

SCIENCE REVIEW

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MAKING UP OUR MINDS: Maureen Gaffney on how the brain's wiring makes us who we are

NewsReview



THE TEENAGERS
"WE HAVE HORRIBLE WEATHER HALF THE TIME"

Dylan Moran, who is 18, Maria Kelly, who is 17 and Seán Southgate, who is 16 (above, left to right), are all members of the drop-in Cove Youth Cafe, located on the town's Fairgreen

Seán Southgate
"We moved to Ireland in 2000 from England, and to Westport four years ago. I really like it. It's small enough to get around, but I can't see myself staying here

for the rest of my life. I'm thinking about going back to England when I finish school.

"My only complaint about Westport is that there are hardly any internet cafes left. And you can get fed up with the tourists. They're always asking you to take their picture. I do take the pictures when I'm asked, but I usually leave their heads out."

Maria Kelly
"If you're in Dublin and it's raining, it's kind of depressing, but when you're here, even if it's raining, it's still pretty. I really

want to go and live in Dublin, but I'll always come back here. What I like about this place is the atmosphere.

"It's always been a friendly town. I'd hate to see it lose its community spirit; for example, I'd hate to see Westport try to be a city."

Dylan Moran
"Nothing really annoys me in this town, other than some of the people in it, of course. I was amazed when I heard Westport won Best Place to Live. There are so many other towns in Ireland, and we have horrible weather half the time."

THE BOOK FESTIVAL COMMITTEE
"TO SOME EXTENT IT IS LIKE LIVING IN A GOLDFISH BOWL"

The third Rolling Sun Book Festival will take place in November. It is run by a committee of Westport women in their 40s and 50s. They include (left to right) Maria Ruddy, the owner of the Clew Bay Hotel; Ursula Skerritt, a psychiatrist; Aine Ryan, a journalist with the *Mayo News*; and Mairéad De Burca, a solicitor

Aine Ryan
"Westport does attract people with a certain amount of money. It's a honeypot. Property prices have always been higher here. So it's a self-selecting community in that way. Some of the people who are struggling financially go and live in Castlebar. There's one estate in Castlebar known as Little Westport, because there are so many people from the town living there.

"In the summer the town does seep some of its character due to gridlock, because all the traffic has to go through the town. There's no ring road, and it doesn't seem as if one will be built any time soon. A ring road to take away the traffic would enhance the dinky, colourful atmosphere of the town. Sometimes you get very fed up with yet another camper van stopping on the street so that someone can take a picture of Matt Molloy's pub. It would be true to say sometimes there is a little bit of tension between tourists and the locals who are trying to live busy lives."

Ursula Skerritt
"Community is what keeps me in Westport. I've lived here since 1989. There's a friendliness, an openness and a cosmopolitan nature to the place; there are lots of artists and writers and blow-ins



living here. There are so many blow-ins living in the environs that I think it creates diversity, openness and tolerance in the town. There's also a large Protestant population here, and Protestants have always had an ethos about community, working hard and sharing with each other. It's a can-do ethos, and I think that has made a difference to the town over time."

Maria Ruddy
"We have 10 hotels in the town. None is in Nama and only one isn't family-run. We all have healthy competition between us, but the difference [between Westport and] other places maybe is that it's healthy rivalry. It's not cut-throat. If we are full, we'll always refer people to another hotel. We don't want the business to go out of the town. We have to co-operate with each other to survive.

"We do get a huge number of stag and

hen parties in the town, both from all over Ireland and the UK, but we try to manage them. We will try to take only one in the hotel, and we suggest to them when they are booking that they do an activity as part of the weekend; climb Croagh Patrick or cycle the Greenway. It's amazing how many of them do take it up once they find out what's on offer. I think we're all very proud of the place, without being cocky about it. That's just the truth."

Mairéad De Burca
"I agree with everything the others say. The only thing I'd say is that when you choose to live in a small place like this, to some extent, it is like living in a goldfish bowl. Everyone knows everything about you. Whereas if you lived in Dublin, say, you could walk down Grafton Street and nobody would know anything about you. So you do give up your anonymity."



