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2005

## Islandman translated: Tomas O'Crohan, autobiography and the politics of culture

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**Islandman Translated: Tomás O’Crohan, Autobiography  
and the Politics of Culture**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the award of the degree

**Doctor of Philosophy**

from

**University of Wollongong**

by

**Irene Lucchitti, BA (Hons)**

**Faculty of Arts**

**2005**

## **CERTIFICATION**

I, Irene Lucchitti, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

IRENE LUCCHITTI

11 November 2005

## **ABSTRACT**

The writings of Tomas O’Crohan in the early twentieth century were celebrated upon publication as icons of Irishness and the voice of the mysterious Gaeltacht expressing itself at last and just in time. Appearing at a sensitive time in Irish history, the reading of these texts as relics of an heroic Irish past nourished hopes of a brave Irish future. Their English translations, though received no less enthusiastically, have often been dismissed as imperfect and undesirable conduits to the author.

Informed by the basic theme of dialogue, this thesis examines the politics of culture that brought the Islandman, man and book, into being, and that have surrounded the texts since they first appeared. It considers both the autobiography itself and the translation in terms of cultural process as well as product. It identifies the desire to control the reading of the texts as a legacy of the Gaelic League desire to wall the Irish culture in and examines it from several points of view – most notably from the points of view of translation theory, autobiography theory and, to a lesser extent, post-colonial theory. These modes of enquiry show that the sites of constraint imposed upon the texts reflect a cultural anxiety about what is revealed about this community that was made to represent Ireland. They demonstrate that the conventional reading of the texts, which privileges Tomás’ fisherman identity, has veiled the writer protagonist inscribed in the texts, subordinating his identity as a writer to his identity as a peasant. The thesis contests the reading of Tomás’ work as “representative” and “authentic” with a recognition of the personal aspects of the individual self that Tomás inscribed in his work.

## **KEYWORDS**

**Autobiography**

**Blasket Islands**

**Gaelic Revival**

**Ireland**

**Islandman**

**O'Crohan**

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***For Pasquale***



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter One</b>	
Wild Things and Western Men: Impressions of the People, Culture and Language of the Blaskets	16
<b>Chapter Two</b>	
“Illiterate Natives of A Wet Rock”? Oral Tradition and Literacy on the Basket	50
<b>Chapter Three</b>	
“The Lap of the Lost Mother”: The Gaeltacht and Revival	84
<b>Chapter Four</b>	
“The Song We Made Together”: Cultural Production and Translation in the Blaskets	127
<b>Chapter Five</b>	
“Each With His Own Tune”: The Personal Voice of Tomás O’Crohan	178
<b>Chapter Six</b>	
“Sé Seo Mo Scéalsa”: Tomás O’Crohan and Autobiography	209
<b>Conclusion</b>	
“All that Seaboard a Silent Land”: Echoes of Voices Still	237
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>241</b>

## INTRODUCTION

Tomás O’Crohan’s autobiography, *The Islandman*<sup>1</sup> (O’Crohan, 1937), came into my hands on the day that I first saw the Great Blasket Island, impressive, forbidding and shrouded in mist on the other side of a hostile sea. It was not the first time I had travelled the road past Slea Head and on to Dunquin, but on the previous occasion, the sea mist and fog had been so thick and heavy that there was nothing to suggest the presence of an Island out there to a stranger such as myself. Even on a fine day, as a stranger, you are not really sure what you are looking at through the windscreen as you travel that twisting, turning road, where there so often appears to be wild ocean between yourself and the road ahead. One promontory after another raises its head as you take each bend, with the result that, when the Great Blasket finally hoves into view, it is hard to be sure that you are looking at an island. Of course, the wild variations in the light, mist and weather that colour the ocean between the mainland and the Great Blasket compromise the perception even more, with the result that no two journeys along this road prompt the same response in the traveller.

The uncertainty of my perceptions, aroused by these early glimpses of the Great Blasket Island, stayed with me as I read *The Islandman*, Robin Flower’s long-awaited translation of the original Irish text, *An tOileánach* (Ó Criomhthain, 1929)<sup>2</sup>. I could not help but wonder if this story about such a seemingly inhospitable place could really be true, as the tales of sea-beasts and diving for treasure reminded me vaguely of old adventure stories I had

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<sup>1</sup> Originally written in Irish, it appeared as *An tOileánach* in 1929. It was translated into English by Robin Flower, appearing as *The Islandman* in 1937. The English text has been republished several times. The edition referred to throughout this study is the 1951 edition.

<sup>2</sup> There are differences between Irish names and their anglicised forms. When this author is referred to in relation to the Irish texts he wrote, his name is written as “Tomás Ó Criomhthain”. When he is referred to in relation to the English translations of his work, his name is written as “Tomás O’Crohan”. This form of his name is used in accordance with “the common practice of combining the Gaelic form of the first name with the anglicised form of the surname” (Thomson, 1998: 11).

read at school, stories I knew to be fiction. I remembered the impossibly heroic protagonists of these stories and saw something similar in the heroism of the Islandman. And yet, as the story reached its close, my wondering was dispelled by the Islandman's final paragraphs, so persuasive of sincerity, in which he expresses the depth of the loss he has known throughout his long life and confesses the most human of sentiments -- the unhappy awareness of the approach of death and the desire to avoid it.

I am old now. Many a thing has happened in the running of my days till now. People have come into the world and have gone again. There are only five older than me alive in the Island. They have the pension. I have only two months to go till that date -- a date I have no fancy for. In my eyes it is a warning that death is coming [...]  
(244).

Persuasively sincere too, was his summation of his life, so full of quiet dignity and so eloquent in its restrained emotion.

I can remember being at my mother's breast. [...]. I remember being a boy; I remember being a young man; I remember the bloom of my vigour and my strength. I have known famine and plenty, fortune and ill-fortune, in my life-days till to-day. They are great teachers for one who marks them well (244).

Tomás' <sup>3</sup> reluctance for death expresses itself further in his fear of being forgotten after death. With the expression of his wish to be remembered by means of this book, he acknowledges his relationship with the reader who, alone, can save him from what he fears.

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<sup>3</sup> Although it is customary in critical literature to refer to authors by their surnames, this convention is not observed with any regularity in the case of the Blasket authors who are often, but not always referred to by their given names. Thus, the Islandman is referred to variously as "Tomás", "Ó Criomhthain" and "O'Crohan". Early and contemporary discussion of the texts, particularly that of commentators familiar with the author or with the district in which he lived, favours the use of the given name. Criticism that concerns a broad body of literature, of which Blasket literature is but a part, often opts for the use of the surname in either of its forms. My concentration on the work of this one author, and my reading of his explicit desire for a relationship with the reader, leads me to think of him and to refer to him as "Tomás".

One day there will be none left in the Blasket of all I have mentioned in this book -- and none to remember them. I am thankful to God, who has given me the chance to preserve from forgetfulness those days that I have seen with my own eyes and have borne their burden, and that when I am gone men will know what life was like in my time and the neighbours that lived with me (244).

The importance Tomás attached to his relationship with the reader may be glimpsed in the very last sentence of the book:

I hope in God that she and my father will inherit the Blessed Kingdom; and that I and every reader of this book after me will meet them in the Island of Paradise (245).

This final sentence brings the author's relationship with the reader to the fore. It places the reader within the intimate space of Tomás' family circle and within the life cycle of the Island. Even more importantly, it also links this relationship with his hope for immortality.

I followed my reading of *The Islandman* with a reading of his earlier work, *Island Cross-Talk* (O'Crohan, 1986), Tim Enright's translation of *Allagar na hInise* (Ó Cíomhthain, 1928). Voices strange and idiosyncratic seemed to come, as if by magic, straight from the Island to the page as I read this text. They were voices quite different from the austere and stoic voice of the old Islandman of the autobiography. As the community seemingly came to life before my eyes, I realised that these books had allowed me a privileged glimpse into a world I had not even known existed until I had seen its crumbling ruins a few days before.

A reading of the critical literature about Tomás O'Crohan's books reveals a very common view that his works are valued for their "authenticity". This view has coloured the reception of Tomás' books since their earliest days. It could not fail to do so, as it was first expressed by Tomás' editor, An Seabhac, in his Introduction to the first edition of *Allagar na hInise*. It was reproduced in large measure in Tim Enright's Introduction to *Island Cross-Talk*. Many critics continue to cite the "authentic" information about life inside an old-world Gaelic

community that Tomás provides or his exceptionally beautiful use of an "authentic" form of the Irish language as reasons for the significance of his writing. Such critics include Daniel Binchy (1934), David Greene (1972), Seán Ó Tuama (1995), James MacKillop (1987), Niall Ó Ciosáin (1993) and, though she qualifies the view by insisting on the literary nature of Tomás' endeavour, Danielle Jacquin (1998). Dissenting voices are raised by Tom Biuso who identifies a disregard for the literary qualities of Blasket literature and ascribes it to "the curse of close perspective" (1984) and by Cathal Ó Háinle who sees more "exquisite literary truth" than historical accuracy in Tomás' writing (1993).

The impression that the Blasket books are valued mostly as cultural artefacts was emphatically confirmed in the course of a research trip to Ireland, undertaken at an early stage in this study. I frequently encountered the view that these books are read and valued as social documents and as linguistic artefacts of an old Ireland. I was told that the Blasket books are not read "as autobiography" or "as literature" but as testaments to an Ireland now gone. Many people I met on this journey expressed the view that the books are only really accessible and meaningful to people who had grown up within the culture. The translations were dismissed by many of those with whom I spoke as unworthy of serious study into Blasket literature.

I was unable to reconcile the excluding nature of the relationship said so often to exist between these books and "the culture" with my own response to them. My encounters with these narrow and prescriptive views of the text led me to form the intention of studying Tomás' writing through the translation of Robin Flower, of considering it outside the parameters laid down by Irish convention and of paying particular attention to its autobiographical dimensions. Discussions of these intentions met with an almost uniform negativity as my journey progressed. Gradually, a politics of culture began to emerge from the discussions. A conversation turning on my intended study led one local Irish scholar to remark that the

autobiographical aspects of Tomás' writings had never received much attention as Irish commentators were usually preoccupied with "broader issues", issues he did not go on to identify and which I sensed were none of my concern. The tantalising hint of "broader issues" was echoed and amplified by another commentator who not only reiterated the view that Irish critics had their own, again unspecified, preoccupations concerning the Blasket books, but also expressed his view that, for the most part, English critics considered "Irish peasant writing" unworthy of serious study. It was these remarks that made it suddenly and abundantly clear that the literary space into which I had wandered so naively was a most political cultural space.

Discussion of the issue of reading in translation also provoked responses marked by a politics of culture. I was told that any approach through the English translation would deprive the texts of their cultural significance and warned that every sentence in Blasket writing carries a cultural load that is not apparent to those who do not speak Irish or to people outside the culture. There seemed to be an accepted wisdom that the texts embody or contain an "authenticity" that is available only to Irish readers. While the translation of Robin Flower attracted no specific criticism, there was nevertheless a view that there is something intrinsically inexpressible in the Blasket books that cannot be captured in translation and that, perversely, it is in the "inexpressible something" that the essence of these works is to be found.

The cumulative effect of these views was to reveal that the space into which I had wandered was not only a cultural and political space. It was also a well-guarded, protected space. The other effect of these remarks was to endow my research with a certain uneasy feeling that, in spite of the fact that Oxford University Press had been publishing the Blasket books in translation for decades, and that others had published them prior to that, in wishing to

study these texts, I was violating a private Irish zone. Quite often on this journey, I felt as though I had stumbled, uninvited, into a private world. While Fintan O'Toole might write of the Blaskets being "wrapped in a special mist" (O'Toole, 2003: 81), I found the barrier between the texts and myself to be more substantial. Every inquiry I made brought me up against a door I seemed unable to open. My intention to study these works that I enjoyed and respected began to seem curiously naïve and inappropriate. But, as I considered the remarks of an academic who said that the Blasket books had been "done to death" and that no matter how a research project began, it ended with the inevitable reiteration of the "same old views", discomfort gradually gave way to a sense of the possibility that an "outsider's" perspective might disrupt this cycle.

Like the proverbial seeker who fails to find the forest because he cannot see past the trees, I had been seeking a "topic", a way in to these texts I wished to study, while the "topic" had been all around me throughout my search, in my own experience of the politics of culture that swirled around the texts and those who engaged with them. The dissonance between the unusually uniform and prescriptive discussion of these literary texts that I so often encountered and my own fulfilling experience as a reader of the Blasket texts, coupled with my own growing sense of transgression at having entered what appeared to be a private cultural space, provides the thesis with its focus and its premise.

The thesis concerns the impact of the politics of culture upon the creation and reception of Tomás O'Crohan's writing. It demonstrates that this literature has been read in an unusually prescriptive fashion and that the uniform, almost dogmatic reading of his work has its origins in the cultural politics of the era in which Tomás wrote. It identifies the narrative about the creation of the texts that has framed them since their first publication as the source of the narrow readings. It demonstrates that this narrative offers an incomplete disclosure of

the cultural influences and processes to which Tomás was subjected, that it hides the deliberate attempt to have the author produce a certain kind of story. Reading this incomplete disclosure in the light of post-colonial theory allows recognition of a cultural colonisation of the Blaskets - -- not by the foreign visitors, as one post-colonial critic has recently suggested (Quigley, 2003) - -- but by the Irish nation. The misrepresentation it engendered fostered the myth of the naïve, native genius so useful to Revival and bolstered the claims of the “authentic” made for the text. Claims of an unmediated authenticity in the language and content of Tomás' writing are examined from several points of view and found to be not only unsustainable but symptomatic of the cultural and political malaise of the era.

The framing narrative is also shown to represent an attempt to control the reader's encounter with the author that is still potent today. The desire to control the reading of the text, a legacy of the Revival desire to wall the culture in, is examined from several points of view -- most notably from the points of view of translation theory, post-colonial theory and autobiography theory -- and found to reflect a cultural anxiety concerning what is revealed about this community that was made to represent Ireland. The thesis further argues that the conventional reading of the texts, which privileges Tomás' fisherman identity, has veiled the writer protagonist inscribed in the text, subordinating his identity as a writer to his identity as a peasant. This has had the impact of limiting recognition of Tomás as a writer and hindering an unstinting recognition of his work as literature.

Finally, the thesis argues for and offers alternative modes of response to these texts by which Tomás and the reader might both be set free from the constraints that have for so long been imposed upon his writing.

The Island, so much more than merely the *locus* of the text, provides the thesis with a central motif. An ambiguous place that offers its people both freedom and confinement



simultaneously, a place that is, each day, both cleansed and sullied, built up and knocked down by what is visited upon it by the capricious ocean, the Island finds theoretical representation in Mikhail Bakhtin's image of the writer at the centre of an "ideological environment" (Medvedev P N / Bakhtin, M, 1978: 14). Bakhtin's theory demonstrates that the environment in which the writer dwells and writes is fluid and composed of many diverse ideological forces that form his subjectivity, continually informing and modifying his intellect and the literature he creates.

Applied to Tomás' writing, the notion of an ideological environment recognises the cultural primacy of the oral tradition of the Island, allowing it to be seen, not so much as a cultural phenomenon, now mourned as lost, but as the repository of Island self-representation and the bedrock of Tomás' subjectivity and writerly sensibility. Features of Island life, such as its communal life, its customs, stories and articles of faith, and outside influences such as the mainland press, the visitors, the literature from abroad, the incursion of mainland politics, the impact of returning émigrés, all become something more than matters of historical or cultural curiosity when considered as part of the ideological environment that surrounded Tomás as he undertook his literary tasks. This image of the Island with outside forces lapping at its shores further contests the depiction of the Island as an uncontaminated cultural space and demonstrates one of the many difficulties with the claim of an unsullied cultural authenticity that has been made for its literature.

The notion of an ideological ring surrounding a writer allows the thesis to move beyond a historical rendition of the tumultuous times in which Tomás lived to consider the movements and events of his day as modifying influences upon his evolving subjectivity. The thesis explores the reasons why and the means by which the Islandman's texts came to be implicated in the cultural and political projects of the nation of Ireland which were themselves

influenced by contemporary European cultural ideologies. As the Gaelic League aimed to restore to Ireland the language that the Blasket Islanders had never lost and had developed a philosophy and an agenda that rested heavily upon the images of the West and the Western Island, the Blasket Island was soon harnessed to the projects of Irish cultural politics (Foster, 1987: xv-xvi). This resulted in a political “owning” of the texts that began with attempts to have the Island authors express League ideology and has continued with attempts to control the reading of the texts that have never really ended.

Examination of the circumstances in which Tomás' texts were written demonstrates that his own personal desire to write was yoked to the nation's perceived need for a most particular kind of text. It uncovers the deliberate attempts to direct the author, to have him write a particular kind of story that might nevertheless be represented as his own. Bakhtin's notion of an ideological ring allows a reassessment of the impact of various individuals implicated in the production of Tomás' writing in that it assists in differentiating between those who facilitated his work and those who attempted to constrain him in some way. It allows a reconsideration of the significance of Brian Ó Ceallaigh<sup>4</sup> as well as a reappraisal of the culturally ambiguous impact of the editor, An Seabhac<sup>5</sup>, whose involvement with the manuscripts simultaneously constrained and facilitated the author's work.

It also allows a deeper appreciation of the cultural complexity of Robin Flower. On his first visit, a young scholar seeking experience with the Irish language for professional reasons, Flower very quickly moved beyond being part of the ideological wave that washed over the Island to achieve an Island identity of his own and an honoured place in Island life and culture, a place inside the cultural ring. So mutual were the relationships between the Islanders and

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<sup>4</sup> Also referred to as “Brian Kelly” and “Brian O’Kelly”. “Brian” is also sometimes written as “Bryan”.

<sup>5</sup> “An Seabhac” (“The Hawk”) was the pen-name by which Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha was known. His surname is sometimes written as “Sugrue”.

Flower that it cannot be denied that the cultural influence between them flowed in two directions. While Flower's cultural contribution to and impact upon the Island and upon Tomás were undeniably immense, it is also true yet less remarked upon that the Island was an extremely significant feature of the ideological ring that surrounded Flower who was himself a writer.

The thesis demonstrates that, though he wrote in a lonely place and charted a lonely progress through life, Tomás' autobiographical writing was not the work of an isolated man but the fruit of a pervasively dialogic cultural environment. It identifies and explores the many layers of dialogue in which Tomás engaged as he wrote -- with his community, with his ancestral past, with Brian Ó Ceallaigh, with selves past and present and, importantly, with each individual reader that opens his books. This reappraisal of the role of An Seabhac in the production and reception of the texts, using the theory of dialogism, casts further doubt upon the "authenticity" of the text as it recasts his editorial activity as a largely hidden dialogue with the author and as a manipulative dialogue with the "nation" and the reader that has not yet ended.

The role played by Flower's translation in the transmission and reception of Tomás' writing is also considered in terms of dialogue as well as in relation to the frequent claim of a special relationship between the Blasket texts and an Irish readership. The validity of the assertion of this exclusive and excluding relationship is compromised by the fact that Tomás has always been more widely read in English than in Irish. Although Flower's translation of *An tOileánach* into English has been both praised and scorned over the years, criticism of his work has rarely if ever turned on linguistic matters. Recent developments in the field of translation studies offer the tools necessary to explore the resistance to this translation and allow a recognition of Flower's translation as the product of a multi-layered series of dialogues

between two friends, Tomás and *Bláithín* ("little flower"), as Flower was known to his Island friends, between two languages and between two cultures. Attention to Flower's explanation of his mode of translation and an examination of the translation itself and the many responses to it combine to support the view that the resistance to Flower's translation represents a refusal of dialogue that is political rather than linguistic.

The notion of voice is implicit in any discussion of dialogism or dialogue. It is the medium that allows the author and reader connection one with the other. Many of Tomás' critical readers allude to his "voice" and their commentaries are coloured by several broad themes. The first and dominant of these themes is that his voice represented something other than, larger than, Tomás himself - -- some say it was a representative voice, some a communal voice, others say it was the voice of the Gaeltacht, a mythic voice. A second theme, expressed by many, describes his voice as an "authentic" voice, a view that is all too often supported by allusions to the "truth" or verifiable accuracy of the material facts of his culture that his writing contains. Though the uniqueness of his voice is often enough remarked upon, the reading of his voice as "representative", "communal" or "authentic" has had the effect of producing a muted and incomplete recognition of the personal quality of Tomás voice. At first glance, his near-silence on the painful facts of his family life seem to support the view that Tomás offers little of his interior life and that he makes little attempt to communicate a sense of the personal. And yet, I recalled, it was not only the voices of the Island but the feeling that Tomás had confided in me, his reader that had kept his books alive in my memory for so many years.

Tomás' decades of participation in the oral tradition of the Island made him expert in matters of voice. Not only does he demonstrate his expert knowledge of voice and a craftsmanlike ability to manipulate and modulate it, he also expresses an awareness of the

importance and power of voice in a commentary so substantial that it might be read as one of his great themes. He repeatedly comments upon the power of voice, the futility of voice, the danger of voice, the consolation of voice, the intimacy of some voices and the mystery of others.

For these reasons, the thesis explores the notion that there were no accidents or oversights in his management of voice in his texts. Silence is read as a mode of voice and what appear to be gaps and silences in the text are read as deliberate literary strategies on the part of the author. The silences Tomás writes into his texts have many significances -- a tactful silence might, for instance, demonstrate the discretion necessary to Island life, while a heavy, ponderous silence might voice the futility of utterance or one of the darker human emotions. On more than one occasion, he uses silence to vocalise his response to life *in extremis*, a response that is as often philosophical as it is emotional. Recognised as a response, silence is shown to be as dialogical as other modes of voice. In the hands of a master, it is also as eloquent. Although the many silences inscribed in Tomás' work have a variety of purposes and significances, what they each convey, without exception, is a clear and certain sense of the Islandman character's resolute self-governance and the Islandman author's exacting control over his own words.

Bakhtin's notions of polyphony and monologism (Morris, 1994) provide further useful tools with which to consider Tomás' literary construction and management of voice and silence in *Island Cross-Talk* and *The Islandman*. We see that *Island Cross-Talk*, which offers Tomás' picture of Island life, exhibits an exuberant polyphony, abounding with voices that are often witty, lively and boisterous. Many of the characters are so completely painted with their own words and seem so fully to be the authors of their own discourse that it is possible to ignore or forget the author at the helm. Readers need to remind themselves that what they are

reading is not merely a series of memories summoned up and written down verbatim, but a collection of finely crafted literary renditions of Island discourse filtered through Tomás' memory and literary intention.

The extravagant polyphony of *Island Cross-Talk* is notably absent from *The Islandman*, signalling the author's new intention to write his own life. The direct speech that was the hallmark of the earlier book is used more sparingly in the autobiography, becoming increasingly less common as the book proceeds. The aged, masculine voice of the narrator dominates the text in what appears to be a move towards monologism. His consciousness is the filter through which all other voices are heard. The witty, pithy, vibrant dialogues of the earlier text are gone.

Although his silencing of most other voices has an autobiographical appropriateness, Tomás' management of voice does more than represent the steady emptying of the Island and his own progress towards solitariness. He also signals that, in the contemplation of his life and in the creation of a record of it, he is engaging in a new series of sombre dialogues -- with himself and with the reader. This shift in voice is the means by which Tomás calls his reader into relationship and the means by which this relationship is made explicit in the text and shown to be central to his purpose of preserving himself and his community from oblivion. It was this voice, this invitation to relationship, and Tomás' desire to be remembered that had kept the old man and the Island in my memory for so many years and made it impossible to think of him or refer to him impersonally as "O'Crohan".

Tomás' explicit assertion of the authorial presence in *The Islandman* draws attention to the "I" at its heart and makes it clear that the work is autobiographical and that Tomás has inscribed his own version of his life in this text that has so often been read in terms that deny its personal nature -- as "representative", "authentic", "documentary" or "stern", "stoic" and

“impersonal”. Awareness of the expressly autobiographical intention of the author informs a search for the personal in the text and locates it in the story of Tomás, the writer, the craftsman, that is inscribed in the text.

His many addresses to the reader not only express his desire for dialogue but confirm the views of many theorists working in the field of life-writing that autobiography is inevitably dialogical. Philippe Lejeune for instance locates the truth and meaning of autobiographical discourse in the pact between the author and his reader (Lejeune, 1989: 3-30). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write similarly of an intersubjective exchange between author and reader that holds the key to the meaning of the text (2003: 13).

Borrowing from Ken Plummer, Smith and Watson point to “coaxing” as a special kind of dialogue that occurs in the case of autobiography. It is a term that refers to a person, an event or a set of conditions that elicits a life-story from a writer. The thesis explores the implications of the fact that there were two separate layers of “coaxing” in the production of Tomás’ autobiography. The coaxing that is most frequently commented upon, especially in the framing narrative that has always encompassed the text, is that which came initially from Brian Ó Ceallaigh and was continued by An Seabhadh. The other, which has hitherto received much less attention, if indeed any at all, is that which came from within Tomás himself. Recent findings in life-writing theory, that coaxers always get the story they ask for (Smith and Watson, 2003: 50-56) and that the influence of coaxing therefore inevitably remains in the text, make it clear that there must be more than one story encoded in this one text. As Tomás not only wrote the story he was asked for but also wrote the story he wanted to tell himself, we find inscribed in the text the fisherman hero of one coaxing process and the writer hero of the other.

Marrying life-writing theory's assertion of autobiography as "literature" with Tomás' self-representation as a writer, the thesis finds the keys to the personal in literary components of his writing. Eschewing the search for the authentic or true or Irish in his text, it reads his themes and images for signs of the self he wished to create and record. These images and themes reveal a self that is not a relic of a lost, imagined Ireland but a modern man deliberately and artistically engaging with loss and change, unwilling to pass silent and forgotten from this world. They oblige the fisherman Tomás once had been to take a step back in favour of the writer he was. Such a reading shows Tomás the author to be a skilled, deliberate, knowledgeable craftsman of literature and demands an unequivocal recognition of Tomás' published writing as works of literature.



## CHAPTER ONE

### **Wild Things and Western Men: Impressions of the People, Language and Culture of the Blaskets**

The early part of this century saw the occurrence of a strange literary phenomenon on the Great Blasket Island off the Kerry coast of Ireland. From a peasant population that never exceeded two hundred came three writers, whose works portrayed the Island life they knew: Tomás O'Crohan, Peig Sayers and Maurice O'Sullivan. Others soon followed where they led with the result that there is now a collection of more than twenty books coming from the Island. These first three to write, Tomás, Peig and Maurice, all achieved publication between 1928 and 1939 and are generally considered to be the most important of the writers. Their books were both significant and poignant: not only were they the first written utterances from within a Gaeltacht, they were also the works of a people writing in a language that was "hovering even then between life and death" (Mac Conghail<sup>6</sup>, 1994: 11) about a community and a way of life that was about to end.

