settings and that Warner himself had drawn upon in his “Yankee City” study in the early 1930s and in the three years of fieldwork he had just completed among the Murngin in northeast Arnhem Land (Warner’s Murngin book and the first book on the Harvard Irish research both appeared in the same year; Warner [1937] 1958; Arensberg 1937).

Warner selected County Clare in the west of Ireland as the fieldsite that best met the project’s objective of testing this kind of approach, and the next year he returned there with Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball, who began their research under his supervision. From the start, the study bore many of the hallmarks that still distinguish anthropology today, some of which it pioneered in this Western setting: comparison, teamwork, multidisciplinarity, and long-term residential field research that focused not only on Clare’s peasant country folk but also on the townspeople of neighboring Ennis, a research focus now likely to be referred to
as “multi-sited.” The publications that resulted from this collaboration, most notably *Family and Community in Ireland* (Arensberg and Kimball [1940] 1968), were to shape Irish anthropology for at least a generation to come, exercising an influence that is widely recognized, irrespective of whether it is celebrated or condemned.

Like anthropologists working elsewhere at the time, Arensberg and Kimball stressed the centrality of kinship, documenting the family structures, inheritance patterns, and generational relationships that regulated much of Irish rural life. They were particularly interested in understanding these aspects of social life in the context of a country in the process of modernizing, and although subsequently criticized for representing Ireland as static (Gibbon 1973), it is perhaps fairer to say that they saw it as a transitional rather than traditional society, as “neither wholly modern nor wholly traditional” (Byrne, Edmondson, and Varley 2001, v). Nevertheless, their account was castigated for stressing stability and, like other structural-functional and community studies of the day, was criticized for highlighting the persistence of particular structural forms and for minimizing the influence of the wider world.

The Clare study took on canonic and iconic status, emitting its influence long after the county itself had changed. Subsequent anthropologists researching in Ireland measured themselves against it, calibrating the extent of social and cultural change by the distance traveled by “their” community from the ethnographic baseline they considered Clare to offer, in an endless repetition that rarely queried the theoretical approach and empirical findings of the Clare study and without referring to its historical context (Kane et al. 1988; Byrne, Edmondson, and Varley 2001). *Family and Community in Ireland* was also for years the Irish ethnography most likely to be read by anthropologists who were not researching in Ireland, and some of the issues it raised, such as those about family structure, entered wider comparative and conceptual debate (e.g., Goody 1983). Irish anthropology at this time thus came to be known principally for its work on traditional peasant family life.

Ethnographically, “Ireland” was thereby firmly placed in the west of Ireland and located within a particular constellation of substantive themes and issues that focused on family and community, a “localizing strategy” that privileged certain lines of inquiry and shaped subsequent fieldworkers who situated themselves within the same geographical and theoretical contexts that Arensberg and Kimball had championed. And what many
of this new generation found in the countryside and coastlines of Clare, Galway, and Kerry was that the transition from tradition to modernity Arensberg and Kimball had set out to research was beset by problems of cultural dissolution and anomie, such as alcoholism, mental illness, and sexual repression, an ethnographic portrait of family and community breakdown elaborated in different ways by Hugh Brody (1973), John Messenger (1969) and Nancy Scheper-Hughes ([1979] 2001), among others, whose studies constructed a portrait of rural Ireland in decline. Some of these anthropologists were visitors to Ireland, and although their work was influential in anthropology generally, it was widely criticized in Ireland itself, both by those who were the subjects of the research and by other anthropologists who questioned its theoretical approach and interpretation, not least for generalizing to the island as a whole the problematic pathology it claimed to have uncovered in the west. To paraphrase one critic, the problems lay not with Irish society but with the anthropology of Ireland (Peace 1989, 105), which by constructing the island in terms of a dying peasant community had created a self-perpetuating image with which new ethnographers of Ireland felt they had to engage. In short, one place—the west of Ireland—was taken as representative of the rest.

