

# FOLLOWING THE OLD STONE ROAD: ÉIRE

by Tomas Lipps

The *Féile na gCloch* (Festival of Stone) is an annual dry stone walling festival/workshop that is held on Inis Oírr, the smallest of the Aran Islands.

This year I had the good fortune to be invited to come and participate and to give a presentation. It was a pleasure to associate with yet another gathering of stone-oriented folks in a place remarkable for the extent and character of its stonework. Following the event I took the opportunity of being in Ireland to schedule another two weeks there, rent a car and meander around the country photographing noteworthy stonework for STONEXUS.

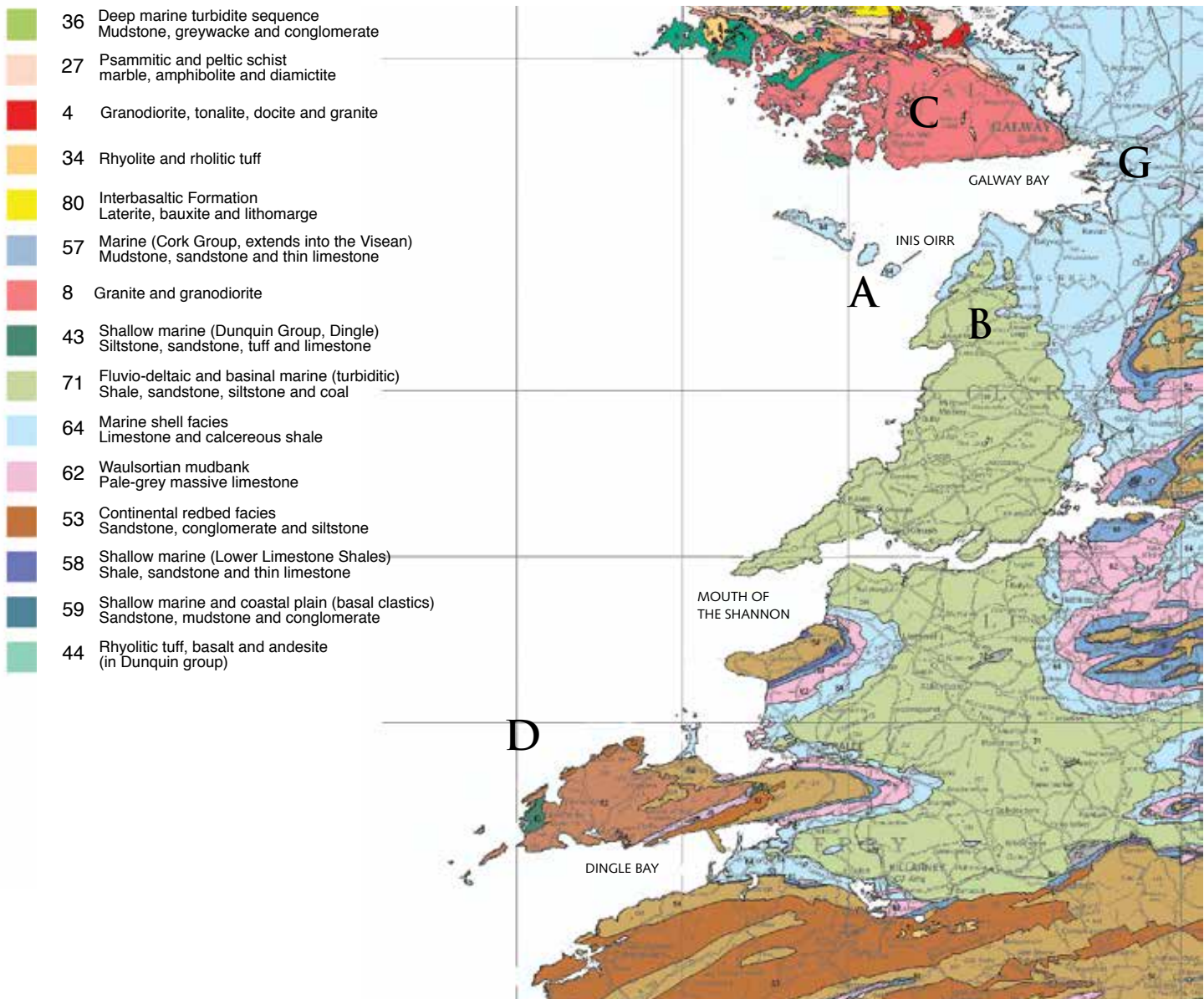
The invitation to Inis Oírr came when I was absorbed with organizing Stonework Symposium 2012 in Asheville, North Carolina

and the four workshops associated with that event. After the Symposium ended I had less than a week before flying out so research was scant, the result being an all-too-short and somewhat cursory exploration with an improvised and constantly changing itinerary. But it was both interesting and rewarding, more so because of the gracious character of the Irish folks I encountered along the way.