Tomás' literary activity occurred during very volatile times. While, at the personal level, he was addressing the issues of old age, the small society in which he lived was in decline, the language he spoke was almost dead, and the way of life on the was becoming untenable. Economic conditions within the Island community had long been forcing the young people of the Island to emigrate to America, making the arduous way of life on the Island unmanageable for the old people that were left behind with the result that, in 1953, the Island

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<sup>6</sup> There is a wide range of practice in the writing of Irish names. Some writers, whose names begin with "Mac" leave a space between this syllable and what follows while others do not. Other less common variations occur with some "O" names. The names are represented in this thesis in the manner in which they appear in the literature.

was evacuated in accordance with the decision of the Irish authorities. At the same time, the wider Irish nation had been undergoing a long period of turbulence as it emerged from the devastation wreaked by the combined effects of colonisation and famine. About four million people, many of them young women, had emigrated between 1859 and the First World War, looking for the work and wages their own country could not offer them. Most of these emigrants had fled the rural areas such as the Corca Dhuibne peninsula and the Blasket Islands. Other rural dwellers left for the towns with the result that the percentage of urban-dwellers rapidly doubled while the remaining population of the rural areas found themselves in an increasingly precarious position. A serious consequence of such a large shift in population was that many of those left behind could find no marriage partner, with the result that Ireland, particularly rural Ireland, was left with an aging population that had little in the way of traditional family support.

The Blasket library began with the work of the Islandman himself, Tomás O’Crohan, who was born on the Great Blasket Island on Saint Thomas’ day 1856 and lived there until his death in 1937. Last-born into a large family, he was considered to be frail, and yet went on to outlive his wife, his brothers, sisters and neighbours, as well as many of his ten children. He led a hard life, mostly at sea, wresting a subsistence living from fishing, seal-hunting, and salvaging debris from the occasional shipwrecks that occurred nearby. He supplemented his sea-harvest with meagre crops drawn from the poor ground of the Island. A versatile, industrious and dexterous man, he was also a builder, a carpenter, a tailor and a maker of harnesses and creels for the Island donkeys. He shared his many talents, cutting garments from his own patterns for his neighbours and teaching his friends the skills of carpentry. In spite of his many talents and his prodigious work ethic, he never escaped the hardship of the life into which he was born.

As a child, he learnt to read and write in English at the Island school and showed both pleasure and promise in his studies, which he nevertheless curtailed in order to begin working for his living. His working life did not frustrate the exercise of his love of language and the arts which found expression in his poetry, his storytelling and his songs. He was also known to be a fine dancer. As a man in his forties, he began to study the Irish language which had come to the school at Dunquin not long after it had been introduced as a subject in the National Schools in 1890. It was in the Dunquin home of his relative, Seán Ó Muircheartaigh, where he stayed when trapped by bad weather, that he began to teach himself to read and write in his native language, soon enough becoming the first of the Islanders to achieve literacy in their native tongue (Tyers, 1998: 112).

Tomás began his life as a writer by contributing articles to various Irish language journals. He also produced a topography of the Islands and assisted the Reverend George Clune in the compilation of a book of Blasket idioms. He went on to write a collection of anecdotes about Island life which was published in 1928 as *Allagar na hInise*, and translated into English as *Island Cross-Talk* by Tim Enright in 1986. His autobiography, *An tOileánach*, was published in 1929 and translated into English by Robin Flower as *The Islandman*, first appearing in 1934. A further work, consisting of a collection of stories told by Tomás to Robin Flower, was edited and prepared for publication by Séamus Ó Duilearga, and published as *Seanchas Ón Oileán Thiar* in 1956, dedicated to the memory of both Tomás and Robin Flower. It remains untranslated.

The story that is often told of the genesis of Tomás' two major works is a simple one. It tells how Tomás' life was changed by a "wave of recognition for the Irish language and its culture" that brought many visiting scholars to the Blaskets, a place long known in Ireland for its Irish language and lore (Mac Conghail: 132, 139). It tells that these scholars created a

“climate” in which the Blasket writers could write of their own lives in their own language (139) and that Brian Ó Ceallaigh prompted Tomás to write the *Allagar*. Then, having sensed Tomás’ capacity to write a sustained narrative, Brian urged him to write the story of his life. We are told that Tomás was reluctant to commence the second task and that he only agreed to it after Brian offered him Pierre Loti’s *Iceland Fisherman* (1886) and Gorky’s autobiography (1913) as persuasion that his own life might be sufficiently interesting to be the subject of a book. Quite often the story ends here, with little, if any, discussion of the role of An Seabhac, the editor to whom Ó Ceallaigh entrusted Tomás’ work when he had suddenly to leave Ireland. When An Seabhac is included in the telling of the story of the texts’ creation, the influence he exerted over the texts as he prepared them for publication is minimised. Even when one discovers that An Seabhac elicited material from Tomás that he had not intended to include, that he reduced the size of the text considerably and that he excluded some material on the basis of “taste” (Mac Conghail, 1994: 144), the gusto with which the editor wielded his pencil is not fully apparent.

This story of the genesis of Tomás’ published texts that stresses their “authenticity” and gives the strong impression that they were only slightly mediated has exerted a long influence over the reading of the texts. The source of these impressions lies with An Seabhac who not only shaped the texts to conform with his own tastes and attitudes but also, with his Introduction to *Allagar na hInise*, attempted to determine what might be read in them. Tim Enright includes a long passage from this Introduction in his own Introduction to his 1986 translation of the *Allagar*, *Island Cross-Talk* (O’Crohan, 1986: 4-6). This passage offers clues to the origins of many of the views of Tomás’ writings encountered on my initial research trip, views that perpetuate the attitudes that have attended the reception of Tomás’ works from their earliest days. Representations of the texts as valuable vehicles of the “authentic”, as

works lacking literary artistry, as cultural artefacts whose meanings are inaccessible to non-Irish readers, all find their origins in An Seabhac's remarks. Enright's reproduction of the passage, nearly sixty years after it was first written, also points most clearly to the enduring legacy of An Seabhac's editorial authority and influence, and the unquestioning acceptance of his point of view. His Introduction is the powerful lens through which Tomás' writing has for so long been viewed.

The picture of Tomás and his community, drawn for us by his first editor, is one of naive simplicity. Displaying the Irish preoccupation of his day with the figure of the peasant, the significance of which will be discussed later, An Seabhac tells of being "riveted" by "a peasant revealing his own mind" with "no knowledge of any other outlook or way of life" (O'Crohan, 1986: 4). This description of Tomás is the seed from which the prevailing view of his texts as documents of unmediated authenticity has grown.

An Seabhac's statement that Tomás had no "literary forms or rules for telling his story" at his disposal is similarly oversimplifying and misleading. It ignores the fact that the oral tradition within which Tomás had long functioned as a story-teller -- a tradition that had itself been "enriched by literary tradition" long ago (Welch, 1996: 416) -- offered great guidance in the telling of his story. It also misleads by giving the impression that Tomás' experience with books was very recent and very limited. Though it is true that Tomás did not have easy or open access to the world of literature, his experience of books was not as limited as An Seabhac suggests. When we finally come to consider the autobiographical intention of Tomás' writing, the distorting impact of this remark will become clear.

While it was true that Tomás' circumstances were narrowly drawn, An Seabhac was overstating the simplicity of what he presumed was Tomás' outlook when he wrote that Island learning derived only "from the constant intercourse with nature, with the pitiless beauty of the

world, with the wildness and calm of wind and sea" (5). The oral tradition of the Island had always been in dialogue with other cultures of the world and with the literatures of the world, and Tomás himself had been in regular close discussion with many of Europe's learned people, as well as in contact with people returning to the Island from America. The countless discussions he had with Robin Flower over the years, for instance, ranged over a diversity of philosophical matters including literature, history and the nature of man. These discussions were said to have become quite intellectual - -- once Flower's proficiency with the language reached a certain level, that is (Mac Conghail, 1994: 139).

An Seabhac's view that Tomás' writing contains "truth baldly expressed, an account without ornament and a completely accurate picture of a community of people" (5) nourishes the preoccupation with the authenticity and documentary value of Tomás' books that has forestalled their recognition as works of literature since the day they appeared. It has fostered the view I encountered with monotonous regularity during my first research trip, that the texts are not "literature". It is easy to assume mistakenly that a "truth baldly expressed" is a truth artlessly expressed, and that "an account without ornament" is an account written without an artist's skill or artifice. Discussions elsewhere of such matters as the similarities between Tomás' works and the Homeric epics, by critics as diverse as George Thomson (1998), J V Luce (1969) and John McGahern (1987), have given the lie to such a narrow view, and yet it is a view that has persisted. Thomas Biuso remarked in 1984 that the Blasket books were only occasionally regarded as serious literature, that Blasket literature has long been considered as personal history and "neglected as pieces of imaginative literature that move beyond the local and historical into metaphoric and symbolic artifice" (17). Biuso's remarks continue to hold a great deal of truth. The "authenticity" read into Tomás' texts somehow came to function as a barrier to recognition of Tomás' work as literature.

For An Seabhac, Tomás' significance derives from his identity as a man of the Gaeltacht: he declares Tomás its spokesman and describes his first published book as a "voice from the Gaeltacht itself" (O'Crohan, 1986: 5). Emphasising the Islanders' place in nature and "the constant peril from the mouth of sea and storm", he tells us that "Tomás is of the Gaeltacht", knowing "nothing else in the wide world", and that "he understands the Gaeltacht, what is deep in its heart and in the heart of its people" (5). He likens Tomás' knowledge of the Gaeltacht to a bird's awareness of its own song, adding to the impression that Tomás' writing was without self-consciousness or artistic striving (5). Although An Seabhac's comments begin with remarks about Tomás and continue with remarks about the Islanders in general, the shift is barely noticeable, so closely does he identify Tomás with the community in which he lives. He tells us that "Tomás O'Crohan belongs to that community, at one with them in almost everything, except the uncommon gift he possesses of being able to commit his thoughts and reflections to the permanence of writing" (5). His perception of Tomás as a communal man and as a representative of his community blinds him to the fact that the "uncommon gift" set Tomás quite apart from his neighbours. This failure to acknowledge Tomás' identity as a writer is perhaps the first recorded instance of a long unwillingness to countenance the fact that Tomás was never simply just a fisherman. His description of Tomás in terms of what he thought he lacked -- experience of other places, reading, literary training, and an awareness of self that leads to deliberate utterance -- was central to An Seabhac's presentation of the author. First, he used his identification of what Tomás lacked to reinforce his representation of him as "authentic". He also used his picture of what Tomás lacked to minimise his identity as a writer. An "authentic" peasant does not write books. This sleight of hand not only deprived Tomás of a fulsome recognition of his identity as a writer, it also fostered the long reluctance to call his work "literature".

An Seabhac's view that *Allagar na hInise* offers "a completely accurate picture of a community of people [...] which only a member of that community could fully understand" (5) continues to impact upon Tomás' readership today. Giving the impression that he is at one and the same time both transparent and obscure, this view is the origin and the rationale for the widespread set of beliefs still current today that Tomás' works are only completely accessible to readers drawn from within "the culture". It was echoed in Niall Ó Ciosáin's remark that "a certain intimate knowledge of the islands and the nearby mainland is necessary to understand some aspects of these books" (1993: 130). Accurate or otherwise, it is nevertheless a view that has the effect within Irish culture of expressing and perhaps perpetuating a sense of local or national identity and solidarity; however, it also displays a disdain for Tomás' foreign readership that may well be the cornerstone of the view that Tomás' work is lost on those "outside the culture". This view has disenfranchised not only those who have read Tomás in translation but also that part of Tomás' readership that lives outside Ireland. For this reason, it is both necessary and interesting to digress for a moment and attempt to identify "the community" that is said to be equipped to understand Tomás' texts most fully today.

The composition of the language communities of Ireland is an issue that is revisited with some regularity. In 1972, David Greene wrote that, of the four hundred thousand Irish readers he could identify, only fifty thousand were native speakers, the rest having acquired Irish as a second language to their first language, English (58-9). Those who acquire Irish as a second language will obviously have a very different facility with it and will never lose the substratum of English that lies beneath their Irish.

Gregory McNab points out, in his discussion of Irish speakers, seven years after Greene's work, that most live in towns and cities, which function almost entirely in English



(1979:134). The circumstances in which they live their lives would bear little if any similarity to the way of life that Tomás knew. McNab's survey of readership figures for Irish language periodicals indicates that only a very small percentage of those who say they can speak Irish actually read it with any regularity.

Edward Purdon provides a more recent picture of the status of the language and takes an opposite point of view, pointing out that, "according to the 1996 census, 41 per cent of the population claim to use some Irish and 10 per cent speak it fluently." (1999: 65). While McNab found many who said they spoke the language but did not read it, Purdon found the opposite to be true less than twenty years later. Now, there are many who can read the language but cannot speak it (65). He draws interesting and subtle distinctions between active and passive users of the language, identifying the former as people able to converse in Irish and the latter as people interested in and capable of reading Irish writing or watching and listening to Irish programmes on television and radio but deprived by circumstances of the opportunity to speak. On the status of the language as the new millenium approached, he wrote: "In truth, a large portion of the population now monoglot in English regards 'the language question' as little more than a minor irritation when they consider it at all" (68).

McNab and Purdon both comment on the mixed feelings of Irish people towards the language that is, officially at least, their native tongue. McNab writes:

Surveys published in recent years have shown that Irish people have mixed feelings about their native language. In a very affirmative way, it is judged an ethnic marker, a symbol of national identity that is especially appropriate for expressing innermost feelings and for providing a sense of community among Irish abroad. But the Irish language is also considered old-fashioned, out of place in the modern world, and of dubious practical utility (134).

If McNab is correct, the ties that bind many Irish people to the language are felt most acutely, not when they are "home alone" but when they are in contact with other cultures.

Writing of the mixed feelings aroused by the Irish language in Irish people, Purdon draws attention to the strained relations between enthusiasts for the language and those who oppose its resuscitation. He identifies a “perhaps intemperate enthusiasm” in the former group who “too often and too obviously regarded their cause as a *moral* crusade”, as “part of the religious baggage of ‘any true Irishman or Irishwoman’” (66), which is usually and naturally enough met with “virulent opposition with temperature levels high and debates that descended to vituperation on both sides” (66). He also suggests that attitudes to the language may be infected with residue of the politics of the past. He speculates that a failure to engage with the language might represent “some deeper psychological objection, as if the old social stigma that the Gaelic League had to fight so hard against was still attached to the language” or “perhaps that a mixture of a folk-memory conscience and a sense of exclusion from a privileged enclave was the true source of the opposition” (67). This “deeper psychological objection” of those who reject the claims made for the Irish language has its opposite in the attitudes and demeanour of the “enthusiasts [who] were, it must be admitted, frequently arrogant, exclusivist and puritanical to the point that the term *gaeilgeoir* (Irish speaker or learner) could often be used pejoratively.” (67).

More recently still, Eilis O'Hanlon offers a rather blunt appraisal of the present status of the Irish language in the Gaeltacht of County Kerry, not so long ago the jewel in the crown of Irish language revival (O'Hanlon, 2004). Her article confirms McNab's impression of an increasingly monoglot Ireland and expresses her view that Irish identity is no longer impossible without the Irish language. Provoked by a plan to reserve new council housing for Irish speakers, people “more Irish than the rest of us” (10), she offers a frank appraisal of the present status of the Irish language in the Kerry Gaeltacht. In this article, she describes a collusion between authorities keen to look as though they are doing something to protect the

language and a population willing to posture as Irish-speaking for financial gain. "Everybody will collude in the pretence," she writes, "even those who actually do speak Irish and care about it." It is her view that "being able to call yourself a Gaeltacht [now] is about getting access to areas of funding which are fenced off for promoting the Irish language." (10). She states that "many parts of the country currently designated Irish-speaking are unworthy of the title, as all studies show", and argues that "most of these people who apply for houses claiming to be Irish-speaking probably have little more facility in the native tongue than the ability to order 'fish agus chips' at the local takeaway." (10). The conclusion she reaches is that "holidaymakers can spend weeks in the West without hearing more than a smattering of Irish and come away with the impression that the native language is English. And they'd be dead right." (10).

It is not impossible that some of Tomás' current readers, who might consider themselves to be "inside" Irish culture and, therefore, in possession of special information that enables a "true" understanding of his texts, learnt Irish as a second language, read it rarely, and live in a town or city a world away from the Blasket Island of Tomás' day. The view that Tomás' texts are Irish icons owned and really only understood by those "inside" Irish culture, problematic even in An Seabhac's day when the language was already under severe threat, grows less tenable with each passing year. Given that Tomás' Island culture is gone and that the Irish speaking culture of mainland Ireland appears to be shrinking, the gulf between those inside the culture and those outside it becomes ever more narrow. Should the view that one needs to come to Tomás' texts equipped with intimate knowledge and experience of "that community" prevail, Tomás might well find himself without a readership outside of university classrooms.

In spite of its contentiousness, An Seabhac's Introduction held powerful sway over Tomás' texts. It sends its first echoes down through Robin Flower's Foreword to *The Islandman* in spite of Flower's deep sensitivity to and respect for Tomás and his abilities (O'Crohan, 1951, v -- xi). Although Flower responds on many levels to the older, simpler world of the Blasket, and describes Tomás' autobiography as "the first attempt by a peasant of the old school [...] to set out the way of his life upon his remote island" (v), he also recognises Tomás' personal suitability for the task he undertook, as well as his long schooling in the ways of his "ancient folk culture" (v). He describes Tomás as both "vigorous participant" in and keen observer of all that went on in the life of "his isolated community" (v) and sees the dexterity and versatility required of a person living in such isolation to be just as much a part of Tomás' "long and unconscious" preparation for the task of writing as his long participation in the oral tradition had been (vii). He writes at some length about Tomás' "inborn genius for speech" and the individuality of his style, so remarkable that "to those who have known the man his whole figure and character is implicit in the manner of his writing" (ix). Even so, for Flower, the issues of authenticity and documentary value are of great significance:

The great value of this book is that it is a description of [this] vanishing of life by one who has known no other, and tells his tale with perfect frankness, serving no theory and aiming at no literary effect, but solely concerned to preserve some image of the world he has known (vii).

This comment seems to bear out MacConghail's opinion that "although it is quite clear that Flower had an enormous regard for Tomás Ó Criomhthain, [he did] not believe that he saw the potential in Tomás as a creative writer" (1996: 139). It is a view that has been reiterated regularly over the years. David Greene, for instance, expressed his opinion that Tomás did not bridge the gap between documentary and creative writing (1972: 35).

Evidence of An Seabhac's influence over Tomás' early readership is evident in Daniel Binchy's discussion of the autobiography (Binchy, 1934). Although he gives the work the rare status of "literature" and describes it as "an achievement of rare beauty and strength", Binchy nevertheless stresses that it is the authenticity of Tomás' account of his life that gives his work significance. He overlooks the individual who inscribed himself in the text in favour of a representative Gaeltacht Everyman (553). Early hints of the politics that will encase the texts for decades are contained in his descriptions of the Islanders as people "steeped in the traditional culture of the native aristocracy from which many of them are sprung" (558) and as "the only survivors of the historic Irish nation" (558), whose passing will be a deprivation not only to Ireland but to the whole world. Thomas Biuso finds evidence of the politics that attached to Tomás' writing in an old article he found in a 1936 scrapbook: it showed that the Blasket literature was being read quite literally, by an "Ireland . . . in the thrall of a nationalist movement" and "eager for emblems of culture and refinement". He attributes these literal readings to "the curse of close perspective" and argues persuasively for a revaluation of the critical perspectives from which Blasket literature may be considered (Biuso, 1984: 18-19).

In later years and with interests that are primarily ethnological, Ian Whitaker continues to read the Blasket autobiographies as books documenting the traditions, lifestyle and values of the Islanders (Whitaker, 1986). This does not prevent his recognition of the high quality of the literature, which he interprets as evidence of the emphasis in rural Irish culture on elegance of expression. Most interestingly, in so doing, he interprets the literary qualities of Tomás' texts as an ethnological feature of Island life. He reads Tomás' autobiography as a text that gives data about Island life and considers Tomás' documentary purpose to be symptomatic of the author's advanced years.

Cathal Ó Háinle's discussion of the documentary value of Tomás' texts centres on the nature of "truth" and on what he describes as the "deformation" of fact in Blasket autobiography (1993). He argues that as a story-teller of the old tradition, Tomás would have seen fiction, rather than untruth, as the opposite of truth. He also considers the implications of the fact that in an oral society, "truth" is a matter of memory rather than of record. Reaching the view that Tomás exercised a great deal of artistic licence for the sake of imaginative truth, Ó Háinle sees him as a creative writer with a full appreciation of the "artistic significance of form", always conscious of improving upon the impact of his story (141).

Five years later, however, Danielle Jacquin reiterates the old view of the Gaelic autobiographies as sociological documents (Jacquin, 1998). While she describes Tomás' writing as ethnographic in its "almost clinical objectivity", she also says that his work is rendered literary by the fusion of the collective voice and the personal voice with which he speaks (Jacquin, 1998: 18). She says that while "they once echoed the ideological discourse that celebrated a rural Ireland and a wild west viewed as the exemplary repository of genuine Gaelic traditions" (14), the books can now be read by modern readers seeking a deeper understanding of human mores and of human nature. Though it reasserts the old views of the texts which go back to An Seabhac, her argument is significant in that it permits multiple diverse readings of a piece of writing that she believes is almost "clinically objective".

In spite of appreciation of Binchy's praise for his literary work, Flower's recognition of his literary talents, and Ó Háinle's exploration of Tomás' creative, literary instincts, the passing of time has not brought much change to the way in which the Blasket texts are approached. The stress remains on the value attached to these texts as documents that either make a fine display of the Irish language or convey important and authentic cultural information. In 1999, Edward Purdon wrote: "Though the Blasket authors wrote of a vanishing (now vanished) life,

the fascinating material was rendered with such linguistic elegance that not only do their books form a valuable historical and sociological archive but they proved again that Irish was as viable for literature as any world language" (Purdon, 1999: 64). The old views prevail: the Blasket texts are of archival significance and their language is elegant, even exemplary perhaps, but they are not quite literature.

Alan Harrison echoed this view in 2001 when he wrote: " [...] above all it, it is a social document that gives us an almost anthropological insight into a way of life that has now vanished." Harrison goes on to ask "Is it fair to call it only a social document?" He answers his own question with the remark that "Tomás makes little effort to introduce us to the particular psyche of being an Islandman", conceding that "his personality and his personal life are not completely hidden" (490). Reinforcing the representation of Blasket literature as anthropological texts, he says that the autobiographies that followed *The Islandman* "increase our understanding of the Island way of life" (492). Harrison is by no means alone in these views. Cathal Póirtéir wrote recently in his Introduction to Radio Teilifís Éireann's CD reproduction of Radio 1's series of broadcasts on the Blasket phenomenon:

While referred to as an autobiography, it [*The Islandman*] is largely a history of the Island community during the author's lifetime, filtered through his personality with apparent simplicity. Like the other Island writers, Tomás realised that he was writing the epitaph for his own community as well as leaving his personal record of life on the Island in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (RTÉ, 2003: 6).

On the tenth track of this CD, Críostóir Ó Floinn expresses a stronger view that the Blasket texts are "over-praised" as literature but invaluable as records of the spoken language and social scene of the day".

An Seabhac's view that the significance of Tomás' writing resided in its authenticity rather than in its literary qualities is not all that has lingered in the subsequent reading of his texts. His imagining of Tomás' life, on a "small, lonely island", "the most western habitation in

Europe” and “cut off from the life and knowledge of Europe” (5) enhances his picture of a pure, essential man, pitting himself against the elements, untainted by learning or knowledge of the wider world and evokes a sense of isolation and separation.

The nature of the isolation the Islanders endured needs to be examined. Although they were separated from the mainland by the sea and often prevented by weather from travelling freely, they were not as culturally isolated as some reports suggest. The community to which Tomás belonged had settled on the Blaskets about two hundred years before Tomás picked up his pen. Of the community to which he too once belonged, Seán Ó Criomhthain wrote:

They went there from the parish of Ventry, from Dunquin and from the parish of Ballyferriter, [...]. The Kearneys and the O'Sullivans came there from Raheens in the parish of Ventry, the O'Sheas and the O'Dunleaveys from the same parish also, the O'Connors and the O'Crohans from the parish of Dunquin and the Keanes from the parish of Ballyferriter. I'm not certain as to where the O'Guiheens came from but they are said to be the first group that went there. Those are the families who lived on the Island until it was abandoned. (Tyers, 1998: 8).

Even though the Islanders all came from the mainland and maintained links with their mainland relatives, working "hand in hand" with them, according to Seán Ó Criomhthain (Tyers: 8), Joan and Ray Stagles write that these mainland relatives of the Islanders considered them “a special breed – wild, hardy and strange” (Stagles, 1984: 95). Their strong sinewy necks, caused by years of rowing, and their habit of walking single-file were read as evidence of their visible difference from other people. In terms that would interest a post-colonial commentator, the Stagles tell that, while the English viewed Ireland as barely civilised, except for Dublin, and, while Dublin's residents considered Dingle “an outlandish name, synonymous with the farthest end of the earth, total obscurity or Hell itself”, Dingle, in turn,



was “often scandalised by the barbarity of the parishes further west” (96). The journey west was a journey into ever-deepening darkness.

The Blasket population was never entirely isolated. As well as their contact with their mainland relatives, they were also visited repeatedly by Protestant evangelists and representatives of their landlord. Early commentaries on the Blaskets written by such visitors presented almost uniformly unfavourable reports on a harsh place and an uncivilised people. "Ventry was superlatively wretched and squalid," wrote Mrs Thompson, the wife of the Ventry land-agent who led the proselytising campaign of the 1830s (1846: 49). "Misery marked every countenance, the untenanted houses were falling into ruin, or becoming the haunt of lawless men, the place had what we call in Ireland, 'a bad name!' ". In expressing her own ambition to convert the local population to her own religion and world view, Mrs Thompson also demonstrates that, even in the early nineteenth century, the Blasket Islanders were not cut off from the discourses of the wider world: "yet here, in this despised spot, had the Lord a people to bring from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God."

Mrs Thomson was not the only Protestant evangelist to see savages in need of conversion when they gazed upon the Dingle peninsula in general and on the Blasket Island in particular. One such person described the people of Dingle as “most primitive in their notions and habits” (Stagles, 1984: 97) while another characterised the Islanders as “the wildest and most uncultivated people in our land” (99). Mrs Thompson described the Ventry people who came for the soup they received along with salvation as “creatures who for uncivilised aspect and poverty of garb might bear comparison with the most savage nations” (98).

Much was made of the “ignorance” of the Islanders, which was usually detected in their lack of English. A report in 1845 stated that “there are about 150 inhabitants on the great Blasquett; these people are in a state of extreme ignorance, not a single individual in the

island could read, write or speak a word of English [...]”. (Ó Conaire, 1992a: 44). Another report stated that “a few years ago, the greatest ignorance prevailed amongst this poor neglected people – not one could read or write; and the sound of the English language was never heard” (44). Suggesting an ignorance that bordered on the primitive as well, perhaps, as an inability to reason in more sophisticated terms, Mrs Thompson wrote of the Islanders:

I was more affected than I have power to describe, by witnessing human nature reduced to the savage state it is among these islanders, within almost earshot of religious light and civilisation . . . I asked them what their idea of “sin” was, and they said “sheep-stealing”; and seemed to have no further idea of moral responsibility than was comprehended in not stealing sheep (45).