Northern Ireland, meanwhile, was ethnographically placed in a different way, but again the principal focus was on rural life and tradition. Far from dying as in the ethnography of the west, however, “tradition” in Northern Ireland appeared vibrant and enduring, albeit as the dysfunctional underpinning of two implacably opposed communities—Catholic/nationalist/republican and Protestant/unionist/loyalist—that were murdering each other in its name. To ethnographers (and others) it was the persistence of rival ethnopolitical and religious “traditions” with deep-rooted, divergent historical and cultural trajectories and mythical origins that animated Northern Ireland’s hostile Catholic and Protestant factions in a deadly conflict between warring tribes in thrall to a premodern, irrational tribal hatred. If, ethnographically, the west of Ireland was in traumatic transition to modernity, then Northern Ireland was locked in a changeless past. Flying into Northern Ireland, as the old joke had it, the pilot would announce: “We are about to land in Belfast, please put your watch back three hundred years.”

This image of two hostile tribes came to dominate notions of the field in Northern Ireland, and successive (mainly) rural community studies sought to understand what prevented the situation from becoming one of
all-out war (e.g., Bufwack 1982; Harris 1972; Leyton 1975). Despite the violent conflict that raged from 1969 to 1998 and despite the apparently irreconcilable differences between Catholic and Protestant, how was it that Northern Ireland seemed to have so many pockets of peaceful, if uneasy, coexistence? Many argued that the answer lay in the crosscutting ties and shared culture of neighborhood and place, and through their fine-tuned studies of localized communities anthropologists were able to show how Northern Ireland was a paradoxical mix of opposition and integration within which Catholics and Protestants could hate each other in one context but tolerate each other in others. It was these mechanisms of quotidian compromise that kept the conflict in check, but by structuring interaction in such a way as to maintain social distance between Catholics and Protestants, they also helped to ensure that the conflict persisted in the form of two aggressively oppositional camps. This tribal model came to dominate the Northern Irish ethnography of the time, generating a literature that, even though undeniably accurate in many respects, nevertheless deflected attention from much else that characterized everyday life there.

Many of the studies sketched out above exhibited the features first stressed by Arensberg and Kimball, and they drew particularly on the community studies approach and structural functional model that, although sometimes qualified and modified, continued to minimize change and the existence of the wider contexts to which the communities were integrally related. Accordingly, many of them were weak on history other than that necessary to locate the particular community being studied, and few paid much attention to the wider political economy within Ireland and beyond. As these approaches attracted criticism in anthropology generally, so too in Ireland they gradually gave way to new kinds of ethnography and novel ways of situating sites for anthropological research.

SHifting FIELDS

For many critics, what had once seemed to be one of the main benefits of anthropology now seemed to be one of its major failings. The rich sense of place communicated by the early works in Irish anthropology was strong on local detail but apparently unable to transcend the particularistic practices to be found in the small communities that were the focus, an approach that seemed to inhibit generalization if not prevent it altogether,
and one that did not address wider structural and political change satisfactorily. Part of the problem was that people in Ireland no longer lived or thought about their lives in terms of discrete communities (assuming that they ever had). As life in Ireland diversified in response to the growing secularization and modernization prompted by developments in the media, politics, education, employment, and patterns of leisure and consumption (see O'Sullivan 2007, 3–8), anthropology’s old models of bounded communities seemed increasingly out of touch. However, part of the problem was also with how fieldsites had been conceptualized in anthropology, as being geographically and physically contained. Although fieldwork had never really been dependent on discrete places, ironically it was particular places that in the ethnography of Ireland had come to stand for the island as a whole, as “everyplaces.” As anthropologists began to understand their fieldsite differently, more as a “field of social relations” than as a “place,” so too they began to “re-locate” their studies (even if for some the peasant farming family of the rural west remained the focus; see Cresswell 1969; Salazar 1996).

This re-location was thus both geographical and conceptual. New and pioneering work drew anthropologists eastwards, into settings previously underresearched ethnographically, and into which they followed the expanding and ramifying social networks of those they were researching. Research was also more likely now to be explicitly problem-oriented (or thematic) rather than community-based, with ethnographers taking up specific issues in the broad areas of religion, economics, or politics rather than constructing a community portrait “in the round,” and this inevitably led ethnographers to look wherever answers to their research questions might be found. Towns and cities increasingly became a focus, but so too did the relationships that clearly transcended locality, such as those that bound town, city, village, and farm to regional, national, and global institutions through, for example, the world economy and the European Common Market, which both Irelands had entered in 1973.

