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Island Culture:

The Role of the Blasket Autobiographies in the Preservation of a Traditional Way of Life

Eamon Maher

The Blasket Islands, located off the west coast of Kerry, are remarkable for having inspired a flourishing literature, mainly autobiographical in nature, which is generally acknowledged as being of great anthropological value, as well as of significant literary merit. When one considers that the islands never had a population of more than around 160 persons (with an average of closer to half that number) during the years covered by the autobiographies, the existence of such an important chronicle of the simple and at times perilous life on these Atlantic outposts is all the more noteworthy. The language spoken on the Baskets was Gaelic and, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the language was in sharp decline, being used daily only in a small number of areas (mainly confined to the western Atlantic seaboard of Kerry and Connemara). Many commentators point to the very important role the Irish-speaking islands played in determining the identity of a newly established state. Fintan O'Toole remarks:

*The idea of an island had a special importance for the independent Irish state that was established in 1922. For the young country, the Blasket and Aran islands had, as well as their echoes of Greek myth, a more specific aura of pre-history. They were part of the creation myth of the Irish state in which, as John Wilson had put it 'the western island came to represent Ireland's mythic unity before the chaos of conquest ... at once the vestige and the symbolic entirety of an undivided nation.' They were a past that would also be a future. Their supposed isolation had preserved them from corruption, kept their aboriginal Irishness intact through the long centuries of foreign rule.*¹

There was clearly a strong tendency among many commentators at the turn of the last century to develop the myth that the west, and the islands in particular, encapsulated the true Gaelic spirit. Terence Browne notes:

*There was something poignant in fact about the way in which so many Irish imaginations in the early twentieth century were absorbed by the Irish west, almost as if from the anglicised rather mediocre social actuality with its manifest problems, its stagnant towns and villages, they sought inspiration for vision in extremities of geography and experience. They looked to the edge of things for imaginative sustenance.*²

There was therefore a romantic and idealised notion of island culture that often occluded the harsh reality of those trying to eke out an existence on these outposts from the limited resources at their disposal and in the absence of an efficient means of communicating with the mainland. In addition, the policies of successive Irish governments failed to halt the depopulation and ultimate desertion of the Blasket Islands. In the opinion of Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin: 'The abandonment of the Blasket Islands in 1953 symbolised the effects of marginalisation and fragmentation of Irish-speaking communities. The fact that the withdrawal from the Blaskets happened under the rule of a native government rather than under the former colonial administration of the British authorities demonstrated the real nature of government interests.'³ This symbolic event was certainly a glaring example of where Irish government priorities lay in the wake of the Second World War, a time when, according to Ellis, '10 per cent of Ireland's population owned 66.7 per cent of the land and capital.'⁴ Political leaders were probably more concerned with the promotion of economic wealth than with preserving Ireland's cultural heritage at this point. This is borne out by the fact that much pressure was being exerted on the Gaeltacht population to speak English. Ó Croidheáin quotes the 1963 *Tuarascáil Dheiridh* of An Coimisiún um Athbheochain, in which it was noted that 'even if the fall in population was stabilised, such administrative and cultural forces would continue to turn the Gaeltacht into an English-speaking area.'⁵ It can be thus deduced that the writing had been on the wall for a long time for those peripheral locations where the Irish language and traditional Irish customs were still extant. Economic forces and pragmatism would ensure that English became the working language of

a nation hungry to rid themselves of a bleak past and to make their way in the world.

To assess the importance of the Blasket autobiographies in a national and international context, one must be cognisant of the richness of the oral tradition of Gaelic culture and the love of story telling among the island inhabitants. The impending demise of their civilisation added urgency to the need these people felt to chronicle a way of life on the verge of extinction. Before any great culture goes under, it assumes the strong lyric utterance of the Swan Song. The main point this article seeks to make is that Tomás Ó Criomhthain's *The Islandman* (1929) and Muiris Ó Súilleabháin's *Twenty Years a-growing* (1933) are vital documents for anyone interested in what made the inhabitants of the Blaskets unique representatives of a traditional way of Irish life that finally succumbed to the inroads of modernity.⁶ I have chosen not to deal with Peig Sayers (1873-1958), as her autobiography, *Peig* (1936), was mandatory reading for generations of Irish students studying Irish for the Leaving Certificate. The reaction to the text was largely negative, perhaps due to the fact that young people aged between 16 and 18 found it difficult to relate to the series of misfortunes that befell this unfortunate woman, whose very name can engender anger and summon up bad memories.