Media reports of the 1850s did nothing to dispel the image of barbarity that attached to the West. They centred on the conduct of the Islanders following the wreck of the Italian brig, *Caroline*, off the White Strand in November 1850, in which most of the crew drowned. Reports of the inquest into the deaths of the three sailors whose bodies washed up near Dunquin tell of the Islanders being rebuked by the coroner, Mr Justice Supple, for the “barbarous inhumanity” they displayed in stripping the drowned of their ragged clothes before throwing them “like dogs in a hole without shroud or coffin” (Stagles: 96). It was also reported that many Islanders shut their doors on the few survivors, with only three people prepared to help the nine sailors who made it ashore. One of the three who assisted the survivors, the Island schoolteacher, Mr Jordan, was an eyewitness to the events. He reported that the Islanders exerted themselves to assist the crew while the ship was intact, but neglected them once the ship had broken up, concentrating instead on salvaging the cargo of wheat that was issuing from the wreck.

The 1890 deployment of the British gunboat, *Britomart*, against the people of the Blasket Islands, which brought the Island community into dramatic contact with

representatives of the British government also received considerable attention in the press. Lord Cork's action against the Islanders, on account of their non-payment of rent, brought both the character of the Island community and the conduct of the British government into discussion in the newspapers of the day, both in Ireland and in England. Neither party emerged unscathed from the attention they received in the glare of publicity, though each had their apologists. In its articles on the matter, the *Kerry Sentinel* in 1890 portrayed the Islanders as victims of a persecution, commenting that

In the wide earth there is scarcely such another miserable crowd of human beings as the inhabitants of the Blasket Islands. They live in a state of chronic poverty, their utmost exertions failing to secure anything like a tolerable living. They are wretchedly clad, and as far as housing is concerned the hovels which they inhabit are not suited even for swine to occupy. (Ó Conaire, 1992: 27-8)

While deploring the use of the Britomart against "the famine-pinched inhabitants" of the Blasket, the newspaper, *United Ireland* objected most strongly to the action having been taken against the "poor fishermen" who "are British Subjects, bless the mark!" and thus "entitled to the protection of the British flag" (29-30). In its article defending the deployment of the gunboat, an English newspaper, the *Daily Express* described the islanders in terms that reiterated their identity as wayward British subjects: "primitive islanders, [who] like sophisticated mainlanders, are all the better for learning that the law under which they live is backed up by irresistible power, and that the State of which they know so little has long arms"(29). Sam Hussey, the land agent who acted for Lord Cork and was responsible for the confiscation of the Island fishing boats, an event related in Tomás' autobiography, described the Islanders as "squatters" who "exceeded all others in poverty, misery and lawlessness" (Stagles: 100). Stagles suggests that Hussey had no personal contact with the people he saw as deceitful, grasping parasites, as the anecdotes he was known to have told about the

Islanders were told in a music-hall fashion, in the Anglo-Irish language often used to deride the Irish.

The records of the Islanders that remain from the latter part of the nineteenth century indicate the low esteem in which they were held. Those who held the harshest view saw them as savages prepared to neglect the drowning in order to gather up their lost cargo and willing to strip the rags off the drowned to clothe themselves. It is interesting to note that, while Joan and Ray Stagles offer the harshness of Blasket existence in explanation and defence of the conduct of the Islanders (96-7), another commentator offers their deprivation as the explanation of their placid demeanour. When discussing the “quiet, docile and well-intentioned” temperament of the Islanders, this writer remarks that “poverty and isolation tend to keep the animal spirits at low level” (Ó Conaire, 1992: 29).

Reports of the sporadic clashes between the Islanders and those seeking to extract rent from them also reveal negative attitudes towards the Islanders. Those who made the unsuccessful attempts to take money from them saw them as a barbarous race that would behave as savagely and as dishonestly as necessary to avoid eviction or the confiscation of goods. Discussion of the use of the Britomart against them showed that they were seen simultaneously as subjects and victims of the British crown and that their lack of English language marked them as ignorant and deprived. Those with more sympathetic eyes saw a pitiful community suffering unimaginable deprivation, but even the most “benign” observers, those who brought them soup, a new language and a new religion, saw them as unfortunate savages living “almost within earshot” of civilisation.

These dehumanising views of the Islanders changed suddenly and profoundly as the result of two very different events in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the

establishment of a railway line between Tralee and Dingle in 1891 and the formation of the Gaelic League in 1893. The opening of the new railway line allowed easy and inexpensive access to the previously almost inaccessible Corca Dhuibne peninsula (Ó Dubhshláine, 2003: 15). Visitors from the larger Irish towns took day trips to the area or spent holidays of a week or more there, to improve their health, to indulge in various leisure pursuits or simply to enjoy the wild coastal scenery (2003: 28). Many also boarded the Dingle train at the urging of the Gaelic League who had "admonished its members to spend some time in the Corca Dhuibne Gaeltacht during the summer, praising the area for the purity of its Irish as well as the beauty of its scenery" (21). The League also established an Irish College in Dingle, "the most Irish speaking town in the world" where they taught the language and culture they wished to preserve and propagate (20). It promised that "outside the College, the students will have splendid opportunities of learning Irish among the people of West Corca Dhuibne, which is the most Irish speaking part of Ireland" (20). Scholars from abroad also found themselves aboard the little train, hastening to this most Irish of places in response to the recent European developments in philology and lexicography. Developments in comparative studies of languages and a deeper recognition of language families had given rise to the opinion that the ancient Celtic languages were culturally significant to all of Europe and that their loss, which appeared imminent, would tear the broad cloth of European culture.

The new enthusiasm for the Irish language, in Ireland and in countries further afield, meant that many of the visitors who now reached the Corca Dhuibne peninsula were cultural tourists (Ó Conaire, RTÉ, 2003: 7). The journey westward still offered those who took it the feeling that they were entering a wholly other place, but it was no longer the despised space on which Mrs Thompson's eyes had fallen.

The travellers from Dublin were struck by the difference in the people from Tralee on. They were full of easy personality; everyone spoke to everyone else, regardless of whether they knew each other or not. The sense of humour, the storytelling, the rich dialect laced with Irish brought people into another world that most had thought had long passed away. (Ó Dubhshláine: 15).

The once denigrated Irish speaking peasant had become a cultural resource as well as a part of the holiday package, as had his language and his lore. Pages from the guestbook in Thady Kevane's guesthouse, with its signatures in English, Irish and German (Ó Dubhshláine: 31), bear witness to the new respect for the Irish-speaking peasant and to his new role as part of the holiday experience. "Ventry is a very bracing and pretty place, with sea, mountain and romantic scenery. [...]. The peasantry are very interesting and original," wrote M. Kennedy on 5 August, 1902 (31). "Tadgh and his wife have the Irish as sweet as ever and Siobhaínín is now a great cook," wrote Maolmhuire Mac Cártaigh in July, 1904 (31-2). In May, 1910, Miss Warren and Miss Powell wrote of their three weeks in the district that "the pleasure of the visit [was] much enhanced by Mr Kevane's knowledge of fairy tales and legends and Mrs Kevane's kindly hospitality." (32).

First of the famous cultural tourists to go to the Blasket Islands was J M Synge whose sojourn there began in August 1905. Seán Ó Criomhthain recalls that the Islanders were at first very wary of him, nervous about taking him in, as the landlords had in the recent past sent spies into the Island to report on their conditions and their property. Seán wrote of Synge:

All this man wanted was to be indoors from the night sky and get a bite to eat sometime during the day. He told the man of the house that he was a writer and that writing was his livelihood. He spent a fortnight in the Island and wrote about everything which he witnessed with his own two eyes. Having written about all that was to be seen, he went out by sea again. (Tyers, 1998: 7-8).

Prior to this, Synge had made five annual visits to the Aran Islands between the years 1898 and 1902. His visits to the Arans supposedly occurred on the advice of W B Yeats, who

had suggested that, in doing so, Synge might “express a life that has never found expression” (Welch 548). The truth and import of this tale has been questioned (Gerstenberger, 1964: 15-17). If it is true, however, it suggests that Yeats failed to recognise the fact that the life of the Island had long been expressed in its own oral traditions. Synge displays a similar cultural superiority himself when recalling an encounter with an inhabitant of the Aran Islands: “It gave me a strange feeling of wonder to hear this illiterate native of a wet rock in the Atlantic telling a story that is so full of European associations” (Synge, 1906: 30). For Synge and Yeats both, as yet seemingly unaware that the oral traditions of the people were rich in European cultural material, a life unrecorded in literature was a life unexpressed. The unrecorded life of the Blasket people was a resource that writers such as themselves could draw upon for their own literary purposes.

Synge’s impressions of the Blasket Island, revealed in *In Wicklow and West Kerry* (1912), were very different from what had previously been written about the Blaskets by Protestant missionaries, bailiffs and land-agents. Where these earlier commentators had written of extreme deprivation and dehumanising want, Synge now wrote of a material simplicity that he clearly admired. His writing on mundane matters such as the accommodation he was given, the food prepared for him, the activities of the Islanders and the clothing they wore not only dispel earlier representations of the Islands, they also reflect the touristic aspect of his sojourn there. His deep emotional response to the landscape and people of the Blasket, though no doubt expressed with a unique elegance, was not uncommon in tourists to the area. While his words lavish the people of the Island with an idealising praise, they are nevertheless really more concerned with himself than with them. They serve to highlight his own romantic susceptibility while continuing to objectify the peasantry, albeit in a more kindly light.

While earlier reports of visits to the Islands often tell of bailiffs, soldiers and police confronted with the hurling of rocks, Synge here draws a picture of welcome and congeniality, of hospitality from arrival to departure. He describes being met peacefully by many of the community assembled to watch as he stepped from the *naomhóg* that had brought him. This welcome is soon formalised by his host who, having carried his bag from the slip, now stops at the door of the home he is about to open up to Synge, in order to offer a “finished speech of welcome” (70-71). Synge later describes the departure of those returning to the mainland, and how many of the Islanders accompanied them down to the sea in a gesture of farewell. He is very much the guest of the Island for every moment of his stay. We learn from Seán Ó Criomhthain that the Islanders recognised the financial opportunities offered by the influx of visitors and responded by providing as best they could for their needs:

The island houses in those days weren't suitable for keeping visitors but those visitors didn't mind as long as they were taken in and given the same food as the islanders themselves ate. Visitors weren't charged thirty shillings a week. The charge was a mere ten shillings a week which was great money at that time. (Tyers: 78).

Synge's description of the physical aspects of domestic life on the Island contains no hint of the deprivation that dominated the earlier descriptions of Island life. Instead, he portrays a host who, with an unstinting hospitality, offers him all that he has, and meets all of his needs. He shows the community's acceptance of their visitor when they come to the king's house to dance in the kitchen amid swirling dust, in a curious display of gaiety and solemnity combined. Similarly, while he mentions their clothing several times, there is no sign of the ragged clothes observed by earlier commentators. He tells that the men who rowed him to the Island were dressed in “blue jerseys, homespun trousers and shirts” (70), while the people who waited to greet him at the brow of the cliff were in their “holiday clothes”. He later describes the clothes of the men who filled the kitchen as those of “ordinary fishermen” and



the clothing of the women who were there as “print bodices and coloured skirts, that had none of the distinction of the dress of Aran” (71).

His writings about the eldest daughter of the king, his “little hostess” whom he first describes as “a young married woman of about twenty, who manages the house”, caused offence amongst some of the islanders and their descendants who read it (MacConghail, 1994: 133). He recounts how she prepared rashers of bacon and tea for those who had just arrived, without even asking if they were hungry. While today’s reader will soon recognise the potential for offence in the word “little” -- the power of this word to patronise, it was not this that caused offence. Synge uses the word to signal her physical qualities, which he soon differentiates from those of other Island women, as well as her position in the household -- hostess but younger generation. The tenor of his other remarks about this woman suggests also that his use of this word signals affection, as diminutives often do. Nor was it in the description of the beauty of her features, not yet coarsened by the hard work that befalls women in places such as these, that offence was found, even though it implied the coarseness of the other Island women. It was in the account of the wordless preparation of food for the newcomers that the offence lay and maintained its stinging quality for eighty years and perhaps more (Mac Conghail, 1994: 133). A criticism of Island custom was read into his words which, I believe, were written to portray the generosity of his hosts. Mac Conghail also believes that offence was taken where none was intended, even though some of his Island friends still disagree: “I have always thought Synge’s account of his sojourn on the Island to be most carefully written and sensitive to the Island culture. Some of my friends from the Blasket disagree” (134).

The dismay felt by some of the islanders about these words of Synge was not shared by Tomás' daughter-in-law, Eibhlís Ní Shuilleabháin who gave her own opinion on the matter in a letter to George Chambers:

Mr Synge was the first visitor that ever visited Blaskets [...]. As far as I understand it I think he wrote exelantly (sic) about Blasket. He wrote more to the credit of the place than what he had seen as far as I remember my own childhood days [...] and there is an awful change on Blasket since Synge was here. I would call Synge a clean and splendid writer as for Blasket anyway. All the Blasket people anyhow thought Synge wrote awkwardly about this place and now they do not think so. So to conclude about him I should say for the Final that he was a clean and decent writer.  
(Ní Shuilleabháin, 1978: 53-4).

If Eibhlís' reference to Synge's "awkward writing" alludes to the matter just discussed, as seems likely, it would seem to bear out the opinion of a resident of Dunquin who spoke of the cultural significance of the discussion of food in the Island and nearby society. It was his opinion that one enduring legacy of the famine and poverty that had been experienced locally was an extreme sensitivity on the subject of food. He spoke of the elaborate social customs that had developed in the community to hide the want of food. Such customs included the offer of non-existent food to unexpected visitors which would invariably be met with gracious thanks and polite refusal. It could well be that Synge's "awkward writing" was not so much a question of what he wrote but that he wrote at all on a subject that was almost taboo. In addition, bearing in mind that the Islanders had previously been spied upon by people coming in from the mainland, the description of his writing as "awkward" may have reflected Island displeasure at finding they had become the subject of learned writing. The Islanders may well have felt that the privacy of their hearths had been breeched, their hospitality repaid with written accounts of their lives leaving the Island. While they received him as a friend, he wrote about them as strangers. MacConghail suggests also that the attitude of the Islanders towards Synge may have been adversely affected by opinions imported into the Island, perhaps by the

attacks on his work by the Gaelic League, by newspaper reports of the “Playboy riots” and by the opinions of relatives in America, conveyed in their letters (133). At the very least, the whole matter serves as a reminder of the constant potential for misunderstanding that attends the meetings of cultures.

Wittingly or not, Synge counters the negative images of the Island found in the writing of earlier commentators. He goes well beyond the prosaic observations of the conditions on the Island that they offered to reveal the profound response evoked in him by both people and landscape. In fact, his feelings for the people are so intertwined with the emotions aroused in him by the landscape that, at times, he seems to respond to them as though they are a part of the landscape itself. While the intensity of his response to what he saw was at first glance flattering, his presentation of the people as part of the landscape showed that he saw them as something other than people. His reiteration of what he saw as their extraordinariness denied their ordinary humanity.

The strength and nature of his response to what he sees is revealed as he begins his account of his journey to the Island. As he contemplates the path between the mountain and the sea, on his way to the Islands, he recalls finding himself wrung “with the pang of emotion one meets everywhere in Ireland -- an emotion that is partly local and patriotic, and partly a share of the desolation that is mixed everywhere with the supreme beauty of the world” (Synge, 1912: 60). He sometimes describes what he sees as dream-like, or compares it with what he imagines or remembers, and the vision is never found wanting in any comparison. For example, his return to the Islands showed them to be “ten times more grey and wild and magnificent than anything I had kept in my memory” (122). His dream-like vision of “wild islands and sea” is “alive with the singularly severe glory that is the character of this

place" (72) and he tells that the wild and gloomy weather awakens in him an awareness of "something nearly appalling in the loneliness of the place" (79).

The frequent extravagance of his response to landscape comes to underline his disconnection from people here as well as elsewhere. In such statements, his dream-state, his imagination, his memory, all serve as filters through which he can view the Island and its inhabitants from a distance. These devices act as discreet veils, distancing him subtly but effectively from the objects of his gaze, the Island and its people. They also emphasise the strangeness of the people, their difference from him, from other people, in fact, their "otherness".

He soon enough makes the connection between this "nearly appalling loneliness" and the people, in whom he sees "a quality and attractiveness" not to be found in the people of the towns. His belief that it is the qualities they have derived from their wild surroundings that set them quite apart from all others (81) is again flattering in its romanticism, but shows no recognition of the hardships endured in their life of poverty. His emphasis on wildness suggests a primitive simplicity that denies the social complexities of living in such a tightly structured society in such a confined place where survival often depends on a high degree of social cooperation.

William Butler Yeats also wrote of the impact the Blasket Island had on his friend when he wrote *Synge and the Ireland of His Time*, shortly after Synge's death (Yeats, [1911] 1970). In his recognition of Synge's love of "what was wild in its [Ireland's] people, and in the grey and wintry sides of many glens" (1970: 12), Yeats reiterates his friend's romantic views. He too makes frequent references to the wildness of the Island people which, again, stress their "otherness": he writes, for instance, that "the wild things" said and done by "the western men" from the Aran Islands and the Blaskets were a joy to Synge (42). Synge's "joy" was thus

derived from his observation of them, not from any interaction with them. His belief that Synge “returned again and again to Aran, to Kerry and to the wild Blaskets” (17) to seek “that old Ireland” of generations past, suggests that both writers were, in allowing their gaze to linger over the Islanders, hoping to find in their persons a cultural artefact or cultural remnant with which to nourish their own writing. Seeing the Islands as the place where Synge could shake off all impediments to his craft, Yeats writes that it was in such places that Synge’s writing lost its brooding morbidity, and his genius was able to flourish in peace (18). For Yeats, the Islanders seemed at least to be the enablers of Synge’s craft, if not quite his muse.

Yeats’ own picture of “the Irish peasant (that) had all his [Synge’s] heart (42) is one of human nature “distilled and made pure”, neither touched by “the nullity of the rich” nor contaminated by “the squalor of the poor” (18). He sees them in a very essentialised form, as people *in extremis*, raised to a higher plane where they live, not only “in the presence of death and childhood”, but also in “the great orgiastic moment when life outleaps its limits”, where life is always larger than life. Such a view recognises neither the realities of poverty nor the ordinary complications of Island life, such as an abundance of fish coinciding with a shortage of salt, or the hardship caused by a poor fishing season. Further, when he attributes to the Islanders the “dignity and good manners” common to “those who have refused or escaped the trivial and the temporary” (18), he implies a choice in their mode of living that the Islanders never experienced.

Yeats’ belief that the peasant “had all his heart” begs careful consideration, as a close reading of *In Wicklow and West Kerry* suggests the contrary. By mutual consent, it would seem, Synge and the Blasket people remained at arm’s length from each other. The writer’s account of his journey to the Island and his stay with the people, as we have seen, shows him being rowed there, his bag being carried for him, the formal welcome given to him and the

meals prepared for him (1912: 69-72). He is very much the guest of the house and of the Island. Yeats adds to this impression of Synge's relationship with the Islanders, stating that Synge himself deliberately cultivated an aloofness that kept him apart from his companions. He told Yeats that "once when he lived in some peasant's house, he tried to make those about him forget that he was there" (Yeats, 1970: 320-321) and Yeats himself observes that "it is certain that he was silent in any crowded room" (321). Synge's demeanour reflects his mistaken belief that his hosts could live their observed lives as though he were not there at all. His patronising reference to "some peasant's house", offensive and dismissive in its anonymous generalisation, makes clear his aloofness from those who had sheltered him, as well as the lack of reciprocity in his relationship with them. While this picture of Synge is neither as dramatic nor offensive as the picture he offers in his Preface to *The Playboy of the Western World* where he describes himself peeping through floorboards at the people below (Synge, [1907] 1996: 111), it shows him to be a silent observer who took what he needed yet gave nothing of himself.

The fact that the Islanders also wished to maintain a distance between themselves and their guest is evident from the account of the Island men going to Ballyferriter for the sports. Synge is advised by his host not to accompany them for several reasons: first, as they will be drinking and "a man the like of you, who aren't used to us, would be frightened", and secondly, because drink would be pushed on him and "you'd maybe get drunk yourself, and that wouldn't be a nice thing for a gentleman" (1912: 76-77). These remarks make it clear that the Islanders did not forget he was there as he imagined, that they saw him as different and separate from them too, and that there were places in their society where he did not belong. They also show that the Islanders believed Synge did not really know them in all their facets and could not cope with them if he did. The references to "a man the like of you" and

“gentleman” perhaps indicate an Island reading of his aloofness as superiority as well as a deference to his class, noteworthy in this place where class was said not to exist. In an interesting reversal of the usual perceptions of safety and danger in these places, and suggesting an awareness of Synge’s delicacy, his host advises Synge to “stay where you are in this island and you’ll be safest so” (77). With this advice, he is courteously put in his place and prevented from inhibiting the fun the Islanders could not have had with an abstemious observer present.

So, by all accounts, it seems that, while Synge was provided for and protected by the Islanders, he did not become one of them. While it is true that he did sometimes play his fiddle in the evenings with the Islanders, he remained by and large a non-participating observer who lived his own unshared life among them, without sharing in their life. Even so, his solitary experience of his own life among them enabled him to write empathetic romantic impressions of their life that deeply influenced outside understanding and perception of the Island community and, later, of Tomás and his autobiography. Synge, like many who had visited the Island before him, failed to recognise the ordinary humanity of the people there. However, while the bailiffs and religious visitors saw the Islanders as less than human, Synge, who had abandoned the religion of his family, saw them as something more, and invested both the people and place with a deeply romantic, spiritual dimension.

Poetic as his vision was, and more kindly and respectful than most commentary on the Blaskets that preceded it, it was seen as a limited and inaccurate vision by An Seabhac:

When Synge went to the Great Blasket and when he wrote his account, he only wrote down exactly what he saw and an English translation of whatever he heard, the exterior of the life and the people he discovered there. He was not of these people and it was from his limited knowledge of them that he gave his opinions. (Ó Criomhthain, 1928).

The growing interest in the language brought a change in status to the Irish speaking people of the Island who were believed to be completely without experience with the English language. Far from being a sign of ignorance or backwardness, the lack of English attributed to them was read as a sign of cultural purity. It was this aspect of the Islanders' reputation that brought their first recorded international visitor to the Great Blasket, Carl Marstrander of Norway. The Norwegian scholar arrived in the summer of 1907 to stay for five months, in order to acquire the language spoken there. His original plan to stay in Ballyferriter had been abandoned when, as he wrote to Richard Best, he found "that too much English was being used through the Irish spoken here" (Ó Lúing, 1982: 110). It seems that the change in plan had a positive result, for he remarked in his letter, "I think the language spoken here is more pure than in any other place I have been to." The emphasis he placed upon the notion of the purity of the language reflected language theory of the day which viewed contact between languages as contamination and linguistic evolution as deterioration.

Marstrander cut a very different figure from the solitary Synge. A large and vigorous man who had been selected to represent Norway in the pole-vaulting at the Olympics, he participated fully in the life of the Island, working with the men on land and sea, and living in the king's house. His reasons for doing so were made clear in a letter to his friend, Richard Best: "I go amongst the people as one of themselves and that is the best way for a person who has come to them to learn the language he wants." (Ó Lúing: 110). There is more than a little unwitting arrogance in Marstrander's assumption that he could, at his own volition, become part of a community, especially when it is in order to get something from its people.

He soon came to be known as *An Lochlannach*, "the Viking", a nick-name that conveyed both the affection and the admiration the islanders felt for him. Island memory of him long after his departure is evident in a letter the king wrote to Flower in 1911, in which



mention is made of *an seomra Lochlannaigh* (the king's bedroom) some three or four years after his only visit. MacConghail relates that Tomás never forgot the Viking he did not see again, once saying of him "*Ní fear go dtí é*" – "there was not a man like him" (Mac Conghail, 1994: 136).

For his part, Marstrander seems to have maintained a certain distance, in spite of living closely with the people. He reserved his praise for what the Island offered him rather than for the people themselves. In his letter to Richard Best, he echoes the sentiments found in Thady Kevane's guestbook when he praises the Island for its fine airiness, its pure language and the company and recreation it affords him. He also relates that: "I must say that the finest thing I have heard and seen in Ireland has been the Irish language, the Irish music, the Irish song and the Irish dancing which I found amongst the very poor people here." (Ó Lúing, 1982: 3).

The visit of Marstrander was a significant event in the cultural life of the Island and, more particularly, in the life of Tomás. Pádraig Ó Maolain, Tomás' grandson and the second editor of *An tOileánach*, credits Marstrander with awakening in the Islanders a new esteem for themselves and their own culture. In sharing their way of life, Marstrander gave it the validation of an outsider, investing it with a dignity that had long been denied. His long sojourn on their Island, for the purpose of a deep study of their language alerted the Islanders to the fact that their language and their culture were significant. Sadly, validation such as this was necessary as it would seem that many of the Islanders had internalised the pejorative representation to which they had so long been subjected. Ó Dubhshláine writes that "... it must also be said that poor, simple peasants were generally given little importance in those times. The island people also thought of themselves as peasants." (Ó Dubhshláine, 2003: 101). His visit also had a profound affect upon Tomás. He aroused an awareness in Tomás that his own

abilities were exceptional and taught him how to think about language in such a way that it might be taught to others. Marstrander's recommendation of Tomás to other eminent scholars is a sure indication of Tomás' ability to use and teach his language (Ó Conaire, 2003: 8). In his declining years, Tomás would recall with pride and satisfaction that it was to himself that the professors from abroad had come (Ó Coileáin: 245).

Tomás' world also began to change with the visit of Marstrander. After his visit, the Viking would send others to the Island to learn from Tomás, including, most notably, his student, Robin Flower, thus setting in motion a train of events that would lead directly to the writing and publication of *An tOileánach*, and its later translation and publication as *The Islandman*.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **"Illiterate natives of a wet rock"? Oral Tradition and Literacy on the Blasket Islands**

The framing narrative that encompasses Tomás' writing presents him as a naive and inexperienced writer before the arrival of the visiting scholars and his culture as "authentic" and uncontaminated by outside influences. The strong impression this gives is that, in its isolation, the culture of the Island was not just uncontaminated by outside influences and unchanging, but also a blank space waiting to be filled. Its presentation of Tomás as a naive and inexperienced writer also contributes to the impression that, prior to the arrival of the visiting scholars, Tomás had spent his life in a cultural void.

As views of the Irish language changed and as the West opened up to cultural tourism, the oral tradition of the Island came to be seen as the very locus and embodiment of the Irish "authenticity" that had almost been lost. As none of its cultural material had ever been recorded in literature, it was considered to reflect a culture that still needed to be given expression. Foster writes that "the peasant had scant access to sophisticated means of self-expression, so others put words in his mouth and thoughts in his head" (1987: 324). Although the status of the peasant had dramatically improved on account of the changing regard for the Irish language, the possibility that the peasant might achieve this written expression himself was not entertained. The artefacts of his culture were considered to be the raw material from which men of letters such as Synge might fashion something literary.