Much of the work done in the 1980s and 1990s moved in these directions, placing Ireland ethnographically very differently from the community studies of the preceding generation, and incorporating history and political economy into the anthropological “field.” Thomas Wilson’s research in the Irish midlands, for example, opened up wholly new fields of inquiry by focusing on large farms in Meath and their links to the European Common Market, work that later developed into his widely
influential anthropology of European integration and Europeanization that stimulated other anthropologists to work on similar themes, not only in Ireland but across Europe more generally (e.g., Wilson 2013; Wilson and Smith 1993; Bellier and Wilson 2000). Imaginative new directions were also taken that explored the historical integration of Ireland into the economic world system, as in works of ethnographically informed historiography by Marilyn Silverman (2001) in the Irish Republic and by Joan Vincent (1995) in Northern Ireland. Yet others offered radical critiques of the community studies approach in their research on clientelist politics, migration, rural development, and religion or took up issues that now also preoccupied anthropologists working in other parts of the world, including, inter alia, gender, tourism, and the environment. Further examples of these trends and of the new fields of research emerging in Irish ethnography can be found in two collections of essays that set out to reorient the research agenda in Ireland around this time (Curtin and Wilson 1989; Curtin, Donnan, and Wilson 1993).

Field locations thus shifted in terms of where (eastwards) and what was studied (problem rather than place). Now anthropologists of Ireland were not so much “outstanding in their field,” as the old quip has it, as outstanding in the street. This was something of a liberation, and a flood of studies began to appear both north and south on topics that had previously been strikingly neglected in Irish ethnography—homelessness, urban regeneration, unemployment, the labor market, the lives of urban youth—many of which not only had a resonance and ethnographic interest far beyond the island but which also better reflected the interests and experiences of the island’s population. Though sometimes informed by competing theoretical approaches, much of this work had in common its desire to reflect in Irish ethnography what was happening in Ireland itself, and to transcend what many now saw as the paralyzing strictures or hauntings of the previously dominant paradigms (Peace 1989; Egan and Murphy 2015).

A good example of how anthropologists in Ireland increasingly tried to move beyond the limitations of earlier studies is Lawrence Taylor’s (1995) analysis of Irish Catholicism, which was the first major ethnographic account of religion in Ireland since Victor and Edith Turner’s (1978) influential study of Catholic pilgrimage in Donegal. Although Taylor’s account is also based in Donegal and is rich in local detail and memorable characters, his Donegal is conceptualized not as the isolated, self-regulating west of previous work, but instead is a “place” from which and on which social ties radiate and focus, as a prismatic node “in net-
works of relations” (Easthope 2009, 77). Following the spiritual journeys of those with whom he lived, Taylor’s fieldwork took him to prayer meetings in Dublin and on pilgrimage to Medjugorje (in Bosnia and Herzegovina, scene of successive apparitions of the Virgin Mary since the early 1980s), and to archival accounts of nineteenth-century missions. Taylor’s fieldsite, then, was a “place” from which and through which to view the intersection of local, regional, national, and international religious belief and practice across both time and space, a convergence and collapsing of different scales from which religion draws its power and which can best be grasped through an ethnography of everyday religious experience. This is multi-sited fieldwork in the sense that George Marcus (1995) appears to have intended: not just research carried out in more than one place, but fieldwork that understands the local and global as mutually constituted research locations.

Towns and cities and the ties to social, economic, and political formations external to locality also increasingly became a focus for ethnography in Northern Ireland, where it was argued that the emphasis on rural communities had discouraged comparison and limited understanding of political violence by failing to address this directly (Donnan and McFarlane 1986). Violence now began to feature as a central element in a number of works, as in Jeff Sluka’s (1989) analysis of the relationship between local urban neighborhoods and the paramilitaries who depended on them for support, and in Buckley and Kenney’s (1995) probing of the symbolic and material forms of violence in street rioting and commemorative parades, a focus in stark contrast to the tranquility of rural coexistence that Buckley (1982) had emphasized in his earlier book. The old paradigm of two warring tribes became much more sophisticated, with simplistic dichotomies between rival camps of Catholics and Protestants increasingly muddied by analyses that revealed the internal diversity of what some previous studies had been too quick to treat as homogeneous blocs.