THE COVEY
"YOU'D GET A FEW LOOKS FROM THE TOURISTS IF YOU SAID TO WHOEVER YOU WERE WITH ON THE STREET THAT YOU WERE GOING FOR A FEW LAYS"

Liamy MacNally, who is 54, was born and grew up in Westport and still lives in the town. He is a freelance broadcaster and reporter and writes a column for a weekly paper, the *Mayo News*

"I'm a covey. It means you're Westport born, bred and buttered. We have our own cant here in the town. 'Covey' means fella. A 'doner' is a woman. Some say they're 'covevesses', but we kind of ignore that one. 'Luke' is keep quiet, and 'bruiser' is your dinner. A 'rum chanter' is a good singer. 'Going for a lay' is going for a drink. You'd get a few looks from the tourists all right if you were on the street and you said to whoever you were with that you were going for a few lays.

"I love Westport and the energy of the place. It's all about the people and the great community that's here. I always say that in Westport you have your own family but you also have the family of the town.

"It's a planned town. So there is a basic order to the town, structurally, and I think people have fed on that and protected it. The fact that it's a planned town does impact on people's sense of order. People have a duty of care to the town and the environment here. You have to strike the balance between what tourists want and what locals need.

"You can come into town on a Saturday, and it can take two hours to do a lap because you meet so many people you know. A lap is down James Street, over the Mall, up Bridge Street and across Shop Street. And when there's a funeral of a local, the cortege does a final lap of the town for that person. All the businesses knock off their lights and close the door as a sign of respect as the cortege passes."



THE CANADIAN WHO MARRIED A LOCAL
"IT'S A GREAT PLACE TO BRING UP CHILDREN, SAFE AND SMALL"

Travis Zeray is 33 and from Ontario in Canada. He met his wife, Colleen Kennedy, who is also 33 and comes from Westport, in 2004 when they were working together in Whistler, in Canada. In 2006 they moved to Westport. Zeray co-owns Clew Bay Bike Hire. Kennedy is a herbalist and has just opened her own clinic

Travis Zeray
"The first time I saw Westport was in the Cayman Islands. We were working there, and we watched a video of Westport and Co Mayo that Colleen's parents had sent us. I had never

even been to Europe, let alone Ireland. We were having a baby in 2006, and wanted to live somewhere we could raise a family. Colleen told me Westport was beautiful, and I was pretty confident I'd find work. She said she loved it, and we never thought twice about moving here. I've never been out of work since getting here.

"It's ironic in a way that I've come from Canada, because we see so many Irish people leaving every week to go to Canada.

"Westport has all the benefits of a city, such as lots of restaurants, yet it's a small town. The people are really what make Westport. It's about community. People help each other out, like they did when I was setting up the business. If I have a criticism, it's that business rates are very high."

Colleen Kennedy
"I went travelling at 19 and worked abroad for seven years. I lived in France, India, Canada and in the Caymans and Bermuda with Travis. So I've spent a lot of time living in other lovely places, but this is where I wanted to come back to, because I have networks of family and friends.

"It's a great place to bring up children, safe and small enough for everything to be accessible. Why wouldn't you want to live somewhere like this, where your surroundings are so beautiful?"

"The only thing is, the train service could be better. We're lucky to have a direct train to Dublin, but there's no early Saturday train, so you have to go the night before if you need to be there early on Saturday."

One writer's view What it means for us to have won the competition

When I was small we would sometimes visit cousins who had a model railway, and an uncle whose pride and joy it was. We didn't visit often, but every time we left their house a bit of me got left behind. Not on the train, which I thought silly, trapped on an endless journey going nowhere, but in the creases of the crumpled-up paper hills, in the doorways of tiny cottages, on the tree-lined streets of the small town at the bright blue river's mouth or marooned on one of the scores of islands my uncle had dotted out to sea.

A part of me longed to stay with the miniature figures – horses, cows, men and women – poised forever on their patches of velvety moss at the edge of the possible.