This quest for the "authentic" made the oral tradition of the Blaskets a site of interest, not only for poets and writers, but for ethnologists, anthropologists, linguists and philologists. While it drew visitors with such diverse interests from many countries, within Ireland itself, the oral tradition was believed to be the key to a lost and hidden Ireland only truly understood by

Irish people themselves, a land "so dark, so scorned, yet so secretly romantic to those who know it" (Corkery, 1924: 16).

There is more than a little irony in the fact that many of those who championed the notion of an unsullied culture and hoped to raise Irish awareness of the cultural significance of its own oral tradition were acting in belated response to the work of the German Romantics a half century before the development of the Gaelic Revival and the Literary Renaissance (Smith, 1981: 103). Based on ideas developed by Herder, the German Romantic Movement had spawned many nationalistic folk ideologies in countries throughout northern and eastern Europe before Ireland too fell under its sway. So strong was its influence that it is believed that Yeats wished to emulate Wagner, whose operas based on German national myths had contributed to a new sense of unity in Germany. Yeats wanted to create a new national drama based on the old Irish cycles of myth and make an Irish version of heroic Siegfried from CuChullain (104).

Robert Jerome Smith writes that Irish indebtedness to German Romanticism is rarely if ever acknowledged in nineteenth century cultural commentary in Ireland (103-4). There are several possible explanations. First, it might be that this was simply an instance of Ireland "painting green" and absorbing its borrowings from other cultures, or it might be that Ireland was not as clear-sighted about her own cultural material as were the Germans. The significance of German interest and influence in Irish culture may be gleaned from the fact that it was German philologists who took the early lead in recognising the significance of the Celtic languages, particularly of Irish, and interpreted the threatened loss of Irish as a European catastrophe. In similar vein, as Smith points out, Herder had identified the cultural significance of Percy's *Reliques* as evidence of a living folk poetry while the Irish were reading and enjoying them merely as "quaint survivals" (106), another instance perhaps of Biuso's "curse

of close perspective" (1984: 19). Finally, it reflects a broad unwillingness amongst many of the language activists to countenance Ireland's European identity. Philip O'Leary gives us Henebry's view that "the resuscitation of the Irish language is not merely a protest against English and Englishism [...] it opposes itself squarely to the modern European spirit" (1994: 35). Similarly, and more extremely, An Seabhac expressed the view that the European literature of his day was "obsessed with the sordid" and "antagonistic to the spirit of the Irish language" (36). An Seabhac wished for the creation of "a literature that will be truly Gaelic", inspired by stories the Gaels created "out of their own spirit", "when they had no knowledge of or contact with any storytelling but their own" (36).

As interesting as the oral tradition in which Tomás lived is to those engaged in anthropology, linguistics or the social and political sciences, it also has a particular importance to any study of the autobiographical aspects of Tomás' literary intention and achievement, as an understanding of the oral tradition that nurtured him is the key to an appreciation of Tomás' subjectivity. Members of an oral society, no less than members of a literate society, grow in dialogue with the society that nurtures them. A Mikhail Bakhtin writes:

Social man is surrounded by ideological phenomena, by object-signs of various types and categories: by words in the multifarious forms of their realization (sounds, writing and the others), by scientific statements, religious symbols and beliefs, works of art and so on. All of these things in their totality comprise the ideological environment. Human consciousness does not come into contact with existence directly, but through the medium of the surrounding ideological world... In fact, the individual consciousness can only become a consciousness by being realized in the forms of the ideological environment proper to it: in language, in conventionalised gesture, in artistic image, in myth and so on." (M.M. Bakhtin / P.N. Medvedev, 1978: 14).

Formative elements of the ideological environment in which Tomás lived included the earliest teaching and values of his parents and their forebears, which was preserved and often found expression in the wise sayings and proverbs of the Island. A pronounced and

competitive work ethic, vital to personal and communal survival on the Island also marked its ethos. From the broad community and from his parents he inherited a deep reverence for his Catholic faith that was neither compromised by his firm belief in the Boethian concept of a wheel of fortune controlling the affairs of humanity nor challenged by his belief in fairies and other superstitions particular to the Island.

Tomás' intellectual and social growth received its deepest nourishment from the oral tradition of the Island into which he was initially drawn by his neighbours, the little grey woman and Bald Tom, who awakened in him his abiding love of the storytelling tradition and all its rituals. It was during evenings in their house, which he preferred over evenings skylarking with the other youngsters of the Island, that Tomás learnt many of the old Island stories he later made his own. A study of this tradition will show not only the cultural richness of the Island society, but also the cultural mores that influenced Tomás' thoughts. It will also offer clues to the individuality or conventionality of the thoughts he expresses and offer information about the models of self and heroism that were available to him as he wrote. Its legacy is detectable on every page of Tomás' texts, which is not to say that they are not literary works.

Several themes emerge when one examines the literature about the Irish oral tradition and, more particularly, about the oral tradition of the Blaskets. These themes demonstrate that, contrary to the opinion of An Seabhac and other commentators of his day, places such as the Blasket Island that functioned as oral societies were never empty cultural spaces. Nor were they ever cut off from dialogue with the wider world. These themes, which include its Irishness, Celtic-ness or European-ness, the ancientness of the tradition and its historicity, its function as memory of the race, its aristocratic origins and nature and finally, its epic or heroic nature, all attest to a long dialogue with the cultures of the wider world. Each of these themes expresses a recognition of a proud and dignified culture that cannot be reconciled with the

scorn to which those who dwelt in the Irish-speaking countryside were so long subjected. As we examine these themes, it soon becomes apparent that the themes cannot always be disentangled, so frequently are they expressed in connection with each other.

Though prized as an icon of Irish culture, the oral tradition of Ireland is often nevertheless described in terms broader than "Irish" -- in terms of Celtic-ness, Gaelic-ness and European-ness, for example. Such broader descriptions are fair and valid as the oral tradition of Ireland absorbed and adopted cultural material from the many ethnic groups which entered and made a place for themselves within the Irish nation over the centuries, groups that included in their number Celts, Norsemen, Normans, the English and Scottish (Delargy, 1945: 35). Delargy writes that tales admitted into the Irish tradition emerged "from the Gaelic Cauldron [...], Gaelic in tongue and appearance, taking on Irish dress, names and citizenship, at liberty to move freely in the company of the stock characters of Irish oral fiction" (36). Foreign cultural material was so thoroughly absorbed that it was soon forgotten that it had ever been "foreign".

In his discussion of the venerable age of Irish literary tradition, James Delargy draws attention in passing to the relationship between literature and orature, sometimes mistakenly assumed to be mutually exclusive and inimical (3). He reiterates Kuno Meyer's description of the written literature of Ireland as "the earliest voice from the dawn of west European civilisation" (4) and goes on to assert the even greater age of the oral tradition that nourished it. "In the unwritten literature and tradition of the Gaelic-speaking countryman are echoes out of the vast silence of a still more ancient time", he writes (4). Smith hears echoes of Renan in the words of Elizabeth and William Sharp when they describe the Irish as a small and ancient race that continued "down to our day, and almost under our eyes, in some islands and peninsulas in the West, its own life [...]" and as "still faithful to its language, its memories, its

ideals and its genius" (108). In addition to acknowledging Ireland's indebtedness to the cultures of other nations, Sharp and Sharp recognise the reciprocity of the cultural exchange, expressing the opinion that "Ireland in the Middle Ages exerted an immense influence, changed the current of European imagination, and imposed upon almost the whole of Christianity its poetical motifs" (108).

While it was in dialogue with the cultures of other countries, the oral tradition of Ireland was distinguished from other such cultures by its aristocratic origins. The oral culture of the Ireland that confronted St Patrick upon his return as bishop already embodied a "high" literary culture (Dwyer, 1988: 7) that was nurtured and transmitted over many centuries by the aristocracy until their fall in the seventeenth century. It was a culture that "embraced the literature of social prestige as well as the common lore of the mass of the people" (Mac Cana, 1969: 35).

The emphasis so often placed upon the ancientness of the tradition and upon its aristocratic origins combine to connect it with the notion of a heroic age. W. P. Ker describes epic as the literature of a society in transition, most likely in a cultural crisis. It is literature that harks back to a time when life was better than it is in the present and arms those who hear it for what lies ahead (1957: 3-16). Delargy, whose expertise in folklore embraced the traditions of many countries, wrote of such "a heroic age which survived till a generation ago in the islands of the Atlantic" (6). He reports that, in a tale he collected from an old man, "one could bridge the gap of centuries and hear the voices of the nameless story-tellers and creators of the heroic literature of medieval Ireland" (9). Ó Danachair describes the oral tradition, particularly in the Gaeltacht, as "a window on a wonderful, heroic Celtic past", adding that the Celtic tradition seemed to have "descended in a pure unbroken stream from a golden age" (1979: 31). Deane sees all early modern Irish literature, so deliberately and self-consciously



created in response to imminent threat to the culture, as “in essence, a heroic literature in which pride of place goes to the new idea of Ireland as a force variously embodied by outstanding individuals” (1986: 1).

The role of oral tradition as memory of the race is also a common theme in commentary on Blasket literature. This role becomes especially significant at the time of Revival as it reflects the ideology of the cultural nationalists who privileged memory over contemporary living experience (Doherty and Keogh, 2003: 160). Of the heroic past only recently lost in the Blaskets, J.V. Luce writes that the Blasket people, whose migration to the Islands was not as ancient as one might imagine, carried with them to the Islands “memories of a great Gaelic past enshrined in oral tradition” (1969: 155). In this vein, Ó Suilleabháin writes that their memories “were fully stocked with the native oral literature which had come down to them from their ancestors” (1969: 47). Delargy underlined the connection between Ireland's heroic age and the Blasket Island when he wrote: “Tomas O Criomhthain's *Islandman* and Flower's *Western Island* have preserved the memory of the heroic age which survived till a generation ago on the islands of the Atlantic” (6).

The characterisation of this tradition as something distinctively Irish, yet something more than Irish, and its links with a heroic age invite a consideration of its international links with other epic literatures. Kenneth Jackson has commented on the striking similarities between Irish epic and the epics of other early literatures (1967: 3). He specifically mentions *Beowulf* and early Germanic poetry, observing that there is a whole body of Irish epic tales that is all too often ignored by students of epic (3). Delargy makes a similar observation concerning the importance of Old Norse and Icelandic to Celtic Studies and mentions that certain literary motifs are shared by Irish and Icelandic oral traditions (38). He also points out

that there are many parallels between modern Gaelic oral tradition and Welsh medieval romances, citing Irish parallels to motifs and incidents in the *Mabinogion* (44).

While the similarities between Irish epics and these epic literatures may not have received the attention Jackson felt was due to them, what they have in common with ancient Greek epic and oral tradition has been more fully explored, most notably by George Thomson (1998) and JV Luce (1969). The discussion of this issue is doubly pertinent to the concerns of this chapter because, as Walter Ong writes, it was the study of Homeric literature that first led to a recognition of the differences between orality and literacy and a questioning of the long-held view that oral traditions were nothing more than the sad remnants of older, higher literate cultures (1982: 3). Through Homeric scholarship, orature and literature came to be seen as the fruits of different modes of composition and oral composition to be recognised as organised, reflective and artful. Homeric scholarship also clarified the different modes and roles of memory in oral and literate societies. In particular, it examined methods of storage and retrieval of valuable information in oral cultures and found that devices such as the cliché, the bane of modern writers and readers alike, and proverbs and maxims, performed these functions. It found that large, bold characters and actions stayed in the memory more effectively than less remarkable ones and that narrative provided the most efficient vehicle for preserving and disseminating large slabs of material. It also drew attention to the politics of memory, finding that it was only activated to retain what was considered important to current social needs and that oral history allowed generously for the forgetting of what was no longer needed or pleasing. Verbatim memory was found to be neither possible nor desired.

Many of the characteristic features of Homeric poetry were not simply the result of felicitous artistic judgement but in fact brought about by the imperatives of oral composition. Homer's great treasury of words and epithets, so many of them formulaic and centring on

recurrent themes, did more than allow variety in poetic expression. The formulaic groupings of words clustered around standardised themes allowed the poet to do several things simultaneously: he could draw conventional yet nuanced pictures, the significance of which was readily apparent to the audience, and he could also make choices that met the requirements of metre. They also offered the performer the chance of a brief moment of respite as he prepared for the next phase of his performance. These formulaic word groups were prime among the characteristics of oral performance that carried over into the written literatures of both societies.

We learn from George Thomson that many such formulaic expressions that found their way into the written literature of the Blaskets had come not only from the lips of the storytellers and poets but had also been used in ordinary conversation which was peppered with proverbs, couplets and quatrains (39). Of the Islanders, he wrote that they would use an idea or image from traditional lore “as if it were their own”, adding the surprising but, once stated, obvious rejoinder, “which, of course it was” (39). He demonstrates the recurrence of conventional formulae with two sentences taken from *The Islandman*: “We turned the stern to land and the prow to sea, hoisted sail and set out for the west with a fair breeze behind us” and “we took oars and sail aboard and set prow to sea and stern to land, as they did in the old tales long ago” (39). In the second of these two examples, Tomás places himself and his fellow Islanders firmly and explicitly in the heroic tradition, just one of the many allusions in Blasket literature to the heroic tales of the tradition. By way of example, Thomson offers: “they were scattered like the children of Lir” and “... as hard on her subjects as Queen Maeve in Connaught long ago” (39). Both the Greek islands and the Blaskets “remembered” a past that contained a heroic age expressed in a considerable corpus of myth and saga considered true and factual in their respective societies. This belief in a lost golden age lent an air of nostalgic

regret to the literature of both societies, an air exacerbated in the case of Blasket writing at least by the fact that the days they were living through were being painted golden in the light of its certain and imminent demise.

J.V. Luce enumerates the many Homeric qualities in Blasket Island literature in addition to the use of formulaic expressions already discussed. Most notable of them all is the dialogue written by Blasket authors, derived from and reflecting the oral tradition of the island and described as “the most pervasive and endearing” feature of all the Blasket books (160). It is sharp, witty, spirited and often testy and competitive, as evidenced by the story of the duelling quatrains. He also likens the concrete expression employed in Blasket literature to the concrete expression in Homeric dialogue, commenting on the “aggressive vigour” of peasant speech in both contexts (161). In addition to the fondness for proverbs and wise sayings, Luce identifies a simplicity of description in both literatures. He sees a “Homeric aptness” and vigour in the frequent use of simile in Blasket texts and comments that even the content of some Blasket similes is very similar to the content of Homeric similes. In particular, he notes a penchant for animal similes that he finds most noticeable in the work of Muiris O’Sullivan but also noteworthy in Tomas’ writing (158). Several of Tomas’ animal similes will be seen to be of critical significance when we come to the reading of *The Islandman* where they are put to highly significant autobiographical use.

Both literatures abound with nature passages and in each culture nature is imperfectly understood though fully experienced, with no distinction drawn between the natural and the supernatural. It is this imperfect and incomplete understanding of a capricious and sometimes cruel nature that inspires both the piety and the heroism of both of these societies. Nature poetry was a particular feature of the *Fiannaíocht*, the Fionn material, which was very popular on the Island, so it is not surprising that the writing of nature should have preoccupied the

Blasket writers. George Thomson wrote extensively on the nature passages in the Blasket books which he argues were derived from Irish nature poetry, “the chief glory of Irish literature” (43). He wrote that the nature passages portray the relationship between man and nature and also show them both to be subject to the implacable cycles of the day, the year and its seasons and of life and death. Thomson writes of a tenderness for “the small things of nature” in the work of Muiris O’Sullivan (160). Such a tenderness is not only discernible but of central importance in Tomás’ autobiography where it is made clear that man is no more than one of the small things of nature himself.

Luce also identifies similarities in the narrative techniques of Homeric and Irish literatures. Each seems more concerned with preparing the foundations for action than with action itself. Preliminaries and human reaction are more important to story than is the event under discussion. He suggests that this apparent imbalance between the preliminaries and the event itself might reflect one of two things: first, that the event would have been felt to be pre-ordained and therefore not really being the issue or, secondly, the singer’s or teller’s reaction to his audience, who would probably know of the event themselves and want to be offered some other aspect of it. He also mentions the Homeric tendency to understatement that attaches to the narrating of events in Blasket literature, most noticeably in the work of Tomás.

Other qualities shared by these two literatures, according to Luce, are a love of gossip and the free expression of emotion. While *Island Cross-Talk* clearly shows evidence of both of these qualities, the latter will need to be reconsidered when we come to consider Tomás’ words on the loss of so many of his family members. If Luce is correct about the latter quality being common to both literatures, Tomás’ resonant and powerful near-silence is not only a literary device more eloquent than words but a departure from the usual practice of the Island tradition. Luce also mentions the fear of the bard and the love of songs and poetry in both

societies, and indeed, Tomás' writing contains evidence of both. Recognising the fact that the love of song is a feature of oral societies, the fact that the culture of the Blasket was a song culture and that Tomás himself referred explicitly to his own love of song (Ó Coileáin: 247), one must question the decision of An Seabhac to cut so many songs from Tomás' texts which have long been praised as reflections of the old oral culture. Indeed, Tomás questions this decision himself (247).

The communities represented in the ancient Greek epics and in Blasket literature had more in common than the memory of a golden age. They were each small and insular and lived autonomously on small islands west of their mainland nations. The circumstances in which they lived were similar, socially and economically, with material poverty coexisting with, perhaps giving rise to, a remarkable cultural abundance. The culture of each was oral and, in both cases, the tradition was expressed in a notably graceful vernacular and maintained, protected and transmitted by poets. The nations to which these Island communities belonged were not peaceful and the cattle raids of ancient Greece had their echoes in the tales of ancient Ireland still told on the Blasket Island just before its demise.

Luce sees many similarities in ethos between these two societies, though they are separated by centuries as well as by nationality. Their literatures are both marked by piety and a tone of sad regret, not only for the lost heroic age just mentioned, but also for lost youth. In spite of this, each literature exhibits a stern lack of sentimentality, their characters strong, stoic and enduring. Thomson writes of the harsh maritime lives that produced such strong characters and recounts the words of Odysseus about the island of Ithaca: "it is a rough place but it is a fine nurse of men", observing that the words could as well have been written about the Great Blasket (70). Luce writes of a "simple, virile humanism", "unpolished but dignified" that can be found in each of these two literatures (164).

Both communities were affected by irregular and unreliable contact with their mainland nations. Their insularity endowed them both with an independence of spirit, autonomy in the regulation of their affairs and a flexibility and dexterity that combined to produce an effective self-reliance that ensured community survival. In drawing comparisons between the circumstances of these two island communities, Luce writes of the Ionians and, by implication, of the Blasket Islanders, that they were conscious of belonging by descent, by language and by sentiment to the wider nations that claimed them (155). Of the Blasket Islanders specifically, he writes that the influence of Dublin was "remote and ineffectual" (155). Yet, in spite of this, and in spite of the fact that the Island had come to be celebrated as the custodian of what the rest of Ireland had either outgrown or forsaken, Luce asserts that "through their language, culture and religion, they belonged in spirit and sentiment to Ireland" (155). Indeed, this had come to be true from the point of view of the nation which, driven by its own perceived cultural needs, now expressed a conspicuous respect for the Island culture that had until recently been ignored, scorned or subjected to humiliating attempts at rehabilitation. It is certain however that the Island population did not feel any such spiritual or sentimental sense of belonging to the wider nation of Ireland. Again, Diarmaid Ferriter's appraisal of the political situation between the Island and Ireland springs to mind: the Islanders were "strangers in their own land" with closer ties to the United States of America than to Dublin (2004: 381). His view is borne out by the writing of Tomás himself as we shall shortly see.

The early history of the oral tradition within which Tomás spent his life and developed his talents demonstrates that, from its earliest days, it held a remarkable depth of learning and sophistication and that it exercised a wide range of social functions. Before the advent of literacy in the sixth century (Mac Cana 1969: 35), Irish learning was dominated by the *filí*, a

highly trained, professional class of poets and seers steeped in traditional knowledge of law, history and genealogy that they used to preserve and regulate social custom. Theirs was “a semi-sacred” role as interpreters of the world to which they belonged (O Riordan, 1990: 1). They performed various functions, advising kings and nobles and entertaining them at public gatherings (Ó Suilleabháin, 1969: 54). They also functioned as prophets or seers, as spokesmen for the other world as well as this world and exerted a unifying cultural influence over the many small kingdoms that made up Ireland in those days. The verse they composed was sometimes heroic, sometimes panegyric, sometimes elegiac, and offered portraits of the ideal rather than of the actual person or event they described. Thus, in function and effect, they were a political force. After achieving literacy, they nevertheless continued to prefer the oral mode of expression (35) which allowed the oral tradition of Ireland to exist side by side with a native manuscript tradition, each impacting upon the other for a thousand years after the coming of literacy (Delargy: 4). The collapse of the Gaelic world in the seventeenth century saw the destruction of the native aristocracy and the disbanding of the Bardic schools they supported (Jackson, 1967: 24). The poets went “among the folk” and the literature the aristocracy had nurtured passed down into the hands of the peasantry, those McCana describes as “the hewers of wood” and “the drawers of water” (Mac Cana: 45). The poets and storytellers who had long plied their craft in “the halls of the Kings” now found themselves in the humble cabins of the peasantry. The effect of this unusual social upheaval was that it not only preserved the old culture, but also scattered and fostered literary talent widely among the more humble levels of the society (Mac Cana: 45). And so, these new peasant-poets were not simply folk-poets concerned with the expression of the cares and interests of folk life but the new spokesmen for and guardians of the old noble culture.



These hewers of wood and drawers of water had earlier been described by Dinneen in similar but more political terms. Drawing attention to the political function of both the Irish language and of the poet, he refers to the people as “helots and wood-hewers” [1929] (Muldowney, 1999: 95). Signalling the social and political significance and power of voice in an oral society such as this, he shows the language to be an instrument of resistance for the oppressed people and describes it aptly in musical terms. He writes that, when coupled with native music, it allowed the chanting of wrongs suffered by its people, thereby ensuring a continued memory of the events complained of. The language was a musical instrument that could lift the hearts of the people in any one of several ways, depending on what the circumstances called for: it could kindle passion or resentment, if necessary, or soothe the people to “contentment and resignation” when appropriate, while “ever enkindling the hope of speedy deliverance” (96). The words of the poets, now in the cabins of the “folk”, had two audiences: they were “poetic shafts” aimed against the oppressor and beacons of light illuminating “the darkness of penal days” of their own people (96). Their poetry “did much to lighten the burthen of oppression, to cheer those in bondage, and to turn wailing and sorrow into contentment and joy” (96).

The catastrophic effects of the seventeenth century upon the Gaelic character of Ireland were compounded in the nineteenth century by further English oppression, by Famine and by emigration. Only remnants of the old, Gaelic tradition remained, on the ragged edge, in the poverty-stricken western reaches of the country where the Irish language was still the vernacular. There, it continued to express itself in song, poetry and tales of several different kinds. As before, it continued to maintain its store of history, lore and genealogy and to use it to entertain and to educate.

We have a comprehensive account of the old storytelling tradition to which Tomás belonged from James Delargy, who spent many years collecting tales from storytellers as the tradition declined. In its new milieu, the tradition was in the hands, or more precisely, on the lips of the storytellers who were, he says, fully aware of their responsibilities as guardians of the oral tradition (20). In support of this view, he cites the story of a dying storyteller expressing his relief that his stories have been written down and made secure before his death. He nominates fishermen and farmers as the new custodians of the tales (6) and observes that the occupation of the person coloured that part of the oral tradition he bore, that is, the oral tradition expressed by a fisherman was different from the oral tradition of a farmer. He also echoes John Millington Synge's romantic coupling of poverty and rich cultural life with his remark that not even grinding poverty could destroy the rich folk life anywhere the Irish language was spoken (4).

Delargy describes the old storytellers as "walking libraries" (8), and lists the contents of their repertoire: heroic tales, religious tales, fabliaux, cante-fables, collections of aphorisms and genealogies. Some tellers could tell a different story for each night of winter. They learnt many of their tales from their fathers and grandfathers and rarely, if ever, from female relatives, thus perpetuating an almost exclusively masculine world view. They also learnt some tales from neighbours, visiting travellers or beggars, or on their journeys as travellers themselves. Each place had its own place-name lore.

Local tales abounded and are always worth inquiry. There is scarcely a hill, a rock, or river pool, a ruined castle or abbey which has not its own story. Why this road bends to avoid an ancient earthenwork, why that house is haunted, why the tree stands bare but its shadow on the moonlit road shows a body swinging by a rope -- all these are part of the oral currency of the countryside (Danaher, 1978: 111).

There were several kinds of storytellers as well as singers who contributed to the tradition. The *seanchaí* was a man or woman who specialised in local tales such as family sagas, genealogies, social and historical traditions, folk prayers and short tales about fairies, ghosts and other supernatural beings. The more important and lengthier tales were told by the *sgéaltoiri*, who were almost invariably men. The *sgéaltóirí* relied on mnemonic devices and learnt synopses of their tales off by heart in order to be able to elaborate upon them in performance (33). The Ossianic hero tales were almost always told by men.

From Delargy we learn that there was an obvious and consistent scale of popularity of different items in the oral tradition. The *Fiannaíocht*, or Fionn material, consisting of both prose and verse material, was always the highlight of the evening's entertainments, and sometimes took more than one night to be told. Other hero tales about adventures overseas were next in favour, followed by wonder tales which appear in the Aarne-Thompson register at 300-749 and thus demonstrate explicitly the international character of some of the material contained in the oral tradition of Ireland. The *seanchas*, or local narrative of various kinds was next in order of popularity followed by the *nathaíocht* or argument couched in verse, composed on the spot. Finally, there was the *rianníocht*, a general discussion of such things as current affairs and local genealogy. In any one evening, tellers of long tales, tellers of *seanchas* and singers would all perform.

The storytelling season began with the end of harvest and went through to mid March. Stories were traditionally told around the fire at night, with the evenings of women's work filled with *seanchas* and the men's with longer, more serious tales. Stories were commonly told at wakes, after "stations", at christenings and quiltings, at netmending in fishing villages, at patterns at holy wells, at wool carding evenings (19). It seems likely that the telling of stories

by day was not permitted. No doubt the practicalities of life in subsistence communities asserted themselves in the daylight hours.

The communal nature of the tradition is evident in many of its details. Every village had a storytelling house (*toigh áirneáil*) (19). The host of the house was repaid for his hospitality by guests bringing turf for the fire that would light and warm their evening or water from the well and doing helpful things to put the house in order. As a prelude to the evening's entertainment, in a ritual that was almost sacramental, the host would light a pipe and pass it around. When everyone had had a puff, the story could begin. Sometimes there would be a visiting storyteller: travellers would repay a night's lodging by entertaining the household and the neighbourhood with tales brought in from elsewhere. The potential for diversity in the material that could enter a district is reflected in the range of occupations and callings of these travellers. Among their numbers one could find beggars, cattle drovers, carters, pedlars, farmers, labourers, itinerant school masters, friars, priests, soldiers, pilgrims, wise women, smugglers and poor scholars. There were also itinerant performance artists such as pipers, poets, singers, harpers and dancing masters. In the early decades of the twentieth century, there was even a keeper of manuscripts from the British Museum taking his tales to the Blaskets, one Robin Flower.