The tone of Ó Criomhthain's *The Islandman* is more elegiac than that of Ó Súilleabháin's account, but this is largely as a result of its being written at a stage when its author was already well into his twilight years. Ó Súilleabháin had had the opportunity to witness the reaction to his predecessor's autobiography before describing his own childhood and early manhood spent on the island. He eventually left the Great Blasket to join An Garda Síochána, the Irish police force established after the country won independence from British rule. Because of life being viewed through child-like eyes and at a stage when Ó Súilleabháin was no longer living on the island, *Twenty years a-growing* is far more buoyant in its celebration of the joys associated with living in close proximity to nature, the excitement of hunting animals and collecting birds' eggs, the joys of music and conversation, the solidarity among neighbours. The harsher side of life, the pain of premature death or the doubts felt in relation to an uncertain future, the need to provide for a wife and family, these are all absent in the younger man's account. Declan Kiberd argues that the world evoked in *The Islandman* 'is almost medieval'⁷, an accurate description

when one considers that the islands were often inaccessible by sea and even when you did manage to reach the mainland, there was a few hours' walk to the nearest town of any significance, Dingle. The routine of life was poetic in its simplicity, punctuated by work, prayer, songs sung and stories recounted around the open fire. People with the gift of narration were particularly appreciated. A finely tuned and poetic language bereft of emotion is what characterises Ó Criomhthain's style. The Oxford professor, Robin Flower (1881-1946), a regular visitor to the Blaskets and the one who produced the translation I am using, was eager to preserve these qualities. He states in his Foreword:

*It seemed best therefore to adopt a plain, straightforward style, aiming at the language of ordinary men who narrated the common experiences of their life frankly and without any cultivated mannerism.*⁸

In fairness, Flower is highly successful in the task he set himself. The translation flows admirably, and the ghost of Gaelic is perceptible in the language used to convey people's emotions and in the descriptions of the landscape and the rituals. The book captures how sheltered the island inhabitants were from the outside world which the Atlantic ocean kept at something of a remove. Here is how Ó Criomhthain describes his first visit to Dingle:

We reached the quay, and my eyes were as big as two mugs with wonder. I saw gentlefolk standing there with chains across their bellies, poor people half-clad, cripples here and there on every side, and a blind man with his guide. Three great ships lay alongside the quay, laden with goods from overseas – yellow grain in one of them, timber in another, and coal in the third. (The Islandman, p.43)

The young boy, while awestruck at this new world, is also distrustful of it and of the people who inhabit it. He is convinced that the island way of life is superior from both a moral and a physical point of view. A frugal diet such as his own is portrayed as life enhancing, as the following lines demonstrate:

People don't know what is best for them to eat, for the men that ate that kind of food were twice as good as the men of today. The poor people of the countryside were accustomed to say that they fancied they would live

as long as the eagle if they but had the food of the Dingle people. But the fact is that the eaters of good meat are in the grave this long time, while those who lived on starvation diet are still alive and kicking. (p.101)

There is a definite note of pride in this assertion, a rare tone of conceit for a man not usually prone to this fault. But he is convinced that the inhabitants of the mainland are weaker because deprived of the type of mutual support and healthy lifestyle of the islanders. An example of this support can be seen in the author's reaction to the death of the woman whose house adjoined his family home. She was often prone to ill-tempered outbursts and tempestuous moods, but Ó Criomhthain detects goodness in her and knows that she would do all in her power to help out her neighbours in their hour of need. Thus, on discovering she is dying, Tomás immediately sets off with her son to get a priest. As he says himself: 'I had no wish to fail to do my share of the duty of helping to bring the priest to her.' (p.89) The journey was made hazardous by mist and choppy seas, but he was not been found wanting in his duty of care and, when the woman died, he knew he had done everything he could to assist her in her journey towards eternity:

That was the last end of the grey woman opposite, and I can tell you that, if it wasn't my luck to be rich the day she left the world, it wasn't for want of her good wishes. I hadn't a thing to say against her. (p.91)