The places visited initially are all located along Ireland's rugged west central coast as shown below on the geological map section: the Aran Islands, the Burren, Connemara, Dingle and Galway. This account will commence with the Aran Islands.

*The first of two (or more) parts.*

*All photos by author unless otherwise labeled.  
Map courtesy of the Geological Survey of Ireland.*



# GALWAY

## Port of Entry.

From Shannon Airport to Galway city takes about an hour and a half by bus. Ten minutes into the drive and less than ten miles from the airport I saw, in a field a short distance from the highway, a *gallaun*, an ancient standing stone—a 'premonition' of the depth of the island's history. Welcome to Ireland.

Once settled in, I went for a walk around the old town that is the heart of the city. Much has changed in the forty-three years since my last visit. The quiet port and county seat I knew has become one of Europe's most popular tourist destinations and the music and arts festivals held here have earned it regard as Ireland's cultural capital.

In 1124 the King of Connacht built a fort where the River Corrib met the bay. The settlement that gathered around the fort evolved into a port town that was visited by the mariner Cristoforo Colombo in 1477 (as commemorated by the sculpture of a dove, *un colombo*, shown at right). The city walls were extended in 1580 to protect the quays. In the 18th century the Spanish Arches (bottom of page) penetrated the walls to give access from the town to the newer quays outside.

The very first photograph I took in Galway (below) seemed to presage two sources of pleasure that I would experience in the days to come: stonework and Guinness.