While many stories told on the Blasket Island were known in other parts of Ireland (Jackson, 1934: 25), brought to the Island, no doubt, by people such as those just mentioned, the oral tradition of the Island had its own distinguishing features and characters. Pierce Ferriter, one of the Four Kerry Poets, not much more than a footnote or an old memory from school days in many parts of Ireland, looms large in the Island tradition though only a few of his poems remain in manuscript. In Pierce we see the poet as hero. He was the seventeenth century head of an Anglo-Norman family that had come to Ireland in the thirteenth century and

were associated with the Earls of Desmond, the Fitzgeralds (Muldowney: 7-8). In return for supplying the Desmonds with hunting hawks, the Ferriter family held many estates, notably the Blasket Island, once also known as Ferriter's Island. Distinguished from other gentlemen of his class in that he became his own poet while they employed theirs, Pierce was a soldier who, having switched allegiance from the Anglo-Irish interest to the Gaelic (Welch, 1996: 184), led a group of men from the Corca Dhuibne peninsula into the rebellion of 1641 and besieged the castle of Tralee for almost an entire year. Having shown mercy to the English when he had power over them, he was eventually seized by the English and, though promised safe passage, hanged in Killarney. Father Dinneen, whose 1929 pamphlet, *Four Notable Kerry Poets*, celebrated the life and work of Pierce Ferriter, saw in him the representative of the ancient chivalric code of Ireland, a hero whose mettle had been tested and found true, earning him an enduring fame in the annals of Irish chivalry.

Dinneen tells us that local memory recalled Pierce as a great poet as well as a chivalrous hero. Indeed, his verse was said by Dinneen to breathe the very spirit of the ancient chivalry. His lyrics were refined and polished and his imagination, like that of the other Munster poets of the time, had been nourished by material drawn from the Anglo-Norman families that had arrived and "gone native" over the years and to which he belonged, as well as by the legends and traditions of Gaelic Ireland into which he had been absorbed. His love poetry was indebted to the courtly love traditions of medieval Europe, "uniting their conventions of wit, elegance and passion to the linguistic skill of bardic poetry" (Welch: 184) and bringing an international flavour to the oral tradition of the Blasket Islands. A melody said to be his is today to be found in the Goodman Collection in Trinity College Dublin. Folk memory also attributed to him a great wisdom and wit as well as a reputation as a "Homeric

trickster” (184). A local version of the Trojan horse story in which a sow is substituted for the horse is attributed to Pierce. Dinneen wrote of Pierce:

He comes before us with a two-fold title to our veneration: as a chivalrous military chieftain who struggled vigorously against the odds and who laid down his life for the cause of truth, and as the sweet singer who enshrined in Irish verse the concentrated essence of many ages of Christian chivalry. We honour him as a warrior, a martyr and a poet. He is one of the greatest heroes of the great century that produced him ... though nearly three hundred years have passed since he ruled in Ballyferriter, his memory is cherished to this day in his ancestral territory.” (Muldowney: 97).

Until the Island community ceased to be, there were many tales told about Pierce and many poems attributed to Pierce. The quatrain he composed in his cave refuge was still known on the Island when scholars such as Thomson and Flower were visiting. Various sites in the district still bear names connected with the Ferriter family, most obviously, the village of Ballyferriter. Pierce's Cave is still so known and Sybil Head is named after a Ferriter woman who drowned while waiting for her lover. Importantly, Pierce offered Tomás a model of heroism in which physical prowess and poetic skill were of equal significance.

Saint Brendan or Brendan the Voyager, a local saint, also figures prominently in the tradition as does material connected with the Cromwellian wars, of which Pierce's military adventures had been a prelude (Jackson, 1934: 25). The Spanish Armada also provided material with an international flavour for the oral tradition of the Island. When Seán Ó Criomhthain was a child, Island children were still frightened of the ghost of a Spanish woman who drowned when a ship from the Armada was wrecked near the Blasket in 1588 (Thomson: 13). Of the international tales told on the Island, animal tales were rarely told while wonder tales and humorous tales were told more often.

Material of a very local nature was an important part of the Island tradition. This included a great many occasional poems composed to mark and preserve the memory of

special events in Island life, as well as gnomic quatrains. We learn from Thomson that Tomás composed quite a number of poems himself which circulated for some time (36). Stories of Island resistance to hostile visitors were also a proud and popular part of the tradition. Interestingly, Declan Kiberd has found that such stories are not exclusive to the Blasket tradition but are also found in the oral tradition of the Aran Islands (2000: 526). Local tradition also included tales that explain the place-names of the district, for example, the tale that explains how the Sorrowful Cliff got its name. "Churl's Cove" (*Cuas an Bhodaigh*) recalls the legend of a woman who took a phantom lover from the sea and from the union got a child that never slept. Other local tales reflect the Island belief that seals were human beings under enchantment. Ghost stories were not so popular in the Island tradition even though there was -- or, perhaps, because there was -- a strong belief in the supernatural, including the *sidhe*, the leprechaun and the *púca* horse.

Most popular among the Islanders were the heroic tales of the Fenian cycle, especially "The Tale of The King of the World" and "The Tale of the Battle of Ventry", no doubt largely because of the proximity of Ventry to the Island. Two long narrative poems also in great favour with the Islanders were "The Lay of Ossian in the Land of the Young" and "The Midnight Court". Also popular, but less so, were tales of Deirdre and CuChulainn from the Ulster cycle. Shorter songs and poems were also enjoyed on the Island, especially, as mentioned, those of the Munster school of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A visitor to the Blaskets in the 1930s has left an interesting account of a Blasket *seanchas*:

Then the boys gathered in and there was a *seanchas*. There were tales of Pierce Ferriter, of his escapes from the Cromwellians on this very island -- it was Ferriter property once -- and brave tales of their own struggles with the sea. But a Blasket *seanchas* is but an excuse for a *ceilidhe*, so when the stories flagged, a young fellow reached for his fiddle and soon there were songs all round. But even

as they talked or played or sang -- and is it not typical of their life! -- these islanders worked, for twigs were being topped and plaited for the potaí that soon now would be set for lobsters in the fissures of the cliffs far out at Inishnambro and Inishvicullane.  
(O'Cahill, 1938: 149).

Tomás' writing bears many signs of his long life within an oral tradition. This could not have been otherwise for, as John Harris points out, an oral performer will always retain his training, even after he has turned to writing (1993: 24). The Island speech and outlook on life expressed in Tomás' writing reflect his long experience as both practitioner and consumer of the oral arts of the Island. Indeed, both Kiberd and Ó Suilleabháin recognise the conversation of the Island, given literary representation in Tomás' texts, as an art form (Kiberd, 2000: 522; Ó Suilleabháin, 1969: 47). This speech was both reflected in and inflected by the tales he told and wrote, many of which he had inherited from generations of storytellers before him, including Bald Tom, his first mentor.

His years as a storyteller endowed Tomás with many skills and an artistic sensibility that he brought to his task of writing. Indeed, Kiberd, who sees the life of the Island as "inherently poetic", describes his writing as "trembling on the brink of poetry" (2000: 522), a view shared by many including Robin Flower. Drawing attention to the vivid beauty of Tomás' Gaeltacht Irish, Seán Ó Suilleabháin praises it for the eloquence of its phraseology and for a vocabulary so appropriate that an air of "linguistic inevitability" hangs about his words (47). He remarks that even conversations on banal topics are rendered stylish and harmonious by the rhythm and alliteration with which it is habitually endowed. It is true that evidence of Tomás' elegant use of the Irish language is unavailable to the reader of the English translation, but I believe it can be taken on trust as it is remarked upon so consistently by commentators on the Irish text.



His frequent use of proverbs and wise sayings, considered a sign of eloquence in the culture that had nurtured him (Foster, 1987: 328), provides further evidence of Tomás' long involvement in the oral tradition. It also shows his deep and abiding respect for the Island culture for, as Ó Suilleabháin points out, these proverbs expressed and reflected the accumulated wisdom and the philosophy of centuries of Island life (54). His representation of the witty retorts and insulting banter that flew so freely among the Islanders show his cultural origins. It contributed significantly to his creation of memorable literary characters such as Séamaisín and Tadgh. His use of concrete imagery (Jacquin, 1998: 21) and his near-personification of tools and weapons also show his debt to the oral tradition (Harris, 24). His frequent use of reiterative doublets is the mark of the oral storyteller he was (Harris: 24).

In addition to its linguistic influence, the oral tradition also impacted upon the philosophy Tomás expressed in his writing. There is his stoicism in the face of suffering, a trait greatly respected within his culture, and often accompanied by an acknowledgement of the goodness of God and an acceptance of what has happened as part of His plan. There is also a reverence for things past and for people long gone that is common to the oral tradition and to Tomás' literary work. Even though, as Kiberd remarks, Tomás frequently paints himself as an upholder of tradition (2000: 533), the reader glimpses, as Tomás' himself perhaps does not, that there is more than a little tension between his stated position on this and his action. In spite of his respect for traditional ways, Tomás is often first to instigate or accept change to Island practice. Another philosophical mark left upon Tomás' writing, identified by Harris, is his tendency to invest his tales with a moral dimension (22).

Island tradition also affected the content of Tomás' writing. Oral tradition encouraged the telling of autobiographical tales fashioned by storytellers who recalled events from their own lives and used the conventions of their craft to render imaginative versions of the events

for their audiences (Thomson: 27). This aspect of the Island tradition is of particular significance to this study for, as George Thomson points out, it was these autobiographical tales that provided the link between the folktales and the books, facilitating both the shift from orality to literacy and the writing of autobiography. It must be kept in mind by those who wish to mine Tomás' texts for "authentic" or "documentary" information.

Several commentators detect the legacy of this practice of giving artistic expression to lived experience in the manner in which Tomás writes some of the stories he includes in his autobiography, among them, Foster who hears ghostly echoes of old wonder tales and voyage tales in the autobiographical stories Tomás tells (1987: 329). Kiberd hears echoes of the sea-monster legends of Aran and Galway in Tomás' stories of the sea-beast and the netting of the shark. Joan Fitzgerald also draws attention to Tomás' indebtedness to the hero tales of oral tradition, particularly the Fionn tales which, we have seen, were so loved by the Islanders. In support of her view, she comments upon the heroic mode of the story he tells about his efforts to kill a seal (1996: 287). She also draws attention to his many allusions to the Fionn tales and his direct quotation of formulaic expressions common to the hero tales. The observations of these several critics combine to confirm that Tomás brought the autobiographical habits of the oral tradition on his journey into literariness. The heroic echoes they hear point to his desire to write a heroic version of his life and the many allusions to Fionn point to his chosen model of hero. And so he wrote in the manner described many years ago by George Thomson, by combining fact with legend and personal with mythical (27).

Fionn, the model of heroic selfhood Tomás drew from the oral tradition within which he had grown, was a cultural figure that had achieved a place in what Eoin MacNeill referred to as "synthetic history" [1921] (1981: 25-42), a cultural amalgam of fact and legend such as that described by Thomson. Synthetic history began in the seventh century with the

construction of a history of Ireland by men of learning and continued over several centuries (Murphy, 1961: 7). This constructed history of Ireland was modelled on the works of Saint Jerome, brought in by Christianising missionaries. It was heavily influenced by the histories of great nations such as Greece and Rome as well as by biblical history (27). In the pages of synthetic history, patriotic Irish scholars rewrote the history of the world from its earliest days, adding the Irish strand that had hitherto been missing. Native stories and the genealogies of important Irish families stored in the oral tradition, clustered around the central myth of Tara, were adapted to the new models and used to construct an account of the Irish origins that went all the way back to Adam:

I am Seth, the son of Adam and Eve. I knew this world when it was young. I walked its fresh formed lands, swam in the newly created seas, disported with the beasts that the Lord God had placed on this earth. And in my travels across the world beyond the Garden laid out by the Lord, but which He had forever closed off from us, I came to the island that would one day be known as Erin. And though I sailed round the island, I never walked its emerald shore (Scott, 1995: 1).

The composition of such history was the responsibility of the poets who had always, throughout Ireland's long history, exercised a political power and responsibility. In the composition of the histories, the poets were expected to do much more than remember and reproduce the material facts of certain events. A good poet was expected to have the ability to "synchronise" and "harmonise" all the data valued by their society, to weave an attractive cloth from the many disparate threads of the nation's past (38). MacNeill attributes the wide acceptability of synthetic history to the fact that it left no gaps in the perception of nation past and present (38). The impact, and perhaps the design, of such a smooth and seamless history were and are to mask the disruptions and discontinuities that attend any history and often, in fact, provide the impetus for its creation.

The synthetic historians enjoyed a long season as the ultimate authorities in matters of Irish history. In 1896, Elizabeth and William Sharp described Ireland with confidence as “the sole country of Europe where the native can produce authentic documents of his remote unbroken lineage, and designate with certainty, up to pre-historic ages, the race from which he sprang” (Smith, 1981: 108). MacPóilin relates that Irish tradition can take itself even further than Eden: he relates that it was long believed that St Patrick had taught that Irish was the first language of heaven (1994: 6). I am not sure if this was taken as an indication that the Irish were the first arrivals there or if it indicated that they were the most populous.

Fionn Mac Cumhaill, a favourite on the Blaskets even after his popularity had begun to wane in other parts of Ireland, secured a place in the synthetic history of Ireland. A mythological character originally derived from the European character, Find, his reinvention as Fionn was complete by the sixth century and he began to figure in the Leinster genealogies from the seventh century. By the eleventh century, he was believed to have been the captain of King Cormac’s soldiers and by the twelfth, when high kings began to displace and overrule local kings, he had a sure and permanent place in the synthetic histories then reaching their final forms. His death was dated at 283 in the histories. Belief in his historicity persisted until well into the twentieth century, but although his mythical origins are beyond dispute, a lot of Fionn material nevertheless reflects the historical experience of Ireland through the centuries, particularly experiences of conflict between old ways and new ways ushered in with the new Christian religion (MacKillop, 1998: 210).

Fionn was the central character of the Fenian Cycle, set in the third century, and was the subject of countless narratives in both manuscript tradition and oral tradition. With a name that suggests connections with Continental divinities (210), he was descended from the god Lugh and born after the death of his father Cumhall, the head of the Clan Baiscne. His mother

Muirenn, descended from a king of the Tuatha de Danaan, was unable to raise him so handed him into the care of her sister, a druidess, so we see in his upbringing combinations of nobility and magic, as well as of “history” and myth. Always portrayed as tall, fair and broad of shoulder and brow, a figure of great prowess, he was well prepared by parentage and upbringing to be the hunter, warrior, poet and seer that he became. Among his many skills were the gift of divination and a special poetic knowledge that he gained from his fortuitous contact with the Salmon of Knowledge.

The desire to protect country, tradition and the past is a persistent theme of Fenian lore. In *The Tale of the Battle of Ventry* much loved on the Blasket, Fionn is shown defending Ireland against invaders gathered from all the countries of Europe and led by Dáire Donn, the King of the World (Welch 194). The multinational composition of the invading force, indicating Fionn’s international stature and highlighting his role and identity as protector of Ireland, reflects the work of the synthetic historians who had endowed Ireland with an international identity that rivalled those of other great civilisations such as Greece and Rome. The national identity of Fionn was drawn into contest by the MacPherson forgeries of the eighteenth century which attempted to claim his son, Oisín, refashioned as Ossian, as the creation of a Scottish Homer. Joseph Falaky Nagy colourfully describes this phenomenon as a “jockeying for position” in “the Celticity sweepstakes”, first prize being “aesthetic primacy” over Anglo-Saxon culture (2001: 439). The preoccupation with finding a Scottish Homer or an Irish Dante (Moore, [1911]1985: 75), evidence of a Celtic cultural cringe perhaps, seems to be an enduring legacy of the synthetic historians.

The twelfth century saw an encyclopaedic gathering of Fionn material called *Acallam na Senoráich*, recently offered in a new translation by Ann Dooley and Harry Roe as *Tales of the Elders of Ireland* (1999). Written in turbulent times about 1175 or perhaps, according to

Dooley and Roe, a little later, it was the work of one scribe. It explores the meeting of old pagan Ireland, in the persons of Fionn's son, Oisín and his companion Cailte, newly returned from several centuries spent in the Otherworld, and new Ireland, in the person of Saint Patrick who had brought Christianity to her shores. Their dialogue allows the telling of hundreds of stories, many drawn from synthetic history, which are held together with a framework consisting of two devices: the journey around Ireland and the encounter between saint and pagan. Each of these narrative devices was already in common use, especially in Patrician hagiography, so their use in this text reflects an adaptation of old materials to a new purpose.

Although the *Acallam* purports to concern fifth century consideration of third century events, it was written in the late twelfth century long after the *fiana* had lost their social role. The literary resurrection of the *fiana* at this juncture represents a cultural response to the invasion of the Normans, an attempt to preserve aspects of native culture while accommodating and absorbing foreign influence. Nagy reads the proliferation of Fionn lore at this time in a political way, seeing in it a sign of the arrival of the once subject people of Ireland into the political and social life of Ireland (439). While the *Acallam* represents a dialogue between the newly awakened ancients and the recently arrived Patrick, it also represents the transactional nature of the encounter between the old and new culture. It shows the trade-offs by which Patrick gives out Christian teaching in exchange for the place-name lore that was at the heart of the old culture, and his prayers for the pagan souls in return for their tales which both fascinate and frighten him. We see cultural exchange also in Patrick's baptism of Cailte in water Cailte has brought him, drawn from a pagan well. Patrick's posthumous gift of heaven to the long dead Fenians implies a recognition of the power of the old myths and heroes and represents an attempt to harness their power to the new dispensation.

According to Welch, the *Acallam* is important for three reasons: its depiction of the negotiation between the old pagan culture and the new Christian culture that allowed a sense of Irishness to remain constant, its glorification of a legendary Irish past and its perception of Ireland “as a storied landscape” (6). Most importantly, however, the *Acallam* embodies and portrays the shift from orality to literacy in Irish culture, a shift effected by St Patrick only after some heavy persuasion. Thrilled and dismayed by the pagan lore he is hearing, and citing the unreliability and impermanence of memory in oral tradition as an excuse, he only has it committed to the page after his guardian angels persuade him he should do so for the sake of those who follow:

Dear holy cleric, these old warriors tell you no more than a third of their stories because their memories are faulty. Have these stories written down on poets’ tablets in refined language, so that the hearing of them will provide entertainment for the lords and commons of later times (Dooley and Roe, vii).

In a moment that not only depicts the conjunction of the arrival of literacy and Christianity in Ireland but also signals a new social order, Patrick urges the newly-baptised Caílte to submit henceforth to the authority of the Book, the Gospel.

Seán Ó Lúing once remarked about *The Western Island*, Flower’s book that emerged from the decades’ long dialogue between Tomás and himself, that it was a book “as Irish in spirit as the *Acallam*” (1981: 124), inviting consideration of the Blasket phenomenon in terms of the *Acallam*. Such a consideration is particularly apt and fruitful in relation to the dialogue between the scholarly visitors to the Island, notably Flower and Kelly with Tomás. A surviving relic of the lost Ireland, sequestered and preserved in an entirely other world, Tomás was a modern “ancient” well-equipped for dialogue with representatives of the new Ireland and the wider world. The literature Tomás produced is the fruit of that long dialogue. This is especially true of *An tOileánach* as Tomás was reluctant to commit the telling of his life to the page. His

reluctance seems to be caused by the exact opposite of what caused Patrick's: while Patrick is all too aware of the power of the stories he is committing to text for posterity, Tomás has to be persuaded to see anything remarkable whatsoever in his own life before he can begin to write. We have Ó Ceallaigh's account of the persuasion needed:

I told him that he should write some prose about himself, about the people or about whatever he wanted. 'Everyone knows' said Tomás, 'what is happening on the island.' I asked him to write a story about the island, but he said that the readers would believe it was a true story and that would not be right. I got and read for him *Iceland Fisherman* by Pierre Loti; but he preferred the stories of Maxim Gorky, because of the difficult lives of the poor people in Russia. Gorky showed Tomás that a fisherman could write a book just as well as an educated person (O'Crohan, 1986: 4).

There are many points of similarity between Fionn and the literary version Tomás made of himself. First, his descriptions of himself as "the scrapings of the pot" and "the old cow's calf" seem, at first glance, to put him at odds with the robust Fionn, but in fact do not do so. Not only are they early signs of the anti-heroic stance he adopts from time to time in spite of the fact that he is the hero of his own story, they indicate that from the very beginning, his survival has been against the odds and thus make his survival seem all the more remarkable. They also indicate his significant place as the last of his tribe, at the end of the long line of the history of his family and his island culture. Secondly, while Tomás recounts no brush with the Salmon of Knowledge, it is clear that he has a knowledge and vision that sets him apart from his peers and even many of his elders from his earliest days.

There are many other points of similarity between the circumstances that gave rise to the *Acallam* and those that produced the work of Tomás. For instance, while the Blasket books concern days gone by to a very large extent, they were written in response to an evident threat of imminent cultural demise in the early twentieth century, their authors seeking, like the author of the *Acallam*, to express and preserve their threatened culture by literary



means. In more recent days, Philip Larkin has written that he believes “the urge to preserve” is at the basis of all art (1983: 79). While the urge to preserve seems to be a small part of Tomás’ motivation for writing, a response to and defiance of the Anglicisation of Irish culture was soon read into his work which was almost immediately fashioned into an antidote for what was ailing Ireland.

The Fenian desire to protect country, tradition and the past also marks Blasket culture as reflected in Tomás’ writing, finding its echo in accounts of the fierce defence the Islanders put up against invaders. Those seeking to invade the Blasket were rarely foreigners however. The transactional nature of the dialogue between Tomás and his two principal visitors is evident at two different levels. At the cultural level, in Tomás’ discussions with Flower over twenty years, tales from here were swapped for tales from there and life stories passed from one to the other in both directions. At the material level, we have many of Tomás’ letters to Brian Ó Ceallaigh saying in effect: “I have sent you my pages, I was hoping you would send me some tobacco”. Ó Ceallaigh provided Tomás with more than a reason to write, he provided him with the necessities to do so, even giving him his own Waterman pen. The very pages Tomás filled with Blasket life and lore and sent to Brian Ó Ceallaigh had come from Ó Ceallaigh in the first place. The significances Welch attaches to the *Acallam* also adhere to the work of Tomás O’ Crohan: he negotiates the transfer of information to and from the Island and beyond, he glorifies and preserves its past in a new literary form, and he too demonstrates the centrality of place to Irish life and culture. Tomás’ books also frequently express the same regret for the loss of old ways that marks the *Acallam*.

Fionn and Tomás share many characteristics: they are both complex cultural figures of ambiguous status that inhabit marginal, transitional sites and they both exhibit contradictory qualities. Fionn’s culturally complex and in some ways ambiguous character is evident in his

positions as head of Clan Baiscne, a proud family, and head of Fianna Eireann, a roving band of warriors. These two roles placed him both inside and outside normal society at the same time, making him, paradoxically, both a protector and almost an outlaw in the same culture. A similar cultural ambiguity attaches to Tomás who was an intellectual and social leader in a community despised or ignored until the last few decades of his life.

Fionn was also a transitional figure, one who hovered on the borders of pagan and Christian Ireland. Interestingly, with the coming of the Christianising missionaries, monasteries sought to establish themselves in the marginal areas, on the outskirts of settled places, in the very places where the *fianna* were based and so it was that these two groups were thrown together and drawn so quickly into dialogue. The marginal location and status of the Blasket Islanders similarly made their home the site of cultural negotiation and Tomás a transitional figure.

Fionn is a figure in whom the world of nature, as expressed in his life in the wild with the *fianna*, reconciles with the world of culture to which he belongs as poet and seer. He is a figure of strength and resource, physically, mentally and culturally. In spite of their great qualities, there are contradictory aspects to each character. Something similar can be said of Tomás who spent much of his life in the wild sea with his fellow Island-fishermen as well as a great deal of it at a table with the scholars of Europe or at a fireside with his neighbours, and who could construct a poem with the same skill as he could construct a house.

While Fionn is usually seen as brave and admirable, a perfect example of pagan Irish nobility, Fionn also appears in many folktales as a comic buffoon, willing to sacrifice dignity to expediency (MacKillop, 1977: 99-100). In both heroic and anti-heroic mode, Fionn offered a model for survival under siege. While Tomás never paints himself as a buffoon, he does show parts of his life where his heroic mantle slips. His mute, stoic response to a grim sequence of

losses offers a model of graceful survival. Finally, just as the *Acallam* is replete with laments for the passing of the heroic and big-hearted ways of old pagan Ireland, Tomás' books also frequently express regret for the loss of old ways.

If not a model for generations of poets that followed, Fionn must at least have been part of the mental armour of hero-poets such as Pierce Ferriter and Tomás O'Crohan. As Tomás' life and literature exhibits the same admixture of myth and history as did Fionn's, and was similarly harnessed to the national project, it has been subject to a similarly mixed reading. But whereas Fionn was a mythical man inserted into the nation's history, Tomás was a historical person inserted into the nation's mythology. A lot was lost when Tomás' life and its telling came to be read, as it commonly is, as representation of an old and now disappeared Ireland. The individuality of his life and its telling was sacrificed and the fact of its personalness was obscured. The fascination of many readers with what they can glean of the past can blind them to the fact that, for Tomás, the writing of his life was both a remarkable development from and a remarkable departure from past ways. It was an audacious act and fact of the present and, most importantly, a strategy for continued independent living in the face of threatened imminent loss.

The cultural richness of oral societies is not always recognised by literate observers. In Tomás' day, his language and lore was seen by many as raw material that might be fashioned into something more literate by his cultural betters. In more recent days, post-colonial commentary on the Blaskets by Mark Quigley fails to recognise its power and the cultural work it did. Quigley reads Tomás' undertaking of autobiography as an entry into subjectivity and an entry into language, a view that perpetuates Revivalist thinking that, prior to the initiation of the autobiographical process, the Island society was devoid of language, social systems and discourses that might have constructed or facilitated an awareness of self

and identity in its members. This represents a failure to see that the oral tradition of the Island had always interpellated its members into its cultural system and had always nourished their intellectual characteristics. It provided discourses that linked the Islanders with the cultures of other countries, with the history, politics, religion, wisdom, folly and philosophies of the past and offered both a means and a mode of interpreting their experiences of the present. The representation of life this tradition offered held an oral record of its past that was surprisingly permanent and resilient. This is demonstrated by the fact that Seán Ó Criomhthain was able to give, in the mid -- twentieth century, a history of the Island that began with the time of the Ferriters some seven hundred years before his time, and concluded with an account of all the Island families of his own day that included the certain knowledge of the mainland towns from which they had originated (Tyers 1998:7). It expressed a sense of place that encouraged the development of a consciousness of self that was marked by a sense of its own uniqueness. It afforded the Islanders an entry, not just into language, but into an elegant form of the language that was practised and recognised at home and abroad as an art form.