Which could be why coming home to Westport every time I have been away gives me such an unfulfilling punch of pleasure. There are specific moments, snapshots I have isolated and carried around with me only to find, to my delight, as I re-enter the west Mayo landscape, that they have not moved. Clare Island still lolls on its back as you crest the last long hill from Castlebar, a floating Yale key dropped by some careless giant on a night out; the tall old boathouse

with its rusted roof, superb in its own reflection as you wind down to the harbour and steal a glance to the right; the crumpled hills and sculpted clouds around Clew Bay, infinite in their greens and greys, infinitely generous. Croagh Patrick's conical peak, here, there and everywhere. And St Patrick himself, still there too, still balancing like Simeon the Stylite, still small and pale and lonely on his column.

"Sometimes I think we live in days more than we live in places," John McGahern said in one of his frequent musings on what

“The clock on the tower might not always give the right time, but you can set your life by the tide if you want

constituted a good life. And he was right. What good is place to us if we have no satisfaction in the hours and minutes of our days? Some places, though, allow us to rhythm our lives to our own choosing more than others. It seems to me that Westport and its surrounds help to make that possible.

The clock on the tower in the town might not always give the right time, but you can set your life by the tide if you want, the twice-daily miracle that pulls the plug on Clew Bay at Rosbeg and empties it of water. By the sun, rising behind the hills, setting over the sea, behind the islands. From your window.

It's the nature of place that makes living in days easier. It's not that time stands still, or that you would want it to. It's not that Westport doesn't work and worry like everyone else; it does, and we do. It's that you can more easily make your days your own, decide to enter the world at the edge of the possible.

Geraldine Mitchell

■ Geraldine Mitchell is an author and poet who lives in Co Mayo

Where Ring is king Westport's politics

Politics in Westport can be summed up in three words: Ring is king.

Fine Gael returned an unprecedented four TDs, including Michael Ring, to the Mayo constituency in last year's general election. Despite the fact that the quartet includes Taoiseach Enda Kenny, Ring remains the dominant force in his home town of Westport.

The Ringer, as he is known locally, is characteristically enthusiastic about the town's naming as the best place to live in Ireland. "It's fantastic for the town," he says.

Asked what local politicians have contributed to making Westport the friendly, lively and almost litter-free place it is, Ring notes that Fine Gael holds more than half of the 31 seats on the county council, while Westport Town Council is also dominated by the party.

But he says councillors from all parties have always pulled together for the town. "One hundred per cent. I started on the town council in 1979, and the common good for Westport always did and always will come first," he says.

If this sounds too good to be true, political opponents back up Ring's view. Seán Staunton, who was a Fianna Fáil town councillor for 37 years, and is a former editor of the *Mayo News*, says the local authority views itself as a development agency. "With the town council, that has always been the case; that party politics were left outside the door and we worked



All politics is local: Michael Ring and (below) Pádraig Flynn kisses his daughter Beverley after the 2007 election. Photographs: Keith Heneghan/Phocus and Matt Kavanagh



together irrespective of what numbers people had," Staunton says. "While we had our little spats, it worked. We saw ourselves as the main development agency for the town."

Staunton plays down the impact of the Flynn family dynasty on Westport but says it was recognised that Pádraig Flynn had "delivered" for the county, and particularly the county town of Castlebar, when he was in office.

Staunton has high praise for his party colleague Dara Calleary, the only Fianna Fáil TD left in the constituency after Beverly Flynn's decision not to stand in 2011, but acknowledges that Ring is a "good, hard worker".

Promoted to be Minister of State for Tourism and Sport, Ring was unperturbed when *The Irish Times* reported last December on the success of Mayo in attracting grant money. The department had announced more than €5 million in grants for projects in the county within six months. A Dublin Fianna Fáil councillor, Jim O'Callaghan, accused Ring and Kenny of "looting after their own backyard" instead of distributing limited resources evenly throughout the State.

Ring demanded an apology at the time, insisting his presence in the department had nothing to do with Mayo's record in securing grants, but he is more sanguine about the matter this week. "I've a responsibility to the country, but I've a responsibility to the constituency as well," he says.