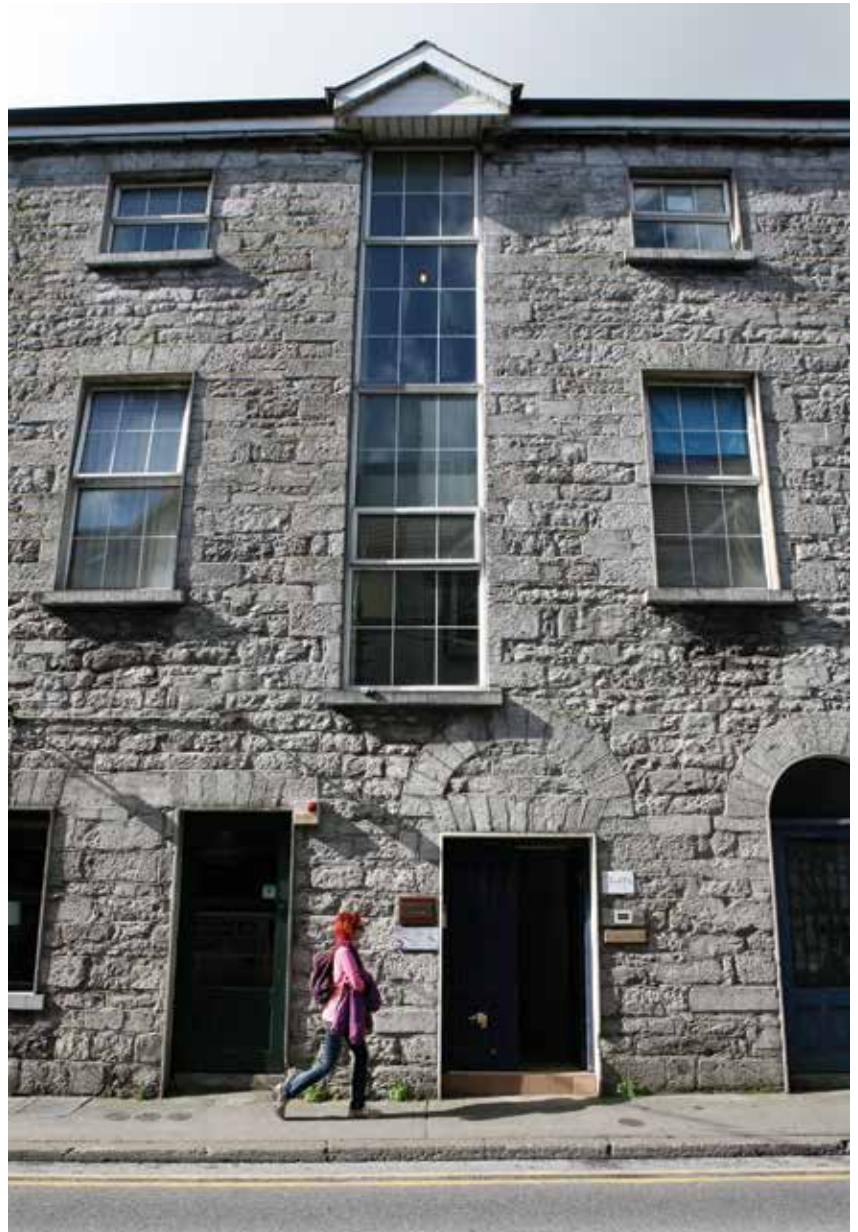


*left:*

*A repurposed pilaster adorned by a carved finial near the Spanish Arches. As can be seen from the side of the pilaster, it projected only slightly from the wall of whatever building it was a part of originally. Which means the finial must have had a different previous use as well. There is another pilaster on the other side of the doorway and they may once have supported a lintel.*

*below:*

*Stone house(s) in the old town.*





# INIS OÍRR



## *The Aran Islands*

are three sea-girt fragments of a vast limestone *massif* (see map on title page).

The western edge of the massif, known as the Burren, terminates in cliffs that drop precipitously into the ocean. Just offshore are the islands, crests of a submarine ridge. From the Cliffs of Moher they look like castaways. Or fugitives. Inhospitable as these scraps of stone were, small populations accreted there and the islands acquired names: Inis Mór (Inishmore—Big Island), Inis Meáin (Inishmaan—Middle Island) and Inis Oírr (Inisheer—East Island).

*karst, rendzina,  
grykes and clints,  
sand and seaweed*

The Burren and the lower-lying islands are geologically young—they were exposed by the retreat of the last glaciers a mere 10,000 years ago. The islands, scoured by glaciation and when the ice was gone by the winter storms of the North Atlantic, were, even more than the Burren, ideal environments for the solutional erosion process known as karstification. Water, being mildly acidic, is able to dissolve alkaline limestone and does so in a peculiar way that produces long narrow crevices called *grykes* that isolate slabs or bands of limestone called *clints*.

Whatever scant soil remained on the island after the glaciers has slowly increased though the weathering of the limestone which produces a dark humus-rich substance called *rendzina*, an early phase of developing soil.

The climate on the islands favors gardening (potatoes, cabbage, carrots) and grazing; it is surprisingly temperate with

plenteous rain. The soil is thin but well drained and the islanders learned to augment it by the admixture of seaweed and sand, manure, fish meal and kitchen waste. Fields were created through the laborious removal of stone. The limestone slabs and bands were wedged apart and broken into manageable pieces that were then used to build the walls enclosing the fields.

Inis Oírr native Padraig Poul began to build walls with his father as a teenager and has gained (the) reputation of being a prodigious waller. He was happy to show us a stony outcropping that he is in the process of transforming into an arable field. He is intent on doing this in the old way (although he will pry the stone free with a 'digger,' the Irish name for a back-hoe).

Using the bulky roundish granite hammerstone in the right-hand side of the photo seen here, he will break up the slabs into smaller pieces and put them aside until the time comes to use them to build an enclosing wall. Load after load of seaweed and sand will then be brought to the field, deposited and mixed with the other ingredients mentioned above.

This method has over time produced a complex network of small fields that blanket the island. Access to fields (and from field to field) is through gaps in the walls closed with a single wythe section of dry stone that may, with minor inconvenience, be opened and closed as needed.