Functionally "illiterate" they may once have been, and "wet" as their Island home often was, the people of the Blasket Islands were never simply the "illiterate natives of a wet rock" , living "almost within earshot of civilisation" that so many literate observers imagined them to be.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **"The Lap of the Lost Mother": the Gaeltacht and Revival**

As resilient and self-sufficient as the oral tradition of the Island had been over the centuries, as we have seen, it was neither insular nor impermeable, as early discussion of Blasket culture implied. And so, just as Tomás, an Islandman surrounded by an often hostile sea, had to navigate his own sea-path as he ploughed and harvested the ocean, he had also, as the eponymous Islandman, to navigate the ideological waves that washed over him. Wave after wave of imported ideology swirled around the bedrock of Island culture, brought in by mainland visitors that included Gaelic League activists as well as foreign scholars, all alarmed by the rapid decline of the Irish language. While the foreign scholars were concerned about the threatened loss of one of the oldest European languages, Irish fear for the language was part of a broader range of political concerns.

The death of Parnell is often identified as the watershed moment in the Irish history of this period. His fall from grace resulted in a widespread disillusionment with the political processes that had failed to achieve Home Rule and left a void in the public discourse of the nation (Welch: 466). Many see his fall as the moment of realisation that the solution to the crisis facing the Irish nation was as much cultural as it was political. Thus, the various cultural activities aimed at Revival grew directly out of the political failure to achieve the national identity so many were actively seeking. From this moment of disillusionment grew an awareness that past efforts had been weakened by a lack of a cohesive sense of Irish identity. The assertion of a distinctive Irish identity came to be seen as the essential and urgent first step towards national rehabilitation.

It was in the years following the fall of Parnell that the long process of identifying and asserting a national Irishness began (Coohill, 2000: 113). Seamus Deane articulates the three ideas central to this endeavour (1997: 50-54). The first was the idea that Ireland is a culturally distinct nation and the second that it had been altered drastically by English colonialism. The third and most significant idea informing the new project was that the identity it had almost lost could still be recovered. Deane looks beyond the facts and statistics of the era to write of the psychic shift in Irish perception of self and nation that followed in the wake of “the cataclysm” that was the Famine (50). He identifies the Famine as the event that had finally crushed Ireland's sense of itself as a distinct nation. The Famine had recast Ireland's population as the tragic remnants of a decimated race whose endurance had failed them in the midst of catastrophe.

The challenge to the sense of nation at this time gave a new centrality and urgency to questions of national territory and language. The loss of land and language was read as symptomatic evidence of the degradation of the nation. Centuries of subjugation to British rule followed by the ravages of Famine and the steady bleed of emigration had diminished the Irish nation's sense of its own cultural and historical significance. In its weakened state and, caught as it was in a no-man's land between two languages and two cultures (Deane: 52), Ireland was poised to succumb ever more deeply to English ways and to English power and influence. An urgent and strident assertion of a distinct Irish national character was the only possible means by which such a fate could be avoided.

The various strategies that concerned themselves with the remaking of Irish identity were linked by the two central aims of recovering the land for the people and restoring the language to the people. Yeats was amongst the first to recognise the need for a new cultural movement and founded the National Literary Society, with Douglas Hyde as its first president.

These early revivalists “sought to employ literature in the resuscitation of elder Irish values and customs” (Foster, 1987: xvi).

Hyde used his first address to the new Society on 25 November, 1892 to reassert the now fragile link between the nation's language and its culture. This speech, his often-cited “Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland”, argued strongly for the preservation and revival of Irish language and customs [1894] (1986). He reminded his listeners that the culture they were hoping to revivify expressed itself in a corpus of folktales, sports, dress and costumes -- “all seamlessly bound by the Irish language” (Kiberd, 1996: 123). He also used this speech to articulate his view that the imitation of English ways was a sign of Irish cultural weakness. The ideas contained in this speech informed the establishment of the Gaelic League in 1893. Doherty and Keogh question the premise of Hyde’s philosophy with their view that the extent to which English language and customs had already been absorbed into “the Irish psyche” was not properly recognised at this time (Doherty and Keogh, 2003: 183). They take the view that the impact of the “long English presence in Ireland” was no longer something that could be understood as external to Irish culture, that it had been absorbed like a layer of sediment in Irish soil, a fact that went largely unacknowledged.

The Gaelic League began with the expressed intention of keeping the Irish language alive in Ireland (Welch: 208). Insisting upon the representation of the language as a living language able to meet the needs of a twentieth century language community, the League aimed to preserve Irish as the national language and to extend its use as a spoken language (Purdon, 1999: 37). It also aimed to promote the study and publication of existing Gaelic literature and the development of a modern literature in Irish. Although it began as a non-sectarian body with no political affiliations, and in spite of Hyde’s hope of keeping it outside party politics, the League soon came to express nationalist sympathies. Recognising Ireland’s

growing dependence on English culture, Hyde's aims soon expanded beyond matters of language to encourage the survival of other native cultural activities that might contribute to a distinct sense of Irishness. He believed that knowledge of the past was the surest foundation on which to rebuild the culture and that it was only through preserving and using their own language that Irish people could "render the present a rational continuation of the past" (Welch: 208). That past would be called up, reconstructed and pressed into service of the new Ireland.

After the Parnell crisis, the creation of an independent Irish mentality came to be seen in political terms as just the first step in a journey towards complete Irish freedom from English domination. Hyde's apolitical intentions failed and the Gaelic League committed itself to a "free, Gaelic-speaking Ireland" in 1915 (208). While some of its members were concerned about the cultural impact of the imminent loss of the language, for others it was the political significance of the language and the political implications of its loss that were of greater concern. The two dimensions of the language issue soon fused to produce a powerful new ideological amalgam as is clearly demonstrated by Malcolm Brown:

Literary clubs and cultural organisations became so many recruiting agents for the volunteers. Money collected after traditional music events was used to buy arms. Rooms used for evening lectures became drill halls in daytime and cultural enthusiasm was a prerequisite for military enthusiasm, not an aim in itself. The men had little use for anyone who was not a believer in physical force. Gaelic leaguers and members of the Sinn Féin Clubs who did not belong to the Volunteers were sneered at (Brown, 1972: 56).

The ideology of the Gaelic League came into Tomás' life largely through Pádraig Ó Siochfhrada, best known by his pen-name, An Seabhac. In his role as editor for several League journals such as *An Lóchrann*, *An Claidreamh Soluis* and *Fainne An Lae*, An Seabhac had published quite a few articles Tomás had written. He also eventually edited Tomás' two major works.



There are other signs of the League's influence in Tomás' life. He often had the League journal, *Misneach*, in his house, as he mentions several times in *Island Cross-Talk*. He corresponded on matters of literature with League members such as Seosamh Laoide. His relationship with the League was eventually formalised to a certain degree with an arrangement by which, as he told Brian Ó Ceallaigh, in a letter dated 5-4-1919, the League offered him financial support in return for his monitoring the use of language on the Island and distributing the books and newspapers they sent amongst his neighbours (Ó Coileáin, 1992: 238).

The Gaelic League also impacted upon Tomás' life in a tragic manner that no-one could have foreseen. His son, Donal, drowned while trying to save Eileen Nicholls, a prominent Gaelic League visitor from Dublin. The identities of those present on the Island on this sad day demonstrate that Gaelic League philosophy had not come unaccompanied into the Island. Activists in every age often concern themselves with a range of social issues, and so it was with James Cousins and his wife, Gretta, who took charge of the situation on behalf of the Nicholls family. They had a range of interests and beliefs that were not confined to the tenets of the League, interests that included theosophy and women's rights. Gretta, who was very active in the Irish Women's Franchise League, had once been imprisoned for throwing stones at a rally in Downing Street, London. The Sunday before they journeyed to the Blaskets and the tragedy that waited, Gretta held a public meeting near Dunquin chapel where she gave an oration on behalf of the Women's League, upsetting the local priest who read it as "a sure sign of the break-up of the planet" (McGrath, 1990: 19). As McGrath says, "on a Sunday early in August 1909 the Suffragette movement came to Dun Chaoin!" (19) – and within three miles of the Blaskets. Perhaps the Islanders would have been treated to the same experience, or a theosophical discussion, were it not for the tragic events of the day. In fact, if

it were not for these events, the presence of a theosophist and a suffragette on the Blasket Island may well have passed unrecognised and forgotten, which leads one to wonder what other forgotten theories, beliefs and causes may have washed up on Tomás' Island.

The identities of those concerned in this tragic story might also be read as an indication of cultural interest in the Island: the roll call of famous names tangential to the events of the sad day on the Blaskets demonstrates Island proximity to the vortex of Irish cultural activity and points to the fallibility of the notion of an untouched Island culture. Eileen Nicholls, "a noble young woman from Ireland's principal city" (Ó Dubhshláine, 2003: 9), was an eminent scholar and a prominent member of the League's Dublin headquarters and a close friend of Pádraig Pearse. As recently as 1994, Philip O'Leary described one of her addresses to Cumann na Mac Léighinn as "perceptive and still provocative" (O'Leary, 1994: 418). James and Gretta Cousins, active in literary circles, enjoyed the friendship of Douglas Hyde (McGrath 18). James wrote several times for the Abbey, stopping only when W. B. Yeats decided that Synge's work should replace Cousins'. He also showed the poetry he wrote to James Joyce and felt hurt by Joyce's derision of his work.

Eyewitness accounts to the events of 1909 tell that while strenuous efforts were made to revive Eileen Nicholls, none were made to revive Tomás' son (Ó Dubhshláine: 101-2). "Eibhlin was a woman and a visitor, and that may have accounted for this preferential treatment, but it must also be said that poor, simple peasants were generally given little importance in those times" (101). The extravagant public lament for Eileen Nicholls, which began in the Blaskets and accompanied her coffin all the way to Dublin, was not extended to Donal Ó Criomhthain who lost his life while trying to save hers. James Cousins, whose written messages alerted the wider world to the tragedy and who wrote about it on further occasions, and who later achieved fame as an early champion of Irish and Indian nationalisms

(McGrath: 18) did not even remember the name of the boy who drowned with Eileen (104). He referred to him once as “Donough” instead of Donal and so many references to the victims of this tragedy also refer to him in this way. In death, Eileen became an Irish nationalist heroine, this stature increasing as her relationship with the tragic Pearse was invested with romantic overtones. In death, beyond his own community, Donal became little more, or perhaps less, than a footnote in Eileen’s story, with no public commemoration until 1989.

The manner in which the tragedy of Eileen completely overshadowed the tragedy of Donal was repeated in 1947 in the reports of the events that followed the death of Seánín Ó Cearna on the Island. Several Islanders braved a turbulent sea to go to the mainland for a coffin for Seánín. The return journey was just as hazardous and mainland volunteers used their new state-of-the-art, fully equipped boat, the *Saint Therese*, to carry the coffin to the Island. In the newspaper accounts of the events, emphasis was put on the use of the new boat and the bravery of the volunteers who had manned it. "There was only one small mention of the initial journey across the Sound by *náomhóg* to fetch help in the first place, and even that said there were two men on board rather than four" (Moreton: 51). These two incidents prefigure the way in which Tomás' personal story of his own life was to be eclipsed by the story of the nation that was read into his work.

The drawing of Tomás' life story into the narrative of the nation was largely the work of the Gaelic League. Although the League's influence was greatest in the towns and cities and only slight in Gaeltacht regions (Welch 208), such as the Blaskets, the League was greatly interested in the Island as it seemed to breathe life into the imagery on which they based their construction and promotion of a Gaelic history and Gaelic mentality necessary to the creation of a new Ireland. Drawing upon the work of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), Kiberd writes of cultural leaders “ransacking the past for a serviceable narrative” (1996: 125)

that would legitimate the emergent nation-state. "In this way," he writes, "by recourse to a few chosen symbols and simple ideas, random people could be transformed into Italians or Irish, and explain themselves by a highly edited version of their history" (125). The West of Ireland furnished the Revivalist with the images around which they spun their new myths. Most notable of these images was that of the Island, the peasant and his folklore (Foster, 1987: xi). The past they "ransacked" was the peasant's past, his traditions became theirs, his heroism a reflection of the nation's character. It was their preoccupation with these images that led the League to harness the Blasket Island and its literature to their cultural agenda. Underpinning them all was the preoccupation with place which, in its most general terms, privileged rural Ireland over the urban centres and expressed itself in a romantic idealisation of the West, especially the Western Islands.

The connection between national identity and landscape is a staple element in post-colonial literature which often seeks to resolve the identity crisis that accompanies the loss of homeland (Nash, 1993: 89). Nash provides a three-tiered model of post-colonial literature's treatment and use of place that allows constructive consideration of the nationalist use of place during the Revival (89-90).

The first tier of Nash's model sees place represented as a colony, perhaps in travel literature, written by and for representatives of the imperial power. Although custom and landscape figure largely in such writing, the imperial centre is the privileged norm against which the colony's difference is evaluated. Nash's description of this tier calls to mind some of the entries in Thady Kevane's guestbook, many of which were written by people from urban parts of Ireland, alerting us to the colonial overtones in the relationship between Gaeltacht and mainstream Ireland. The second tier of the model sees the colonised writer using landscape flamboyantly and self-consciously to declare his identity and to assert his attachment to the

place, calling Synge to mind. The third tier reveals that for writers whose work is for their own home audience, landscape is part of the shared culture, a backdrop of "shared resonances" that require no strident proclamation (90). Examination of Tomás' texts will find not one description of the Island. As John McGahern wrote:

The island is simply there as a human habitation, a bare foundation of earth on which people live and move. A field is only described as it is reclaimed and cultivated. A strand is there to be crossed, a sea to be fished, a town to be reached, a shore to be gained, walked upon, lived upon. (1991).

There are numerous reasons why the Revivalists' use of the imagery of the West as a rallying point for their project was particularly apt, the most obvious being the ever-diminishing remnant of Gaeltacht it still held. While the use of English was seeping into some parts of the Gaeltacht, including the Blasket Islands, it was nevertheless commonly believed that Irish was still the only language spoken there. It was represented, as we have seen, as the home of a "pure", "authentic" and "uncontaminated" Irish language. Traditional Gaelic lore was still alive there and the way of life remained much as it was a hundred years or more ago. The Gaeltacht provided the wider Irish population, not only with the language Hyde believed they needed to connect their present with their past, but also with a living image of that almost forgotten past that could be fastened to the mast of their endeavours. Finally, the Gaeltacht provided the fragile nation with evidence of its own cultural resilience.

The West also connected Ireland to her ancient past by drawing upon Celtic mythology which asserted that all features of the landscape were "animated" (Pennick, 1996: 8). Observing day's end in the West, the ancient Celts had come to regard the West as a place of mystery and death. The disappearance and reappearance of the sun beyond the earth's horizon offered an image of the soul's mysterious wait for rebirth. Thus the West came

to be associated with the mysteries of death and the hope of paradise, useful imagery for those bent on refashioning a nation.

Ó Tuama points out that Irish literature has always reserved its greatest respect for the rural places (1995: 249). He offers two explanations for the fact that many town-dwellers continue to identify themselves with the rural origins of their forebears instead of with the towns or cities they inhabit, one more ancient than the other, but both historical. It is his view that the origins of the Irish refusal of an urban identity are to be found in the distant past, when Ireland was composed of one or two hundred small, autonomous “rural cities” that each had a chieftain-king. Tradition had it that each of the chieftain-kings was wedded to his territory which, in Ó Tuama’s view, provided the model for the lower ranks where families remained faithful to their family territory, some even to this day. He places these imagined relationships, between chieftain-king and territory and between family and homeland, at the centre of the Irish preoccupation with place as well as of its refusal of urban identity.

The political appropriateness of the Revival use of the West as a central image becomes apparent when Ó Tuama identifies the second possible reason for urban alienation. This ancient and familial predisposition to refuse an urban identity was compounded, in Ó Tuama’s view, by the fact that many of Ireland’s cities and towns, especially those in the east, were brought into existence by the colonial powers soon after invasion and maintained by them as their administrative centres. The West was as far away as one could get from these sites of dispossession and so provided an obvious alternative.

The Irish West began its climb to cultural prominence in the middle of the nineteenth century when travel links to the western areas were developed and it began to be represented in travel literature as a place that offered beautiful scenery, a healthy environment and many opportunities for leisure pursuits. In Kerry, the Dingle train opened up the area south-west of

Tralee, bringing visitors to the Corca Dhuibne peninsula and making the once almost impossibly remote Blasket Islands somewhat more accessible. Anthropologists and antiquarians had already stimulated public interest in this and other western areas, and philologists had drawn attention to the language that was still spoken there but lost to most other parts of the country (Nash: 90). The West quickly came to stand for Ireland in general, both at home and abroad and its landscape to be read as a symbol of true Irishness (86).

The cultural significance that attached to the West allowed it to be used in representations of Ireland both domestically and internationally and so soon became a standard feature of the way Ireland was represented, both to itself and to its neighbour (Nash: 87). In its colonial context, the West provided England with a primitive "other" that allowed it to demonstrate its superior strength and status and to justify its imperial project in Ireland. Within Ireland, the West also confirmed Ireland's difference from England. In response to the social dislocation it suffered in the wake of rapid industrialisation, England had begun to re-imagine itself in terms of its gentle hills and soft, green pasture (91). The jagged, grey rocks of the West furnished the Irish with a hardy, masculine and ascetic identity that not only contested the old representation of the Celts as a feminised race but also turned England's image of itself into that of a soft-bellied, tamed race (87).

Within Ireland itself, the West came to be represented as a special place able to restore to Ireland much of what had been lost in the past. The language, traditions and lore all spoke of a way of life that had almost disappeared in other parts of the country, and Irish-speakers such as Tomás quickly developed reputations that spread far beyond their own districts. Their words and stories were assiduously collected and recorded by various means, and personal encounters with them often took on something of the air of a pilgrimage. Few commentators failed to be swept up in the new enthusiasm for peasant culture. A rare

dissenting voice was raised by Seán O'Faolain in his written account of the time he spent on the Great Blasket (1941). Describing Tomás as a “pompous old man”, he boasts of matching the old Islandman proverb for proverb and beating him at his own game, to the amusement, he says, of those who looked on (134). He also expresses his preference for the company of some Islanders returned from the United States after an absence of seven years, finding in their conversation signs of a shrewdness, detachment and freedom of mind absent from the conversation of the other Islanders (135).

While the colonial version of Ireland's West rendered it primitive and inferior, the national model of the West re-fashioned it as a site of cherished difference from the rest of the country and from its neighbour. Although O'Faolain dissented from the sentiment that attached to this view, he nevertheless confirmed the other-ness of the region: “every mile down the peninsula is a mile of time. The years roll back. I can feel the eighteenth century is already on me at Dunquin. There is a man who, by his language [...] speaks like a hedge-school master of 1700” (135).

The valorisation of the West as the site and image of true Irishness did more than oppress some sections of the national community, denied the rest of the country a sense of authenticity. The modernisation, the urbanisation, the industrialisation and, above all, the Anglicisation, that had swept through many parts of the country, all came to be read as marks of inauthenticity and of corruption. The view that the rest of the country, particularly the North, had been disenfranchised by the privileging of the West was best expressed by Conor Cruise O'Brien, who remarked that “the Ireland they believed in had an enormous West Coast and no North-East corner” (1970: 21).

Ironically, within Ireland, the West functioned as the representative of the true Ireland because it was quite unlike the rest of Ireland (Nash: 87). It functioned simultaneously as a



revelation to the Irish of their own exoticness, and as a reminder of familiar cultural values they reputedly shared. It defended them against Hyde's charge that they had thoughtlessly surrendered their Irishness. It was, however, neither the representation of the rural reality of the day nor of the Irish rural past. Drawing attention to the harshness of nineteenth century life in rural Ireland, Luke Gibbons points out that no-one would have left the Ireland of De Valera's latterday fond rememberings (1996: 85). Recognising the romanticisation of rural Ireland as a symptom of a breakdown with the past rather than as a continuation of it, Gibbons locates its origins in the social upheaval that came in the wake of modernisation. He draws attention to the views of Miller who writes "those very innovations, so pregnant with social disruption and demoralization, themselves encouraged greater popular reliance on traditional outlooks and 'explanations' which could relieve the tensions consequent on rapid transition" (85). The romanticisation of rural Ireland emerged from the metropolitan centre of Ireland and was the work of town-dwelling political leaders, writers and commentators (85). Fintan O'Toole recognises the urban confection of the idealised rural existence as the work of people not long removed from the land themselves (1985: 112-113). He believes they were people longing for the primitive simplicity they imagined they had lost, and a sense of community that had yet to be re-fashioned in an urban setting.

As Kiberd remarked, certain symbols were chosen to further a deliberate invention of Irish tradition. It is thus not surprising that some of these symbols are not in fact residue of an old Gaelic order but, instead, social constructions of modern vintage (Gibbons, 1996: 86). By way of example, Gibbons cites the uniformity of religious practice, assumed to be basic and essential to Irish life through the ages (86). This uniformity of practice was, however, a direct result of the post-Famine centralisation of the power of the church in Ireland that brought the truly traditional and idiosyncratic practices of the countryside into line with mainstream

practice. Far from being an expression of an old code of living, the assertion of such unified and uniform features of Irish life as this, in fact, represents an effort to modernise the old decentralised society (86).

An urgent desire to endow the culture with a sense of tradition reflected the cultural anxiety of the period. There were many instances of newly minted "traditions" answering the need. The story of Muriel Gahan offers us a case in point (Somerville-Large, 1999: 169).

Gahan was an Anglo-Irish devotee of traditional crafts who, in 1931, persuaded the women of the Aran Islands to knit off-white pullovers, with intricate Celtic patterns for adults, saying that she would find markets for this product if they did. And so the traditional Aran sweater was born. It is still bought eagerly today by tourists wanting to take home something "authentic" from Ireland. Similarly, Walsh writes that the "traditional" dances of the Irish countryside were local adaptations of dances brought in from England and Scotland (1977: 19). He also tells that the "traditional" Irish harp music was brought back into vogue and refashioned by antiquarians who feared its imminent demise (19).

Tomás, whose work is so often valorised as the written record of Blasket Island tradition, occupies an ambiguous position in relation to this tradition. He gives an early indication of his equivocation on the matter when, early in his autobiography, he has his mother say of the days and people gone by: "Thanks be to God, again and again, that that world is passed away!" (51). Throughout this text, although he does indeed record many aspects of the tradition, and represents himself as its champion, he also documents many of the changes and challenges to tradition in his texts and his mixed feelings about them. On the one hand, he writes disapprovingly of matters such as the changes in the Blasket diet and the departures from traditional wake practices that were creeping in (1951: 213), and on the other,

he tells that he helped with the work on the changes to the land usage system on the Island and with the building of the new houses by the Congested Districts Board (233).

As we have seen, the West aroused conflicting emotions in those who gazed upon it. While the coloniser saw it as a primitive outpost of civilisation, Irish Revivalists saw it as the fragile relic of its culture. While Mrs Thomson and other proselytising visitors saw its inhabitants as amoral barbarians just beyond the fringe of civilisation, the Revivalists emphasised their timeless spirituality. Early tourists to the area responded romantically and extravagantly to the beauty of the landscape, its extreme poverty either escaping their notice or being seen as an integral part of the appealing primitivism of the place. Politically, the poverty of an area "so close to the heart of empire" (Nash: 88) came to be an embarrassment to the English administration as it would later be to the new Irish government. Romanticising the poverty was an effective cultural remedy for a serious political problem.

Fintan O'Toole comments on the marginality of the romantic West:

In Irish nationalist mythology, the West was the locus of the real Ireland, and the goal of politics was to make the whole country as like the West as possible. In reality, though, the West was marginalised economically and culturally, poorer, less populous, more vulnerable to the loss of its people through emigration (O'Toole, 1999: 14).

Not soon enough, it was realised that this chosen site of national identity and rebirth was under inescapable threat. The cultural heritage of the Gaeltacht, especially as it was expressed in the Irish language was equally threatened by the decline of the Gaeltacht and by the measures that might have saved it.

The myths that had grown around the West found fuller expression in the Western Islands where the traditional associations with the West -- decline, death and the hope of paradise -combined with the many significances of island imagery. John Wilson Foster has written extensively on their cultural and literary significance (Foster, 1987). He writes that the

Islands signified a link between sea and sky as well as between mainland and the ocean beyond and provided a buffer between the known and unknown worlds (261). He points to their historical associations with extraordinary modes of existence such as sanctuary, penance and exile which strengthened notions of the island as a place where life is deeply experienced (261). The rigours of Island life demanded heroism on a daily basis, thus producing a population that was necessarily of heroic stature, the very stuff of nation building.

Foster discusses the use made of the island image by the Revivalists in their efforts to forge a new Irish consciousness with roots in an Irish past (xvi). So central was this image to Revival enterprise, and so pervasive did it become, that, in Foster's view, a reading of a person's attitudes towards the western island could be taken as a reliable measure of their attitude to Irish culture (261). As with the West, the new island mythology created by the Revival harked back to ancient beliefs about islands found in Celtic mythology.

Celtic tradition revered the landscape, seeing it as Mother Earth in her local manifestation and considered the relationship between people and the landscape that nurtured and sheltered them as profound, subtle and inescapable (Pennick, 1996: 7). This philosophy attributed a soul and spirit to each place and saw the reflection of an animated nature in every place and thing, with the result that everything in the Celtic world had a personal and particular significance. Nigel Pennick shows that Celtic tradition imbued the world with soul and that, in this "ensouled world", every place had its own personality and reflected multiple meanings in both the physical and metaphysical worlds (9).

Celtic mythology attached special significance to certain places of nature, especially islands, springs and mountains, which were among the "ensouled" places that heightened human consciousness and increased their chances of receiving healing or inspiration. Irish tradition considered many islands holy (Pennick: 105). It was thought that islands were cut off

from evil and magic and so could maintain a purity and innocence impossible to safeguard in the wider world. For the same reason, it was believed that islands fostered ways of life that differed from those of the ordinary world. Islands were separate worlds,

Physically cut off from worldly contamination, . . . as the hermits knew a thousand years before, where the sea kept the people apart from the sinners on the mainland to indulge in clean living, sustained by strong religious faith, and zealously maintained traditional values (Somerville-Large: 167).

These views were borne out by Seán Ó Criomhthain who points out that "the sea has neither pity nor mercy for anyone" (Tyers: 42). He explains the mind-set of those who live on islands:

Islands are places where, if the inhabitants have any prayer at all in their hearts, their faith will be strengthened and deepened as a result of signs they see coming from God. It is better to witness one portent than to be listening to people chattering all your life. The portent goes to one's heart but talk is slow to impress. (42).

The remembrance of the hermits of a thousand years ago serves to underline the asceticism of the holy islands which, as Foster points out, were seen as earthly images of purgatory, martyrdom and apocalypse by early Irish Christians (263). So, as well as offering alternative modes of existence to the living, holy islands were also thought of as "the undying lands" or otherworld abodes of the dead (Pennick: 105).

There were also phantom islands that seemed to come and go, apparitions produced by certain weather conditions (Pennick: 109). Pennick reproduces an account given of such visions by D. R. McAnally who wrote of one such island:

At its own sweet will it comes and, having shown itself long enough to convince everybody who is not an 'innocent entirely' of its reality, it goes without leave-taking or ceremony, and always before boats can approach near enough to make a careful inspection. This is the invariable history of its appearance. (Pennick: 109).

Pennick writes that the changing location and appearance of the island were seen as a measure of the craft of the enchanter controlling it.