On reaching adulthood, the need for him to find a wife becomes a priority. Practical considerations, and not love, are what guide the eventual choice of female companion. Although very taken with a woman from a nearby island, his sister convinced him and their parents that marrying near home was a much more sensible option, as there would be the advantage of having another family 'to lend a hand on a rainy day'. He was cognisant of the wisdom of this approach and took his newly acquired role as husband very seriously:

Marriage makes a great change in a man's life. His disposition and his view of all sorts of things alters, and, above all, it whets his appetite to be up and doing in life. As the phrase goes, I used to fancy, up to then, that food was sent from heaven to us. (p.146)

Ten children were born to the couple and they were not blessed with good fortune. Note the economical style he employs to describe the tragic fate that befell them:

The very first of them that we christened was only seven or eight years old when he fell off the cliff and was killed. From that time on they went as quickly as they came. Two died of measles, and every epidemic that came carried off one or other of them. (p.147)

In old age, he is left with one son on the island and another who has made his way to America. His wife and the other eight children have all passed away. At no stage does he indulge in self-pity, however. He simply states that 'when comrades part, the one that remains can but blunder along only too often, and so it was with me. I had to turn my attention to everything, and, do what I could, things would often go wrong.' (p.218). John McGahern, an avid admirer of Ó Críomhthain's stoicism, found the way he dealt with the tragedy life heaped on him admirable. In an essay entitled "What is my Language?", McGahern spent much time explaining the extent to which his evolution as a writer was influenced by the style of *The Islandman*, and the fortitude its author displayed in the face of life's tribulations. The reaction of Ó Críomhthain to his son's death after a fall from a cliff is revealing of a man who knew that he could not afford to mourn his loss for too long, arguing: 'Well, those that pass cannot feed those that remain, and we, too, had to put out our oars again and drive on.' (p.186) McGahern makes the following observation in relation to this attitude: 'Death is like a roll call (for Ó Críomhthain). There is nothing for it but to endure and go on. Each new day will break on the world with its own claims, demands that care nothing for sorrow. Sorrow, because it blinds and weakens us, is an impairment, and the action required by the new day will require all our faculties and strength.'⁹

The most important quality of *The Islandman* is the anthropological insights it supplies to a way of life that has now vanished. This becomes particularly acute at the close of the book, when Ó Críomhthain acknowledges that he sees his narrative precisely as a means of naming a civilisation that he considers worthy of commemoration. His race may be on the point of extinction, but it will be preserved through his account:

I have written minutely of much that we did, for it was my wish that somewhere there should be a memorial of it all, and I have done my best to set down the character of the people about me so that some record of us might live after us, for the like of us will never be again. (p.244)

These are some of the most famous lines in all of Gaelic literature. The book builds up to this crescendo of praise for the uniqueness of a race living on a small expanse of land off the Kerry coast. By concentrating on the local, Ó Criomhthain succeeds in capturing a universal truth. As McGahern points out: 'So free is the action of everything that is not essential that it could as easily have taken place on the shores of Brittany or Greece as on the Dingle Peninsula.'¹⁰ Ó Criomhthain shows us how indomitable the human spirit is and the epic proportions are evident in the account of one feeble man wrestling against the mighty forces of nature and occasionally bending them to his will. He manages to slay a seal that he sees basking on the white beach, thus supplying meat for the island population for a few days. This is his *gaisce*, or great warrior deed. But Tomás is not the only noble inhabitant on the island. He is always at pains to point out how sexual propriety was maintained, even among young people whose sexuality was in full bloom. He writes:

There was a special house in the village that the young folk, boys and girls, used to gather in and stay till midnight. To give some account of that house and the young people that used to gather in it, I am proud to be able to say that nothing wrong ever happened among them for the sixty-seven years that I've known it. (p.141)

An obvious desire to emphasise the high moral standards that characterised the young islanders can be detected in these lines. There can be no doubt that the author felt justified in praising what were for him the most admirable traits of his race.