*right: Padraig's field. Stone has been removed from the area left of center and replaced with seaweed and sand. A swath of grass is now growing there. The broken stone, piled up to the left, will become a wall. Note the long parallel grykes and the 'liberated' slab. It awaits the hammer stone, known locally as a 'goat's head,' that rounded granite cobble seen just right of center in the photo. These were transported to the island from Connemara either by ice sheet thousands of years ago, by giant waves in 100-year storms, or by boat.*







*above: Padraig Poul and a wall that he built "when (he) should have been in school". Padraig asked me to mention that he is unmarried.*



*right: Harvesting spuds. Note the various styles of walling.*











### *stylistically speaking . . .*

The stonework of the Aran Islands is unique unto itself. Like the other islands, Inis Oírr is almost totally composed of limestone (except for the granitic immigrants mentioned earlier) but there is some variance in the way the stone is formed and when human peculiarities are factored in an amazing variety of walling styles results. Families tend to build in a particular way; if shown a photograph of a section of an island wall, an island man, at least one who builds walls, could identify 'who done it'.

There are horizontally coursed walls on Inis Oírr, some good ones (photo, facing page) and wall ends are stabilized with large horizontally oriented stones, but what Inis Oírr and the other islands are noted for are walls built with stones aligned vertically.

Equilibrium is the goal in building a wall. Horizontally coursed walls in which stones are placed in a stable position have *static* equilibrium.

Walls with stones standing or leaning against each other are (like polygonal walls in which the stones are placed so they are not at rest, but acting against each other) in a state of *dynamic* equilibrium. *Wedge-walling* is a good way to describe this system.

### *the mothers . . .*

On the Aran Islands, styles of walling have evolved which combine vertical and horizontal elements. The stones in wall ends framing an opening are horizontally bedded, but stones in the body of the wall and those used to close the opening may be placed vertically. Sometimes the lower section of a wall is horizontally coursed, but row upon row of vertical stones are placed on top. One style that is characteristically 'Aranesque' is the 'family' style wall, examples of which are shown below and at the top of the facing page. The large stones aligned vertically in the lower parts of the wall are called the *mothers*, the small stones they bracket are the *children*, the *fathers* go on top.



A properly built vertically coursed wall is similar to a horizontally coursed wall with respect to the primary rule of stonemasonry: "one over two, two over one"—*except* that in a vertically coursed wall it should be one *against* two, and two *against* one. The photo above is a section from the wall in the photo to its left. It has been rotated 90 degrees. Note how much this looks like a well-built horizontally coursed wall.











facing page: Teampall Caomhán (Cavan's Church) looking from the nave into the chancel. St. Caomhán, the patron saint of Inis Oírr, chose a less than auspicious site to build his church in the 6th century. Its physical bulk and proximity to the shore resulted in its eventual burial in a great sand dune that collected around it. Every year on St. Caomhán's day, June 14th, the islanders gather and dig it out. What is now the nave was the entirety of a 10th century church until the addition of the chancel. The pointed chancel arch and the well-formed east window (odd that there isn't a single keystone) are dated to the early 13th century.

left: Low relief carving of Christ on the cross. If this was once a part of the church, the eastern window recess into which it has been cemented, blocking off the lower part of the opening, cannot have been its original location. The limestone is darker where it has been repeatedly touched.

right: The 'signpost' for Cil Ghobnait carved from local limestone by sculptor Eileen MacDonagh

below: Exterior of the east wall of Cil Ghobnait, a small church dated variously to the 8th, 9th, or 10th centuries. As it lacks an apse or chancel, an earlier date is more likely. It is dedicated to St. Gobnait, a 6th century female saint who sought sanctuary here from enemies on the mainland.





## *The Féile na gCloch*

*Féile na gCloch* means Festival of Stone and there were festivities, but it was a workshop as well and a lot of work was done by the 40+ folks who participated. And a fine company of folks they were, as this photo by Karl Kennedy shows. They came from Ireland, Scotland, England, Finland, the Netherlands, Poland, France, Canada and the US. Inis Oírr has a grand little pub, Tigh Ned's, and the *craic* (enjoyment/banter) was good. This was the fifth Féile to be held on Inis Oírr and there will be another on the third weekend of September 2013.

*below: The principal project: a retaining wall about 100 feet long, 12 feet high at the far end and 3 plus feet thick at base. It consumed about 150 tons\* of stone and was built in less than three days. The worksite would have been too crowded with more than 40 wallers so a splinter group led by Scottish wallers worked at repairing two other walls. These three walls were in the populated part of the island; on the afternoon of the third day the group walked across the rockscape to an undeveloped field and built a wall with the stone found there. In the photo at the bottom of the facing page our Pat McAfee works in the field with both students and professional wallers.*

*\*These English long tons weighing 2240 pounds, not to be confused with American tons at 2,000 or metric tonnes at 2204 pounds.*