A belief in mythical, magical islands was prevalent in the west of Ireland for many years. One such island was Hy Brasil, a mysterious earthly island paradise that was the subject of a thesis in cartography in 1325 and even continued to appear on maps until the nineteenth century (MacKillop, 1998: 267-8). MacKillop records Yeats' report of a conversation with fishermen who claimed to have sailed out to sea as far as Hy Brasil, showing that belief in this fantastic island continued down to his day (268). The fishermen described it as an island without labour, care or cynicism and as a place where conversation could be had with Cu Chulainn and his heroic companions. Christa Löffler sees in the Irish belief in magical islands a psychological response to the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean (Löffler, 1983: 306). T.J. Westropp, who wrote many years before Löffler, held similar views: "The Irish lay on the 'fringe of things' of the Old World: it is unendurable to live in the mist on the edge of a precipice, so they mentally and actually strove to penetrate the gloom beyond them." (1912: 232).

Celtic legend often made reference to the westward journey to the Isles of the Blest made by the soul at death. The concepts of heaven and hell never completely overcame this Celtic belief in the soul's journey to a timeless island paradise in the west. After the coming of Christianity, Celts continued to bury their dead on islands west of the land of the living, a practice that maintained a link with the old pagan belief in the soul's journey west to the Isles of the Blest. Beliefs such as this prevailed on the Island during Tomás' lifetime. The journey motif often colours his narration of an Island death; more than once he describes death as a journey on "the way of truth". His faith in the old beliefs is most fully expressed in the valedictory passage of his autobiography where, writing of his mother, he says: "I hope in God that she and my father will inherit the Blessed Kingdom; and that I and every reader of this book after me will meet them in the Island of Paradise" (245).

The use the Revivalists made of imagery associated with the western islands, both real and mythical, was most apt. First of all, islands both real and mythical shared the quality of timelessness. This timeless dimension of the existence of some of these islands in a mythic space, that allowed them to appear and disappear "at their own sweet will", lent an air of timelessness to the Irishness that was being brokered, as well as a useful sense of wilful independence from the usual laws of existence. It allowed the present, and more importantly, the future, to be added to this continuum of timelessness, connecting the endeavours of the revival to the heroic past and providing a bedrock to which could be anchored an emergent Irish identity.

Perhaps the most significant quality of the islands to the Revivalist enterprise was the isolation that set them apart spiritually and culturally and which also set them apart politically (Pennick: 105). While the mythic islands were said to have welcomed and sheltered the heroic forebears of the Irish, each real island that was inhabited sheltered "a tribe that was really a small nation, whose people were dependent on one another to an extent difficult for outsiders to understand" (Somerville-Large: 163). Their status as independent lands was easily translated into an image of proud independence that could be used to counter the image of the Irish as a fallen race. The reliance of islanders on each other for their very survival provided a model of an old, imagined existence that would be used to counter the theme of isolation so often expressed in depictions of the modern, urban world of the mainland. And so, as Foster points out, the western islands came to be seen as a precious remnant of the old Ireland, to represent "Ireland's mythic unity before the Chaos of conquest" (Foster, 1977: 265). Foster's view is borne out by the words of Thomas Mason who wrote: "the inhabitants [of the Aran Islands] may be peasants, but they are remnants of an ancient race and are gentlefolk in the literal and highest meaning of the phrase" (1950: 2). The fondly imagined unity of

pre-conquest Ireland overlooked the fact that unity had never prevailed in Ireland which, as already noted, had functioned as a collection of small independent kingdoms.

Over the years, many visitors fell prey to the appeal of the western islands. Orson Wells wrote of his stay on Inisheer when he was sixteen:

I know and love every spot and every soul on these isles . . . I spent an hour or so lying in the sand listening to the sounds of the night -- afar off the crying of dogs and donkeys -- the mournful note of a Gaelic ballad and nearer me the wailing of the gulls and the 'wash-wash' of the sea (Somerville -- Large: 169).

His words are reminiscent of Synge's impressions, years before, of the peasant as part of the landscape in that, for him, the mournful Gaelic ballad is but one of the sounds of the night, a part of the accoustic landscape, as wordless as the crying of dogs and donkeys and the wailing of gulls.

Just as the mythical islands appeared and disappeared "at their own sweet will", the significance of the islands seemed to take on a life of its own and grew in proportion to the emotional responses of those who beheld them. Depending on what was being sought in them, islands offered their visitors a vision of an old Gaelic world or of the Garden of Eden. One visitor looks at an island and sees man's lost origins and paradise: "Here life has attained a simplicity and is lived with an artistry surpassing anything I am sure in the South Seas . . . a kind of lost Eden rich in romance and bounteous beauty" (Somerville -- Large, 169). Their significance is stretched well beyond the local emphasis on things Gaelic when Hubert Butler claims the islands as part of Europe, writing: "Aran [...] one of the most enchanting and interesting spots in Europe since it has held to a precious beauty and simplicity which the rest of Europe is disastrously discarding" (170). Fintan O'Toole also takes note of European significance of the islands when he writes: "The Arans, and especially the Blasket Islands



became for European culture a mythic terrain, a place where Odysseus and Nestor still walked the earth and the older verities still remained true" (168).

At the national level, the western islands as the chosen site of national renewal was particularly appropriate for, as Foster points out, many of those revivalists, antiquarians, philologists and folklorists who went to the islands, did so hoping to prove Ireland's pre-conquest identity. The most obvious factor in their choice was their distance from England and the heart of empire. Difficult access to the western islands and their notorious poverty combined to keep the English away, leaving what seemed to be a fragment of uncontaminated Ireland. The visible, physical link with old unconquered Ireland provided by the ruins and remains on the islands was a further factor in their choice. Another was the fact that the pre-Christian past of the islands strengthened the position of those who wanted the new Ireland to remain Catholic as its pre-Christian past was also necessarily pre-Reformation. The purity of the Irish language spoken on the western islands provided a further reason for their emphasis on the islands and is the factor most commonly discussed in relation to this issue. A further motivating factor was the belief of the day, later disproven, in the aboriginal descent of the islanders (Foster: 265). Finally, the islands lent a gravitas to the endeavours of the revivalists in that the difficulties of journeying to the islands gave such expeditions the aura of a pilgrimage and came to be read as a sign of commitment to the new Ireland (265).

Somerville-Large sums up Irish attitudes to the islands:

As uncontaminated survivals, these islands and their inhabitants were respected and cherished by the State. The West of Ireland was revered, but these islands even more so; with their culture preserved by isolation, their primal innocence which remained intact, and the perceived heroic lifestyle of their inhabitants, they took on an aura of symbolism. They were glowing outposts of the Gaelic tradition which the State was trying desperately and expensively to preserve elsewhere (168).

It seemed to those involved in the nationalist project that Ireland's failure to assert its own national identity with vigour and conviction had contributed to its long subjugation (Deane: 50-54). That so many, both citizens and foreign observers alike, could either be unaware of or ignore Ireland's distinct national identity was the result of centuries of occupation and the rupture of the Irish social fabric that followed its loss of sovereignty (Maignant, 1996: 24-25). This long process had caused the Irish, in the words of Douglas Hyde, to lose their Irishness without becoming English (Hyde, 1986: 154). For many Irish people, according to George Watson, the knowledge of their lost cultural identity and their awareness that they had already gone a long way towards the acceptance of the foreign culture were more painful than the political subjugation of their country (Watson, 1979: 19). On a similar note, Elizabeth Bowen remarked that while politicians had failed to deliver the Ireland they had promised, the cultural nationalists believed they could at least get Irishness back (Hirsch, 1991: 1124).

Throughout this period, the proud image of Ireland that had been preserved in the nation's histories -- oral, synthetic and literary -- had been eclipsed and eroded by countless miserable losses and tales of defeat that diminished whatever sense may have remained of its national identity. Perhaps because it was the event that sent the Irish out into the wider world in droves, the Famine has come to be seen as the sole cause of Irish suffering in recent centuries. It was in fact merely the last and cruellest blow suffered by an already fragile race. The political significance of the Famine was that it allowed the Irish to be seen and represented in terms of an attrition from which there could be no recovery. It was a sad image of the nation that was widely and swiftly communicated to the rest of the world as a result of the emigration that followed in its wake. So, as Deane points out, the Revivalist project was complicated by the need to reconcile two competing, contradictory truths about traditional Irish culture (50). They had to show first, that Irish culture had almost been destroyed by forces

outside itself, if not by attrition, then by disaster, and secondly, that this same culture was nevertheless still viable and so justified their claims for independence. If an impression of the continuity and vitality of the culture could be established, it would suggest the future viability of the country by re-contextualising the current emergency as merely the most recent of many. Tomás O’Crohan, western man, islandman, survivor, wittingly or not, provided the Revivalist project with a template of Irishness most useful to the “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991) under construction.

The equally urgent first tasks of the Revival were the recovery of a sense of the past and the assertion of a distinctive Irish character. Douglas Hyde recognised that Ireland needed to recover its sense of its own past as a conduit to self-knowledge and as a strong cultural basis on which to build the future nation (155). As the events of recorded history had discredited the heroic national character the Revivalists sought to demonstrate, it was necessary to turn elsewhere in their culture for material suitable to the task of rebuilding the past. It was to be found in abundance in the ancient legends and manuscripts which had for some time already been the focus of much antiquarian and philological interest at the time (Maignant: 28). Ancient myth, with its heroes and champions and seamless history, was favoured over history with its litany of defeat and indignity, as the path to the reclamation of Ireland’s past (Deane, 1997: 50).

Myth was a happy choice for several reasons. First, the choice of legend, myth and folklore strengthened and validated Revival reliance on the figure of the peasant at its masthead. Secondly, as we have seen, Irish folklore, with its origins in pre-Christian times, had been acknowledged as rich beyond comparison, largely because it had been kept alive by professional poets and story-tellers through the ages. Finally, due to the long influence of the synthetic historians, the traditional stories it contained were believed to be the true history of

the dispossessed race ( MacKillop, 1977: 87). The effectiveness of the early Revivalist strategy may be judged from a reading of L Paul-Dubois' *Contemporary Ireland* of 1908:

When such English visitors are of an observant turn of mind and compare the Ireland of today with the Ireland of twenty years ago, they perceive that a great change has taken place, and they are not far wrong when they see in the revival of the Irish language the symbol and the agent of this profound transformation.

This transformation began fifteen or twenty years ago. In the time of recollection or retreat which followed on political disintegration, Ireland came to understand that if liberty had always been refused her it was because her nationality had not been forcibly enough affirmed before English eyes. She understood that independence alone does not make a nation; that independence alone may not always indicate nationhood; that the essential mark of nationhood is the intellectual, social and moral patrimony which the past bequeaths to the present, which amplified, or at least preserved, the present must bequeath to the future; and that it is this which makes the strength and individuality of a people. (Paul-Dubois, 1998: 315).

It is ironic that England appears to have failed to appreciate the significance of the cultural movements in Ireland at this time. Although the English government was on the alert for political movements, it paid no attention to the cultural movements and, in fact, even encouraged them, "probably thinking they would take the people's minds off the struggle for freedom." (Colum, 1998: 316). The Irish, however, read the sudden and near comprehensive loss of their language as nothing less than an attack on their culture at its roots (Casey and Rhodes, 1977: 10). With their language movements they mounted their defence and in the peasants of the West they found an image on which to base their response.

The idealisation and elevation of the peasant had begun with the Land League's creation of the myth that the peasantry had owned their land in ancient Ireland until their dispossession at the hands of the English settlers. This invented, dignified, land-owning peasant informed and justified the Land League's assertion of an "ancient claim" for the return

of the land to the Irish people (Watson: 22). The peasant, for his part, was further dignified, his image almost sanctified, and given a central role in the reconfiguration of the nation. But it was a myth, in the tradition of Eoin Mac Neill's "synthetic history", as "the people" had never owned "the land" (22). Joseph Lee gives something of the flavour of this new piece of "synthetic history" when he writes: "the Land League not merely articulated, but largely created, that aspiration [peasant proprietorship], and legitimised it with an immaculate pedigree by which the tenants acquired retrospective private shares in a mythical garden of Eden" (Lee, 1973: 96).

Just as the West had come to be seen as the home of true Irishness, its people, the peasantry, the poorest people of Ireland, soon came to be seen and represented as the embodiment of the authentic national character. Tied to the land by their labour and way of life as well as by the mythologising of the Land League, their unique and enduring ties with the failing nation became the new focus of the growing respect for the peasantry (Maignant: 28). Their immersion in the oral tradition that had sustained them for generations had never ended. It seemed that the last scraps of the old culture were in their hands. It seemed that the oral tradition not only insulated them from the effects of modernisation and anglicisation felt everywhere else in the country (MacKillop, 1977: 104), thus keeping their traditional identity intact, but tied them to that imagined past so many now wished to reconstruct. The perception that the habits and customs of the peasant were unchanging soon came to be read as evidence of a historically continuous and undisrupted national character. This, combined with their location in the West, the newly minted site of Irish authenticity, allowed a reading of the peasant as "the embodiment of a pristine national character" (Deane: 52).

As Graham and Kirkland write:

De Valera's Ireland was one whose destiny was to slough off the accretions of Anglicisation and return to a source, denied through colonisation and abandoned through modernisation, which was located at the furthest historical and geographical distance from contemporary cultural pollution; accordingly, the subsistence economy peasantry of Ireland's western coastline were apostasised as the living body of the uncontaminated race. (1997: 100).

Discussion of notions such as that of an "uncontaminated race" and a "return to the source" point to the endowment of the peasants of the West, inhabitants of the sacred space, with spiritual qualities thought lacking in their recently urbanised brothers. The sway of these emotive notions was given eloquent voice by Sean O' Faolain, who did not allow his jaundiced views of Tomás and his neighbours to diminish his emotional response to the Gaeltacht:

Twenty years ago, when I first discovered the Gaeltacht myself, I felt exactly the same sense of release. It was like taking off one's clothes for a swim naked in some mountain-pool. Nobody who has not had this sensation of suddenly 'belonging' somewhere -- of finding the lap of the lost mother -- can understand what a release the discovery of the Gaelic world meant to modern Ireland. I know that not for years and years did I get free of this heavenly bond of an ancient, lyrical, permanent, continuous, immemorial self, symbolised by the lonely mountains, the virginal lakes, the traditional language, the simple, certain, uncomplex modes of life, that world of the lost childhood of my race where I, too, became eternally young. For I must speak of it as a bond although it was also a release [...]. I got a terrible nostalgia for that old content, that old symbolism, that sense of being as woven into a pattern of life as a grain of dust in a piece of homespun. (O Faolain, 1941: 136).

Many years later, Maurice Harmon writes of peasant Ireland being a "region of the imagination and the spirit" that fostered contact with the old Gaelic way of life and "the lost childhood of the race" (Harmon, 1996: 158).

Once again, what appeared to be an Irish cultural phenomenon was in fact a local expression of a European trend. When the Irish desire to assert a distinctive national identity found its focus in the remote places and people of the West, the most marginalised people of

the old world, Ireland was but one of many to look for the essence of nation in the ordinary people and their language. Largely through the writings of Herder, the “ordinary man” of all countries came to be accorded a new respect for his wisdom. The language of the “ordinary man” was seen as the unique product of such particular local influences as climate, environment and history. This view of language also saw it as the basis of its nation’s consciousness and ultimately as a reflection of the nation itself. Influenced by his Pietist beliefs, Herder saw the distinctiveness of each nation as a unique element in God’s diversity that made its own particular contribution to Civilisation (Mac Póilin, 1994: 16-17). What set Ireland apart in this matter was that the “ordinary people” it chose to elevate and revere were the most exotic to be found among the nation’s citizens.

As the “ordinary people” that came to represent Ireland are most commonly referred to as peasants, we should pause to examine the word. Loaded with so many derogatory connotations in English, one hesitates to use it even though there is no other satisfactory word to take its place. “Peasant” is a generalising word that robs the people it designates of their individuality. It is a condescending word that no-one ever applies to himself or the people of his own country. Illustrating this point, several writers, Casey and Rhodes (9) as well as Hirsch (1123), recount an incident from Seamus O’Kelly’s novel *Wet Clay* (1922) in which a young American émigré returns to Ireland to “follow his blood and become a peasant” as he tells his grandmother:

‘A what?’ the old woman asked.  
‘A peasant -- we’re all peasants are we not?’  
‘Faith, I never knew that until you came across the ocean to tell us.’  
The old woman said.

Sadly, as we have seen, it is a term the people of the Blasket islands were inclined to accept in relation to themselves (Ó Dubhshláine, 2003: 101).

The relationship between the people and the land is at the core of peasant identity (Estyn Evans, 1977: 37). E. Estyn Evans sees the tenacity with which the peasant clings to the soil and vice versa as the source of the qualities of persistence and endurance that mark peasant culture and lead others to valorise it (37). He is correct in pointing out that we have no English word that is as useful and as dignified as the French *paysan* and which makes the relationship so explicit. Alf MacLochlainn, sensitive to the potential for offence in the term “peasant”, has chosen to write of the “rural proletariat” (1977: 10), but the term is cumbersome and not entirely devoid of connotations in any case. There seems to be little choice but to continue, regretfully and with apology, to use the word. A word that eludes easy definition, it will be used here as in most writing to signify pre-industrial rural workers, subsistence farmers who do not own their land, and their families. As several writers point out, it often connotes much more than this. For Patrick Kavanagh, for instance, it connotes limitation, constraint and a life in darkness. Kavanagh wrote:

Although the literal idea of the person is a farm working person, in fact a peasant is all that mass of mankind which lives below a certain level of consciousness. They live in the dark cave of the subconsciousness and they scream when they see the light. (Kavanagh, 1977: 10).

A further difficulty with the word “peasant”, or more accurately, “peasantry”, is that it signals an unchanging and undifferentiated group of people. In fact, rural Ireland had undergone great change by the mid nineteenth century. The success of the Land League mythology had resulted in a new desire for land-ownership with the result that only those who stood to inherit stayed in the country, the rest either migrating or moving into the towns. Watson identifies this as the factor that changed the rural proletariat into a new rural bourgeoisie (24). This trend was exacerbated by new demands on Irish agriculture which also encouraged the development of larger holdings. The growth of a banking system and the



development of the railway also changed the face of rural Ireland and the way things were done there. These factors all contributed to closer links between the economy of Ireland and that of England (Waters, 1977: 161). As Maignant points out, the myth of historical continuity that was built on the figure of the peasant and which attempted to obscure the transformation of rural Ireland that was then well under way was in fact symptomatic of the transformation and the social malaise that accompanied it (22).

By this time, the rural population was marked by a wide range of social and economic circumstances. The basic distinction drawn by the people themselves was between those who owned land and those who did not. Writers of the day, however, tended not to distinguish between peasants at all but to write of an amorphous peasantry, a group of people lacking individuality. To create the literary figure of the peasant, the writers “aestheticised” the rural people, to use Hirsch’s word, in order to immortalise them (1116). The figure created underwent an evolutionary process as each writer reacted to or interrogated the imagined peasantries that preceded his own. But, as Hirsch observes, by the time the peasant was being discovered and portrayed, he hardly existed any more, a matter of little consequence, he suggests, as what the peasant represented was always more important than what he was (1118).

The literary figure of the peasant functioned symbolically at both a national level and an international level, as did the imagery of the West. At the national level, as we have seen, the peasant was used to provide the blueprint of Irish identity so urgently needed. Sustained still by the native oral tradition that linked him to ages past, he retained the dignity of an identity and culture that remained uninterrupted and undiminished. He appeared not to have suffered the ruptures in identity, culture and relationships that had afflicted those who had moved to the towns and so could be used to counter the fallen image of urban man.

His age-old habits, customs and beliefs were read as indicators of a certain historical continuity that would demonstrate the survival of the old Irish nation. His fidelity to his language and the land that had become the subject and site of the struggle for Irish independence made him into a figure of national significance. He lent his strength to the Land League that had brought him into national focus in order to use his timeless image as a basis for the philosophy that informed the land wars.

At the international level, the image of the peasant was used to counter the imposition of the various English stereotypes of the national Irish character. The first of the stereotypes to be rehabilitated was that of Paddy, the music-hall buffoon -- a silly, harmless, character incapacitated by drink. Lord Acton wrote of the Celts in 1862 that they "are not among the progressive, initiative races, but among those that supply the materials rather than the impulse of history" (Williams, 1966: 53-4). He went on to say that the Persians, Greeks, Romans and Teutons were "the only makers of history, the only authors of advancement" (54). His remarks reached their logical conclusion with the remark that "subjection to a people of a higher capacity for government is of itself no misfortune". Paddy's alter ego, the bog-trotter, was portrayed in cartoons and jokes as an idiot playing in the countryside. But even before they were properly out the door, Paddy and the bog-trotter were replaced by new racial stereotypes, some quite sinister, that required immediate address. An early replacement image of old Paddy, designed to provoke English resentment was "the working man's burden", an Irish peasant carrying a bag of Famine relief money and riding on the back of an English working man (Mullins, 1998: 35). Another image in a *Punch* cartoon dehumanised the peasant, depicting him as a pig with an Irish accent (36) while yet another cartoon drew him as an Irish Frankenstein (38).

As well as the image of the Irishman as the working man's burden, another English version of the Irish peasant was brought into being that found him in the company of Negroes, at the bottom of the human scale of development, just above the ape or chimpanzee. *Harper's Weekly, Journal of Civilisation*, offered a cartoon drawing of a set of scales on which a Negro on one side converses with an Irishman on the other. On this theme, *Punch* offered the following verse in 1848:

Six-foot Paddy, are you no bigger –  
You whom cozening friars dish –  
Mentally, than the poorest nigger  
Groveling before fetish?  
You to Sambo I compare  
Under superstition's rule  
Prostrate like an abject fool." (50).

Irish people, Negroes and apes were often thrown together in English racial discourse. James Froude described the Irish as "more like a tribe of squalid apes than human beings" (Watson: 53; Williams: 81). In similar vein, Charles Kingsley wrote in a letter to his wife in 1860: "I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country." Tellingly, he makes an aside: "I don't believe they are our fault." He continues:

I believe there are not only more of them than of old, but that they are happier, better and more comfortably fed and lodged under our rule than they ever were. But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it as much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours (Curtis, 1968: 84).

*Punch* remained true to form in 1862 when it published "The Missing Link" intended to add a satirical take on the discussion and debate that followed the publication of Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. *Punch* wrote:

A gulf certainly does appear to yawn between the Gorilla and the Negro. The woods and wilds of Africa do not exhibit an example of any intermediate animal. But in this, as in many other cases,

philosophers go vainly seeking abroad for that which they could readily find if they sought for it at home. A creature manifestly between the Gorilla and the Negro is to be met with in some of the lowest districts of London and Liverpool by adventurous explorers. It comes from Ireland, whence it has contrived to migrate; it belongs in fact to a tribe of Irish savages: the lowest species of Irish Yahoo. When conversing with its own kind it talks a sort of gibberish. It is, moreover, a climbing animal, and may sometimes be seen ascending a ladder laden with a hod of bricks (Curtis, 1971: 100).

It is ironic that both the Irish and the English saw the peasant as the symbol of the Irish national character. For the English, the Irish peasant, living in conditions of extreme poverty in the West of Ireland as well as in the slums of Britain, was a dehumanised figure that shamed its country and threatened and frightened its neighbour. For the Irish, the idealised, spiritualised peasant embodied the Irish intention to demonstrate that Ireland was, in the words of Lady Gregory, “the home of an ancient idealism” (Gregory, 1998: 20). The Irish turned the stereotype on its head and used their idealised peasant to contest the colonial position into which Ireland had been cast. Not content with merely refuting the stereotype of the peasant, the Revivalists went on the offensive, writing back to Empire and offering a critique that found Empire values wanting and inferior to those of Ireland. With the inversion of the stereotype, Ireland’s poverty could now be read as a mute reproach against English materialism and English power and material success as a sign of spiritual incapacity (Watson: 23). In words that bring to mind those of Westropp, discussed earlier, George Moore imagines what the Irish might see as they gaze eastward from the “last verge”:

Those who believe that dreams, beauty and divine ecstasy are essential must pray that all the empires may perish and the world be given back to the small peasant states, whose seas and forests and mountains shall create national aspirations and new gods . . . England has imposed her idea upon all nations, and to girdle the world with Brixton seems to be her ultimate destiny. And we, sitting on the last verge, see into the universal suburb, in which a lean man with glasses on his nose and a black bag in his hand is always running after his bus (24).

Although the peasant assumed a new level of significance during the Revival, he had already long been a figure of Irish literary imagination. Indeed, the very "first Irish novel worthy of the name", William Chaigneau's *The History of Jack Connors* (1752), charts the redemption of an Irish peasant achieved by his gradual acceptance of eighteenth century England's Protestant values and mores (Escarbelt, 1996: 51). Just as the status of the peasant was evolving in Irish society, the literary figure of the peasant evolved in the pages of the new fiction. Each new peasant character that was written was built on or against earlier peasants and claimed to have an empirical status or validity missing from earlier creations (Hirsch: 1117). Hirsch cites a pamphlet written in 1906 by Abbey playwrights who were claiming that they had broken with earlier stage representations of traditional Irish life and were taking "their types and scenes from Irish life itself". They wrote:

This life is rich in dramatic materials, while the Irish peasantry of the hills and coast speak an exuberant language and have a primitive grace and wildness, due to the country they live in, which gives their most ordinary life a vividness and colour unknown in more civilised places (1125).

Fictional representations of peasant life were sometimes dressed up as histories or biographies to feed the cultural imperative of "authenticity". Many were based on some generalised notions of a generic peasantry, their peasants being types rather than characters (1117). What each successive Irish-imagined peasants had in common with his predecessors was the desire to contest and discredit the English products of the stage-Irishman and Paddy the Ape (1117).

While the literary evolution of the peasant figure continued in the works of writers such as Edgeworth and Carleton, the peasant written by Charles Kickham found most widespread favour with the reading public (Carpentier, 1996: 107). His peasant contradicted the stage Irishman of English and Anglo-Irish literary tradition while managing to avoid the "tragic

romanticism and mystical fatalism” of other Renaissance writers whose work had failed to engage them (107). Kickham offered a peasant they could accept, an identity they were seeking and a nationalism they could embrace. The ideal Irishman had arrived, physically and morally strong, capable of projecting and inciting a pride in Irish identity and of contesting the “stage Irishman” or “wild Irishman” that had enjoyed so long a season (105). His idealised peasant became the guardian of traditional values, personally and nationally (Genet, 1996: 3). Kickham remembered and re-imagined an Irish society composed of an aristocracy and peasantry living complementary and harmonious lives, a society devoid of a middle-class (2), thus anticipating Yeats who would, later, also yearn for just such an Irish society. He read the suffering the peasantry commonly endured through eviction, exile or death, through poverty and famine, as evidence of an English will to eradicate the Irish (Carpentier: 102).

The first major reconstruction of the peasant was undertaken by Yeats. He not only challenged but overturned the stereotypes of Irish brutishness by drawing the peasant as a spiritual character (Hirsch: 1126), possessed of an imagination that ranked him with the poets (Genet: 4) and custodians of a folklore and mythology of great value to the development of a national literature (Fleming, 1995: 1). The spiritualised peasant that Yeats constructed reflected his firm belief that the peasant held the last fragments of a romantic Ireland whose passing he mourned (Casey and Rhodes: 12).

