1
Out With the Old, in With the Boring

In 1994, when Intel launched the Pentium processor that was central to the emergence of the personal computer as an everyday consumer product, more than half of worldwide production was based at Leixlip. Over the next decade, the Irish plant produced a billion Pentium chips.

(ÓToole, 2013)

Placed alongside the Tara Torcs, Book of Kells and Clonmacnoise Crozier in Fintan ÓToole’s History of Ireland in 100 Objects, the Intel microprocessor is transformed into an icon for the remarkable ‘rise of information technology’ in Ireland (ÓToole, 2013). In their own way, of course, all of the 100 objects are assertions of technological advancement. Whether they reflect a new age of sophistication in the hammering and twisting of gold or the dexterous production of illuminated manuscripts, all of these objects are touchstones in Irish techno-cultural evolution. In this sense, the inclusion of the Intel microprocessor in 98th position is no more than a matter of extending the timeline. More notable than the innovative nature of these objects, however, is their value as implicitly sacred artefacts. While many of the items served distinctly religious or spiritual functions, all can be read as objects of secular veneration, simply by virtue of their inclusion on the list. Reproduced in the printed book, the online exhibition, the phone and tablet apps, and available to view at the National Science Museum at Maynooth, the Intel microprocessor becomes, in a painfully literal sense, objectified by this project. Labelled, mapped and historicised by the 100 Objects initiative, the microprocessor is plucked from its hidden location within the computer and made visible in both virtual and actual museum spaces. With good reason too, it is a truly remarkable object of Irish manufacture.
While the ancient objects on the list are admired for their rarity, Intel’s ‘billion Pentium chips’ seem almost ludicrously numerous. In the book and the app, the associated image is an abstract blur of blues, pinks and greens, bringing the processor in line with the objects crafted centuries earlier by inviting the reader to admire the human capacity to produce objects which are both ingenious and beautiful. Perhaps most importantly, placing the Intel microprocessor on this long chronology also serves as an insight into its future as an archaeological relic. Future civilizations, the list implies, might one day marvel at this small object of sophistication in an otherwise primitive culture, in the same way that we might view a Mesolithic fish trap or flint macehead.

While the impact of Intel and other manufacturing plants was, as O’Toole has it, ‘unimaginable’ just a generation before, Ireland’s early involvement in the computer revolution was as much driven by economic opportunity as by technological proclivity. The contributing factors which made Ireland so attractive to international investors, including tax breaks and a young, well-educated, English-speaking workforce are discussed in detail elsewhere in this book. Suffice to say here that from the late 1980s, limited industrial development and a relatively unsophisticated economic infrastructure made it uniquely possible for Ireland to ‘leapfrog into the microelectronic age’ (Foster, 2008, p.3). While the economic and political conditions which made this possible are vitally important in forming a history of the period, generalising structural overviews threaten to obscure the lasting cultural significance at an individual or experiential level. So, while the material fact that more than half of the world’s processors were produced in County Kildare in the mid-1990s is indeed evidence of Ireland’s transformed reputation in manufacture and export, it tells us very little about the correlated impact on Irish lives. As the History of Ireland in 100 Objects demonstrates, the value and meaning of any object, or even billions of them, whether a Neolithic bowl or a microprocessor, depends upon the associated narrative interpretation. With this in mind, O’Toole asks in his introduction to 100 Objects whether a ‘physical object, in our digital age, [can] still mean anything?’ (O’Toole, 2013). Since the objects collated here are used as inspiration for broad and suggestive cultural commentaries, the more pertinent question might be whether objects are, in fact, expected to mean everything in the digital age. In the simplest terms then, the Intel microprocessor becomes symbolic of Ireland’s more general engagement with cyberspace – not so much an object as a metaphor. Beyond the Irish context, the internal components of computers, the physical objects which facilitate access to cyberspace, are