Whereas Ó Criomhthain's elegiac tone is appropriate to his particular account, Ó Súilleabháin's purpose in *Twenty years a-growing* was to celebrate in a different way the lives of the people with whom he spent the formative years of his life. There is a keen awareness in his descriptions also of what is unique about the islanders, but the tone is lighter, more upbeat. He too realises that their like will never be again, but there is also

the realisation that it is impossible to resist the lure of the wider world and the opportunities it affords those with the talent and energy needed to achieve success. The opening chapter of *Twenty years a-growing* recounts the young child's life in Dingle, where he had been placed in the care of a family after the death of his mother. It is clear that Muiris was possessed of the same mischievous nature as many children of his age. He and his companion Mickil regularly got into trouble for skipping school to head off on high-spirited adventures. School was a chore, and sometimes an ordeal as the colourful picture of the schoolmistress reveals:

*The schoolmistress teaching us was a woman who was as grey as a badger with two tusks of teeth hanging down over her lip, and, if she wasn't cross, it isn't day yet. She was the devil itself, or so I thought. It was many a day I would be in terror when that look she had would come over her face, a look that would go through you.*¹¹

Ó Súilleabháin is adept at evoking these childhood experiences with all the wonderment that comes from innocence. He is also aware that the success of narrating a tale depends on the degree to which you succeed in maintaining the reader's interest in what you are saying. The opening lines demonstrate how this book will not contain the wisdom of *The Islandman*, because it is being written by someone who is still undergoing his apprenticeship: 'There is no doubt but youth is a fine thing though my own is not over yet and wisdom comes with age.' (p.1) Alan Harrison points out that *Twenty years a-growing*, while dealing with the same basic material as *The Islandman*, views existence through a totally different lens. The following lines capture his stance in relation to Ó Súilleabháin's book: 'It is, in short, a joyful and sometimes gleeful celebration of youth in an ideal landscape written by one who has left that landscape behind him. It compares more than favourably with the first hundred and fifty pages of *The Islandman*, but does not show the same fortitude in the face of hardship that gives the earlier book some of the characteristic full flavour of living the island life.'¹² It may be for this reason that the later book has a greater appeal for young readers not so directly concerned with the vicissitudes of life. Ó Súilleabháin is captivated by the island when he returns to live there after a few years in foster care on the mainland. He loves the stories of his grandfather, with whom he had a very close relationship, the sight of the birds swooping on the cliff-face or diving down

to catch fish in the ocean. Whereas for Ó Criomhthain, landscape was described only insofar as it was reclaimed and cultivated— a strand was there to be crossed, a sea to be fished, a town to be reached, a shore to be gained, walked upon, lived upon - Ó Súilleabháin was more prone to lyrical outbursts such as the following:

Hundreds of birds were flying around, rabbits leaping from one clump of thrift to another, a fragrant smell from the white heather and the fern, big vessels far out on the horizon you would think were on fire in the sunlight, a heat haze here and there in the ravines, and Kerry diamonds lying all around weakening my eyes with their sparkle. (p.41)

Ó Criomhthain, because of his struggle to dominate his natural environment in order to secure food and shelter for himself and his family, never really had the luxury of ‘seeing’ the beauty that surrounded him. Nowhere in *The Islandman*, for example, does one encounter the excitement of the day spent at the Ventry Races, where the young boy has his first taste of porter amid the general mayhem and revelry of the swarming masses congregated for this event. Songs, drink and fights are all very much in evidence in this description as people attempt to escape for a short while from the drudgery of daily life. Other days bring new experiences also: the sight of the mackerel flailing about in the nets of the fishermen, the attendance at the wake of a dead islander, where pipes were passed around along with food and drink, a night spent on a nearby island, which reminded the boy of what Robinson Crusoe must have felt when he was marooned. One might think that this remote location would not have been affected by World War I, but it was, and in a most positive manner, as things began to appear, almost miraculously, on the water from ships that had fallen victim to German gunship attacks: ‘Money was piled up. There was no spending. Nothing was bought. There was no need. It was to be had on top of the water, - flour, meat, lard, petrol, wax, margarine, wine in plenty, even shoes, stockings and clothes.’ (p.142) Some coloured members of a shipwrecked crew end up on the island, where they evoke amazement: “Great God of Virtues”, cried an old woman who would not believe there were such people in the world, “Why wouldn’t they clean themselves?” (p.150)

Towards the end of *Twenty years a-growing* the inevitable departure of Muiris from the island adds a nostalgic note to his descriptions. He

appears to be even more lyrical in his descriptions, now that he is aware that he will soon be gone from what is to him an earthly paradise:

There was a light breeze from the east, frosts on the ground, hooded crows cawing across the fields, thrushes, blackbirds and starlings singing sweetly in the meadows; and if you turned your eye, seaward, herring gulls and black-backed gulls diving in the water and a sea-raven among them hunting small fish. (p.201)

The depopulation of the island was unfolding before his eyes – people heading to America and the mainland in their droves. His friend, the academic George Thomson, who regularly visited the Blaskets, urged him to join the police force rather than emigrating to America. During the journey to Dublin, he felt very much an outsider, a sentiment that is reinforced initially by the use of English among the people on the train and in the towns they passed through. Seated in the train, he summoned up in his mind the peaceful island landscape he had just left: 'I shut my eyes closed and soon the village appeared in perfect likeness before my face.' (p.269) He would not return to it for some time, and when he does so at the end of the book, there is a definite sense that the way of life he so loved is soon to be no more: 'When I returned home the lamps were being lit in the houses. I went in. My father and grandfather were sitting on either side of the fire, my grandfather smoking his old pipe.' (p.298) E.M. Foster sees in these words the death knell of a civilisation: 'it is as if a shutter descends, behind which all three generations disappear, and their island with them.' (p.vi)

These two Blasket autobiographies play an important role in preserving the traditional way of life that characterised these remote Atlantic islands. This role has been described by Declan Kiberd as constituting 'a real homage to past culture: for in each text a deep humility before that tradition is accompanied by an invincible pride.'¹³ It is paradoxical to reflect that while successive governments failed to come to any firm decisions as to how to ensure a viable future for the island population, they were very quick to extol the virtues of their way of life as soon as everyone had fled the Blaskets. This type of attitude is probably what prompted the authorities to put *Peig* as a compulsory text for anyone studying Irish in the Leaving Certificate. De Valera himself, always a politician with his finger on the

pulse, visited the Blaskets personally in 1947 and wanted to meet Muiris Ó Súilleabháin outside the house of the now famous writer. Diarmuid Ferriter observes that Ó Súilleabháin was so disgusted with government hypocrisy that he refused to be complicit in this staged event.¹⁴ The visit did nothing to stop the rot in any case, and the last inhabitants left, as stated previously, in October 1953. But even though the Blasket islands are no longer inhabited, there is a real sense in which the imaginative life of its people continues to resonate across languages and cultures thanks to the work undertaken by Ó Criomhthain and Ó Súilleabháin, and their respective translators of course.

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Notes:

- ¹ Fintan O'Toole, *The Ex-Isle of Erin: Images of a Global Ireland* (Dublin: New Island, 1997), p.112.
- ² Terence Browne, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002* (London: Harper Perennial, 3rd ed., 2004), p.81.
- ³ Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin, *Language from Below: The Irish Language, Ideology and Power in 20th-Century Ireland* (Oxford, Peter Lang, 2006). p.244-245.
- ⁴ P. Beresford Ellis, *A History of the Irish Working-Class* (London: Gollancz., 1972), p.291. Quoted in Ó Croidheáin, p.245.
- ⁵ Ó Croidheáin, *Language from Below*, p.245.
- ⁶ Ó Criomhthain (often referred to as O'Crohan) was the older of the two. He lived between 1856 and 1937. Ó Súilleabháin's dates are 1904-1950: he therefore died at a much younger age than his predecessor.
- ⁷ Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (London: Granta, 2000), p.522. Kiberd's grasp and appreciation of the island autobiographies are exceptional.

- ⁸ Tomás Ó Criomhthain, *The Islandman*. Translated by Robin Flower (Oxford University Press, 2000), p.x. All my references will be to this edition.
- ⁹ John McGahern, "What is my Language". Special edition of the *Irish University Review*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Spring/Summer 2005, pp.1-12, p.8.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.4.
- ¹¹ Muiris Ó Súilleabháin, *TwentyYears-a-Growing*. Translated by George Thomson with an Introductory note by E.M. Foster (Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.1-2. All references will be to this edition.
- ¹² Alan Harrison, "Review Article: Blasket Literature", in the *Irish University Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2, Autumn-Summer 2001, p.492.
- ¹³ Kiberd, *Irish Classics*, p.521.
- ¹⁴ Diarmuid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland: 1900-2000*, London: Granta, 2004, p.381.