Such thematically focused ethnography was also more inclined to look beyond Ireland for appropriate comparators and theoretical models than had the community studies, which had emphasized centrality of place. Indeed, in some cases the “field” now seemed to be shaped as much by social theory as by the social and cultural relations that were the ostensible focus of study. Allen Feldman’s (1991) poststructural analysis of political subjectivity in Northern Ireland attracted both widespread controversy and praise for its treatment of the body as a text from which could be read the formations of violence that constitute the body as object and
agent in conditions of extreme political instability. Drawing on Michel Foucault and René Girard, Feldman’s book is widely cited by almost everything written in the anthropology of violence ever since, yet has been roundly criticized, not least by ethnographers who have lived and worked in Ireland, for an overreliance on decontextualized interview transcripts and its “elitist” and rarefied analytical approach. So too Begoña Aretxaga’s (1997) account of the gendering of political subjectivity amidst the violence of political incarceration in Northern Ireland has sometimes been criticized for overinterpreting the symbolism of the “excremental” and “menstrual” pollution that characterized republican women’s resistance to the prison authorities.

Studies such as these raise issues about the generation and use of theory in Irish ethnography, and about the balance to be found between advancing theory and contributing to an understanding of Irish social and cultural life. Taylor (1996, 215) puts this very well when he recommends that some anthropologists of Ireland would “benefit from raising their heads high enough to catch an occasional glimpse of cultural theory, but so too might postmodernist/postcolonialist theoreticians benefit from alighting on the sod long enough to learn something that they did not already know.” Empirically based and theoretically informed ethnographic research has long been carried out in Ireland, as we have seen, but ethnographers of Ireland must renew their efforts to contextualize or “place” their fieldsite in ways that are meaningful within and also beyond the island itself.

Achieving this balance is also a challenge for the public policy research in which in the 1990s growing numbers of anthropologists in both parts of Ireland became involved as they embraced new opportunities for research generated by political change in Ireland, entry into the EU, and a shifting job market. If Irish ethnography could be said to have been increasingly shaped by social theory in the 1990s, so too it now began to be progressively influenced by issues that public policy practitioners identified as important, such as housing, unemployment, rural development, access to sport, drug abuse, crime, and young people (see Donnan and McFarlane 1989; 1997). Although such studies have been criticized for using a conceptually truncated notion of culture and for their limited comparative and theoretical engagement, they not only better reflect the concerns of Irish people themselves in many cases, but they also help to fill the gaps in the public policy understanding of people’s everyday lives by providing a perspective from below.
Dominic Bryan and Neil Jarman, for instance, brought together anthropological insights into ritual and symbol to identify best practice in the control of crowds during the frequent, seasonal, ethnopolitical street parades in Northern Ireland and to show how the notion of “tradition” must be problematized and understood as socially constructed and susceptible to political manipulation (Bryan 2000; Jarman and Bryan 1996). They argued that we should not take the form and content of these parades at face value. Even though they may look and sound the same, these processions are not fixed or static, but they respond to changing political circumstance and historical context. Indeed, the power of these events lies in their ability to encompass widely divergent views and interests within a collective demonstration of unity and belonging. Here again, then, we find Irish ethnography focused on “tradition,” but it is a very different notion of tradition than that referred to earlier. Rather than being sedimented and fixed, it is fluid and negotiable, not something that need be shed in the move to modernity, but which instead might be reshaped to inform policies for a postnational, cosmopolitan age.

Irish anthropology was consequently now sometimes influenced by the “evidence-based” policy questions of politicians and civil servants, which critics viewed as contaminating the discipline, but which enabled some anthropologists to practice a socially responsible social science committed to civic engagement and to use their research to benefit those with whom they worked.

If Irish anthropology was initially located in the west and the field was originally identified by where anthropologists researched, this has been transformed as anthropologists have begun to grapple with how people fashioned a sense of belonging in a world where the boundaries of locality and community were stretched by the forces of postmodernity. Old ideas about the relationship between people and place seemed to be undermined as people moved or as the world came to them, and social theory struggled to keep up, emphasizing a world of connectivity and relationality rather than as immobile and fixed, one in which mobility is constitutive of place and not just something that happens there. The focus now was on deterritorialization, transnationalism, diaspora, and local–global relations, concepts deployed to understand the new cosmopolitan and, to