The construction of this spiritualised, romanticised peasant was underpinned by an idealisation of the primitive to which Yeats subscribed. It fed his belief that the ideal society he dreamed of had once existed and could be reconstructed. In his Introduction to Lady Gregory’s *Irish Myths and Legends*, for instance, Yeats wrote:

If we would create a great community -- and what game so worth the labour? -- we must recreate the old foundations of life, not as they existed in that splendid misunderstanding of the eighteenth century, but as they must always exist when the finest minds and

Ned the beggar and Seaghan the fool think about the same thing, although they might not think the same thought about it. (Gregory: [1910] 1998: 22).

There is a great irony inherent in the fact that Yeats, the visionary intent upon the rebuilding of Ireland, was by birth and inclination, Anglo-Irish to the core. For him, as for other Anglo-Irish writers, as Martin J. Waters points out, the peasantry they were elevating were not only representative of an essential Irishness but also, by virtue of their Catholicism, wholly Other (34). This fact, as Waters goes on to say, allowed the writers a freedom from disquiet as they continued in their representations of a pagan, primitive peasantry so unlike themselves (35). The distance between these writers and their audience, and their distance from the peasant on which they were basing their literature, was made startlingly clear in a remark made by Lady Gregory after the *Playboy* riots. In a letter to Yeats, she described the conflict between the Abbey directors and the Catholic crowd offended by Synge's *Playboy* as "the old battle between those who use a toothbrush and those who don't" (Nrev, Inc, Aug 9, 2001: 5).

The political significance of the peasant had long been recognised. Not only did he offer a reply to English versions of Irishness, his relationship with his landlord mirrored Ireland's political relationship with England (Watson: 45). Yeats went outside these political issues to recognise the cultural usefulness of the peasant as a literary device. The peasant offered Yeats a hook on which to hang his interests in romanticism, the occult, folklore and nationalism (Hirsch: 1126). Having endowed him with poetic sensibilities, Yeats recognised the peasant as an archetypal figure and as a figure that could be used as a poetic mask (Fleming: 1). He used the peasant as a means of bringing the Cuchulainn myth back into circulation in contemporary Ireland which, ironically, as we have seen, distanced him from the peasantry who had remained faithful to their hero, Fionn and who had no real interest in

Cuchulainn ( MacKillop, 1977: 89). MacKillop points to the varying significances of Fionn as the reason for his popularity with the peasantry whose circumstances were always uncertain. Fionn was fallible, as MacKillop points out, sometimes foolish, sometimes even anti-heroic. The peasantry could summon up whichever Fionn answered their current circumstance: proud, brave Fionn or wily, cunning Fionn. Each incarnation of Fionn had his place in the armoury of resistance. Cuchulainn's unambiguous valour was more appealing to those whose class and situation insulated them from the vagaries of circumstance.

The work of J. M. Synge provided the Revival with another literary version of the literary figure of the peasant (Hirsch: 1126). Like Yeats, Synge drew upon the romantic conventions of the Noble Savage and romantic primitivism, the Aran Islands reflecting for him a lost Golden Age (Genet: 4). While the tale is often told of Synge's first journey to the Aran Islands being undertaken for professional purposes on the advice of Yeats, Hirsch reads Synge's journeys there as spiritual journeys necessitated by his recognition of his disbelief in God and the need to fill the void that followed it. Synge's reading of the peasants of the Aran Islands as representatives of an original, authentic human nature (1127) would seem to be the fruit of a mind intent upon spiritual matters.

Synge continued to romanticise the peasant, emphasising his unbroken ties to Ireland's ancient pagan past and his life in nature. Flood reads his early peasant plays, *Riders to the Sea*, *The Tinker's Wedding* and *The Shadow of the Glen*, as examinations of life in the shelter of society as opposed to life in nature that show that, while the sheltered life protects human life and identity, it is ultimately a sterile life that it offers (1972: 72). They also portray the physical danger and disintegration that accompanies the vitality and fulfilment offered by a life spent in the world of nature. This makes it possible for his romanticised portraits of the peasantry to encompass the violence and cruelty that marked their existence (Hirsch: 1126)



which in turn lends a dramatic appropriateness to the extravagance of the language he put into their mouths. It is his countenancing of these harsh realities that marks his work as the second major rewriting of the peasant during the period of the Revival, moving him out of the misty, soft focus of Yeats' vision.

While Yeats saw the peasants as timeless, Synge was interested in the peasants of his own experience, of his own time, those he met on the Aran Islands, in Connemara and In Wicklow and West Kerry (Fleming, 1995: 1). It is ironic that his ethnographic works offer peasants more romanticised than those of his plays. Perhaps the differing forms of these works were the reason for this. While Synge, the ethnographer, could see and present the peasants as a part of an evocative landscape, Synge the dramatist had a greater need of and scope for conflict and exuberant language.

The writers of the Literary Revival, men of their time, viewed peasant lore and language as a raw material more learned people could polish and perfect. Hirsch points out that they not only viewed peasant material as "lack[ing] discriminating intelligence" and "needing the shaping hand of a literary artist" in order to become "culture" (1123), they also patronised it by seeing it as an "antidote to intellectualism" and an "escape from self-consciousness" (Hirsch 1123). Thus, those who were thought not to have wakened to full self-consciousness were seen as needing the help of those who required a rest from it. Views such as these, expressed after the peasant's culture has been plundered, could well be read as a local variation on colonialism.

Irish literature of the decades preceding the publication of Tomás' two major texts provides bounteous evidence of Irish culture's preoccupation with the West, the Islands of the West and the peasantry. So, to some extent, Tomás was already "known" when he appeared -- or, so it seemed. George Moore had confessed his hope of "some unequipped

genius" rising up in the West to write of his life and become "an Irish Dante" (75) and, it would seem, here he was. We recall that An Seabhac introduced Tomás to the readership of *Allagar na hInise* as "a peasant revealing his own mind and the traits about him according to his own background and experience" (O'Crohan, 1986: 4). The figure of Tomás, as one imagines him after reading his stories about himself and his neighbours, springs easily and unbidden to mind when reading the Preamble to the Irish Constitution of 1937:

In the name of the Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority and to Whom, as our final end, all actions both of men and States must be referred,  
We, the people of Eire,  
Humbly acknowledging all the obligations to our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ, Who sustained our fathers through centuries of trial,  
Gratefully remembering their heroic and unremitting struggle to regain the rightful Independence of our Nation,  
And seeking to promote the common good, with due observance of Prudence, Justice and Charity,  
So that the dignity and freedom of the individual may be assured, true social order attained, the unity of our country restored, and concord established with other nations,  
Do hereby adopt, enact and give to ourselves this Constitution [...].  
(Mitchell and Ó Snodaigh, 1985: 215).

This document draws a picture of a national character very similar to Blasket Island character. It submits all human activity to the authority of God, as the Islanders and their writers were wont to do. It then describes the nation's fathers as people who had undergone centuries of trial in an heroic and unremitting struggle. Tomás' life was certainly one of "heroic and unremitting struggle". The Preamble draws attention to the national struggle for independence -- perhaps an independence such as that enjoyed, albeit at a great price, in Island life. The Preamble states that the Constitution aims to assure the dignity and freedom of the individual and to attain true social order and unity -- probably of an order similar to that seen in Tomás' accounts of Blasket life.

Eamon De Valera's picture of an idealised rural Ireland, expressed in his famous Saint Patrick's Day broadcast of 1943, was also replete with figures and images one meets in Tomás' writing: people satisfied with frugal comfort, people devoted to things of the spirit, cosy homesteads, the sounds of industry and little firesides that provide the forums for the wisdom of the elderly.

The Ireland we have dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit; a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sound of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens; whose firesides would be the forums for the wisdom of old age. It would, in a word, be the home of a people living the life that God desires men should live (Coogan, 1993: 72).

Tomás was not only "known" before he arrived. He has remained "known" a long time after he departed. However, when we go back to Tomás himself and examine his texts for signs of his relationship with nation, we find that his sense of nation was confined strictly to the Island. He rarely went to the mainland and only stayed there when trapped by bad weather. He went "in" to the Island and "out" to the mainland. Like his fellow-Islanders, he was not governed by Ireland and bowed to none of their officials. He paid no taxes and received no benefits. Texts other than Tomás' own also bear this out. His son, Seán, for instance, when telling of the good use the Islanders made of salvage from the sea, remarks that "in this way the old hovels on the island were improved a little without government aid. The government across the water ran this country but the islanders in those days knew nothing about government or state" (Tyers: 36). Elsewhere, Seán remarks: "it was as if it had a government of its own. If you committed any crime or did anything wrong not one of them would be pleased. You had to follow the straight road always, and if you didn't the islanders would

confront and correct you" (143). Tomás also famously remarked that the Island had known Home Rule long before the rest of Ireland had begun to desire it (O'Crohan, 1951: 155).

For the Blasket Island people, the mainland was America. It was America that supplemented their needs in times of hardship and housed many of their relatives and friends. The fact that the Islanders were considered a strange and outlandish breed, a race apart, by people on the mainland, including their own relatives, had its mirror image in Island attitudes which maintained a strong sense of their own difference. This sense of difference is stridently and repeatedly asserted in Tomás' writing. In his last pages, while describing the people amongst whom he has lived, he reminds us that "we had characters of our own, each different from the other, and all different from the landsmen." (O'Crohan: 242). He reiterates this message as his description goes on: "you may understand from this that we are not to be put in comparison with the people of the great cities and the soft and level lands" (243). In the same passage, he states that it has been his aim to write a memorial of his community so that they might be remembered after they are gone. Here, in this important section of his book, he writes nothing of the wider nation of Ireland.

Although the national community to which the Blaskets ostensibly belonged was post-colonial, Tomás was not. An Islandman rather than an Irishman, different from all other Irishmen, his sense of nation, his "imagined community" was confined to the Blasket Island (Anderson, 1991). Tomás was an uncolonised writer, with a very particular sense of nation, writing urgently in anticipation of a local and personal dislocation that he knew was imminent and inevitable. On account of their "otherness", the Blasket Islanders, always a marginalised group throughout their long, communal existence, "strangers in their own land" and closer to the United States than to Dublin (Ferriter, 2004: 380) were, in their final days, drawn into the Irish centre, their identity appropriated in the cause of asserting a distinctive Irish identity.

Their proud independence was harnessed to the Irish State, their literature "institutionalised" within the schooling system as an official representation of national identity (Ferriter: 380). It might thus be said that, in postcolonial terms, the Irish colonised the Blaskets. They turned Tomás, an uncolonised writer, into an unwitting postcolonial voice, endowing his words with meanings he may not have intended.

The positioning of *The Islandman* at the interface between the politics and culture of its day has drawn the attention of post-colonial theorists in recent days. Mark Quigley offers a reading of *The Islandman* that privileges politics over culture (2003: 382-406). His relentlessly political approach to the text gives the impression that what Tomás wrote was a political document rather than a literary and specifically autobiographical text. His recognition of the appropriation of the Islandman image and text by cultural nationalists leads Quigley to read the text as "a sophisticated meditation on the commodification of the subaltern by the nationalist postcolonial state" (382). This reading produces an alternative image to the naive fisherman of the framing narrative: a subaltern victim forced to write against his wishes and against his own best interests. It produces an "Ó Criomhthain" who uses his autobiographical text to voice a resistance to the imposition of "a regime of subjectivity" by representatives of a larger society or hegemonic power. Coming to Tomás' text already equipped with this notion of "a regime of subjectivity" imposed upon the author, Quigley misconstrues the nature of the interpersonal relationships between those involved in the production of Tomás' texts, relationships that will be shown to have been largely mutually respectful and fruitful. As well as producing a victimised author, this reading also brings Marstrander, Ó Ceallaigh and Flower into sad disrepute, portraying them as cultural heavyweights who impose upon Tomás to produce the cultural artefact required by the society and power Quigley thinks they represent. His reading of the cultural politics is further limited by his failure to separate the aims and

attitudes of foreign philologists such as Marstrander and Flower from those of Irish participants such as Ó Ceallaigh and An Seabhac. It is limited even further by his failure to draw distinction between the politically hapless and nervy Ó Ceallaigh and the politically driven and powerful An Seabhac. Curiously, although he pays some attention to An Seabhac, he fails to examine the extent and the nature of the cultural authority the editor exercised over Tomás' work. He reserves his deepest suspicion and disapproval for the translators, Flower and Thomson, characterising their work as both spurious in intent and insensitive in character.

Quigley's discussion of the political context in which the text was produced is based on his view of Tomás as a Gaelic subaltern and of Blasket culture as Gaelic alterity. These views seem to be based on an assumption that a writer from a small, peripheral society will always be disadvantaged in his dealings with representatives of larger, more powerful societies. However, none of the participants in the process that produced *The Islandman* would have viewed Tomás as "Gaelic subaltern", had the term existed in those days. Tomás was undoubtedly a cultural leader in his community. Never in doubt of his own cultural authority, it was only in small part self-assumed. The Island poet had chosen and trained him as his successor. The Island king designated him as the one the visitors in search of language should consult. His mastery of the language and its arts set him apart from his fellow-Islanders and gave him the upper hand in the relationships he enjoyed with Ó Ceallaigh and Flower and in the activities they pursued together. He was not only in a position to direct their learning, to teach and correct them but, as his experience with them grew, he became increasingly aware of the value of the cultural material he held in his mind.

Quigley's reading begs the question of centre and periphery. It disregards the fact that, as we have seen, Tomás was so completely islanded, so truly the Islandman, that the Island was his nation and the mainland his alterity. When he writes, for instance, about new

wake practices he has witnessed on the mainland, it is clear that he considers the practices of his own cultural milieu the norm and the mainland practice the alterity. His dealings with his brother, Pats "the Yank", shows that Tomás sees a stain of alterity that cannot be removed from those who have left the Island for "the land of sweat", even after they return to the Island. Cultural leaders of the wider Irish nation such as Douglas Hyde, who preached an essential, original Gaelic identity, similarly regarded the emergent way of life in the Ireland of the day as aberrant, an alterity. De Valera went even further -- he not only erased all versions of Irishness but that which was Gaelic, Catholic and rural, he erased the notion of alterity itself.

Quigley's argument is presented in terms of a postcolonial narrative that he deploys as a template superimposed upon Tomás' text. This narrative template not only robs the text not only of one of its great themes, its meditation on heroism, it robs it also of its hero, turning each of the participants in Tomás' tale of cultural encounter into victim or villain.

The impact of Quigley's deployment of a postcolonial dialect and narrative is similar to that of An Seabhac's editorial activity: it comes between Tomás and his readership, it hides him from his reader. As Quigley's reading draws to its close, Tomás, the individual who wrote his life, remains unknown because he is still unread. The fact of the autobiography is still obscured by political interests and theories. Quigley replicates the processes by which the cultural nationalists harnessed Tomás' autobiography to their social and political projects. Postcolonial theory is as necessary and beguiling in today's globalised world as cultural nationalism was to the Irish revivalists of a century ago. In this case however, postcolonial theory mocks itself by staking a claim for a text it is ostensibly seeking to liberate and for an Island someone else has claimed as his own.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **"The Song We Made Together": Cultural Production and Translation in the Blaskets**

Any reading of Tomás' texts as "authentic" or for "the authentic" must take into account the fact that others apart from the author himself were also implicated in the production of his texts and thus impacted upon the "culture" that is represented in them. Most significant of those who played a part were Brian Ó Ceallaigh who is credited with recognising Tomás' ability to tell his own story and instigating the autobiographical process, An Seabhac, the editor of his two major works, and Robin Flower, his translator, all of whom came from places outside the Island. At first glance, it might seem obvious that Brian Ó Ceallaigh, an Irishman born in Killarney, and his teacher, Ventry-born An Seabhac were insiders to Irish culture equipped to appreciate the culture of the Blasket Islands. It might also seem obvious that Robin Flower, an Englishman sent to the Island by a Norwegian linguist, was an outsider to Irish culture and thus less equipped for the encounter with Blasket culture. A consideration of the circumstances of their lives and of the roles they played in the production of Tomás' texts will show that the easy assumption of the obvious can be misleading.

We are indebted to Muiris Mac Conghail for much of what we know about Brian Ó Ceallaigh who was, by all accounts, a lonely and mysterious man with few friends (1994: 140-2). A Killarney man, he was a graduate of Trinity College and had a brother an air vice-marshal in the British Royal Air Force. He passed much of 1916 gaining the rudiments of the Irish language from An Seabhac who then advised him to continue his studies on the Blaskets and provided him with a letter of introduction to Tomás. He arrived on the Island in April, 1917 and stayed there until the last day of that year. He was appointed to the Irish Schools Inspectorate under the "old", that is, British, regime in 1918 but was not happy in the



job (Ó Coileáin, 253). His services were dispensed with in 1919 after he failed an examination. He was not a strong man physically and both his declining health and his unhappiness became more noticeable as the years went on, especially from 1924 onwards. He applied to rejoin the Inspectorate but withdrew his application in July, 1924. Clearly suffering some sort of distress, he left Ireland abruptly in 1925, never to return. The last known contact between Ó Ceallaigh and anyone from Ireland occurred in 1927 when James Delargy saw him by chance at the railway station in Berlin where they talked of the Blaskets through a train window (Mac Conghail, 1994: 186). In December, 1936, Ó Ceallaigh died of poliomyelitis in Split, Yugoslavia.

Nothing was known about Ó Ceallaigh between his graduation from Trinity College, Dublin, in 1911 and his year of study with An Seabhac in 1916 until, by chance, research into the Irish School Inspectorate unlocked the mystery (Mac Conghail, 1990: 180). It revealed that Ó Ceallaigh had been in Germany at the outbreak of war and interned as a prisoner of war in a camp at Marburg. Alerted to Ó Ceallaigh's plight by mutual friends, Sir Roger Casement met with him at the camp where he tried unsuccessfully to persuade the Irish prisoners to support Germany in the war against England. Ó Ceallaigh refused his request for help in the endeavour but Casement used his influence to secure Ó Ceallaigh's release just the same. Not long after his release, for reasons that are unclear, Ó Ceallaigh furnished Sir Matthew Nathan, then Under Secretary for Ireland in the British government, with a report detailing Casement's political activities in the prison camp (180). This report was transmitted to the British government early in 1915. Casement was arrested in 1916 and subsequently executed. Although it is commonly held that Ó Ceallaigh was promised an inspectorate if he became proficient in Irish (Harrison, 2003: 489), Mac Conghail's research suggests that Ó Ceallaigh

received his post as an Inspector of Schools in reward for his report. Mac Conghail quotes Leon Ó Broin:

The report [by Ó Ceallaigh] described what Kelly had learned of Casement's efforts to change the allegiance of Irish prisoners of war and the award of a Junior Inspectorate of National Schools was made to him in reward for his services (Ó Broin, 1982: 36).

As the war continued, his letters were often opened by government officials and he was interviewed several times by detectives. The effects of these unnerving events could only have been compounded by Ó Ceallaigh's knowledge that his report on Casement remained on file in Dublin Castle while the atmosphere in the country was becoming ever more politically charged after the Easter Rising of 1916 and the executions that followed it (Mac Conghail, 1994: 185).

Ó Ceallaigh's solitary and mysterious demeanour on the Blaskets and in the company of other men of letters, many of whom were politically driven, is thus not surprising. He was not the first brooding scholar to go among the Islanders but, unlike Synge, whose solitary habits masked and nourished a romantic inclination, Ó Ceallaigh's lonely reserve, whether shameful, fearful or both, was a political necessity. It put him outside the culture whose language he was seeking to know more deeply. He did however respond to warmth and friendliness, according to AnSeabhac who counted himself and Tomás among the few Ó Ceallaigh befriended (Ó Coileáin: 234).

The records that remain show that the relationship between Tomás and Ó Ceallaigh was indeed one of deep and abiding friendship. Mac Conghail describes it as a "literary friendship" with a deep "cultural core" (246). The two men met several times each day of Ó Ceallaigh's stay on the Island. Tomás expanded Ó Ceallaigh's incomplete knowledge of

the language, telling him to mind his grammar and explaining matters of vocabulary for him -- "*ná leig thart an graiméar*" and "*gramadach, féach romhat*" (246) while Ó Ceallaigh shared his knowledge of literature with the old Islandman.

The warmth of their association did not diminish when Ó Ceallaigh left the Island. It is evident in the songs Tomás composed in his honour and sent in his letters. One such song, in a letter dated 12.7.1921, reveals the Islandman's loneliness for Brian:

Tá an oíche ag dul i bhfaid's i ngearra laethe,  
Ar bhánta an Bhlascaoid Mhóir,  
Is dá bhficfinn Brian sa mbliain seo féinig,  
Ar bhánta an Bhlascaoid Mhóir;  
Is fíor's follas gur corraithe an saol é,  
Gach lá chuinn aitis ó scaramair le chéile,  
Ach beimid fós i dtreo lá éigin,  
Ar bhánta an Bhlascaoid Mhóir (247).

The nights are getting longer and the days are shortening  
On the fields of the Great Blasket.  
If only I could see Brian this year  
On the fields of the great Blasket.  
It is very true that life is troubled  
Every year since we parted from one another  
But we will be reunited one day  
On the fields of the Great Blasket. (Áine de Paor, 2001).

A letter from Ó Ceallaigh to Tomás displays a similar longing in its reminiscences of the evenings he had spent with Tomás reading by the lamp in the Island house. They corresponded on matters close to their hearts, such as the deaths they had each experienced within their families. Tomás' affection for his friend is evident in his closing words of his letter on this subject: "Goodbye and blessings to you, wonderful person" (Ó Coileáin: 248). Tomás' admiration of Ó Ceallaigh is also evident in a letter he wrote to An Seabhac in which he described him as "the other noble man" (257).

As he prepared to leave the Island on New Year's Eve, 1917, Ó Ceallaigh asked Tomás to write him daily accounts of life on the Island. He gave him his Waterman's fountain

pen and promised to send him paper, tobacco and whatever else he might need. Tomás agreed to his request and sent his daily accounts for five years.

The familiar narrative that has surrounded Tomás' texts for so long puts the friendship between Tomás and Ó Ceallaigh at its centre. In crediting Ó Ceallaigh with being the first to recognise Tomás' latent ability to write creatively, it represented the friendship between Tomás and Ó Ceallaigh as the source of the impetus for Tomás' writing. Ó Coileáin advises wariness on this issue (237) and indeed there are several issues that justify further examination of the matter. First, Tomás' believed for quite some time that Ó Ceallaigh wanted the material for his own reading practice (Ó Coileáin: 245). Perhaps Tomás was right in this and it was only as the process wore on that Ó Ceallaigh became fully aware of Tomás' ability to write his own story. The second reason to question the story of Ó Ceallaigh's recognition of Tomás' artistic ability lies in the fact that Tomás was not the only Islander to be sending him "daily accounts". Other Islanders to send their accounts to Ó Ceallaigh included Eibhlís Ní Shuilleabháin and Micheál Ó Gaoithín. This might indicate that, in the early stages at least, Ó Ceallaigh was, in accordance with the practice of the day, collecting cultural material from "the folk".

However the work started, at some stage, it became apparent to both men that it was of a significance that warranted publication. As the material was gathered for what was to become *Allagar na hInise*, Ó Ceallaigh proposed that Tomás write his autobiography. Life-writing theory recognises the importance of the persons or circumstances that elicit the telling of a life from its owner. Such a person or such a circumstance is referred to as "coaxing", a term borrowed from Plummer by Smith and Watson (2001: 50). Its influence remains inevitably in the text it calls into being and so precludes any notion of an unmediated authenticity such as that which is so frequently claimed for Tomás' texts. The familiar story of

Tomás being "coaxed" to write tells that the writer initially demurred and that Ó Ceallaigh offered him Gorky's autobiography and Pierre Loti's *Iceland Fisherman*. These books persuaded him of two things: first, that the life of an ordinary man could be of literary interest and secondly, that an "ordinary man" could write his own story. The works of Ó Laoghaire are also mentioned in some accounts of Tomás' literary progress and we know from their correspondence that it was *Séadna* they read together during Ó Ceallaigh's stay on the Island (Ó Coileáin: 245). So much is made of these few books that one might be forgiven for assuming that Tomás' reading was confined to this small library.

While the Gorky work has become prominent in most discussion of the process that initiated the autobiography, Seán Ó Criomhthain, eyewitness to the events offers a fuller recollection of what Tomás was shown and how he reacted. He acknowledges his father's initial hesitation and reveals the manner in which it was overcome:

He was kicking against it, boy. He maintained that he had nothing worth starting with and that he had no idea how to start or finish it. But then, you understand, Ó Ceallaigh knew what he himself was looking for and knew that Tomás could provide it, but Tomás himself did not realise that he could. So Ó Ceallaigh gave him two books written by some Russian writer. I'm not sure whether his name was Jorkie or Jurkie. [...]. He gave him *My Childhood* and *In the World*. Tomás read them and understood them well. 'I declare to the devil,' he said, 'he's a fellow just like myself.' He then got another book *The Growth of the Soil* from Finland and read it, and the man who wrote that was worse off than the first fellow. He had a tougher life than Tomás himself. When Tomás saw that those poor simple people had come out and described their own lives, 'Yerrah,' said he, 'if they're fools I'll make a fool of myself too. I'll have a shot at it.' He took up his pen and continued writing until finally the well ran dry (114).

The volume of reading material that made its way into Tomás' hands, and its diversity, has long been understated. Tomás' correspondence (Ó Coileáin, 1994) and the recollections of his son, Seán Ó Criomhthain (Tyers, 1998) combine to reveal that Tomás received a wealth

of material from a number of sources. He received a multitude of books from friends in the Gaelic League as well as newspapers and journals of the League itself, newspaper clippings from Brian Ó Ceallaigh, usually exotic in nature, as well as newspapers from the mainland. He also received some English newspapers, especially *The Daily Sketch* which was a favourite on the Island. Tomás also received more books and newspapers from relatives in America and more still from the fishermen on the big lobster boats that visited the Island. In addition to this flood of material, Seán remembers that Knut Hamsun's book, *The Growth of the Soil*, appealed enormously to his father and, according to Seán, provided his father with the final necessary push towards autobiography (Tyers, 1998: 114). This book is not mentioned by any other commentator. It is unlikely that the minimalist account of the reading material Tomás encountered, which originates with An Seabhadh's Introduction to the autobiography, was a matter of oversight. It reflects An Seabhadh's assertion of a pure, uncontaminated Irish culture, both past and present. It also reflects the prejudices of the Ireland of the day. Philip O' Leary writes of an Irish hostility to the English press that was so strong in 1911 that some citizens of Limerick seized and burnt a shipment of English Sunday newspapers (36-7). He writes that one commentator, An Bráthair Bearchán, drew a parallel between Limerick's historical fight against Cromwell and its new fight against "the new foreign foe, evil literature" (36-7). "The cheap, putrid literature of England gets no support among those who have taken up the serious study of the Irish language" (Editorial, *An Caideamh Soluis*, 6 April, 1912, O' Leary: 38).

Attention to the discrepancies between the familiar version of the coaxing of Tomás and the more complete and accurate account of his literary experience lays bare the politics that lie hidden beneath the story that is usually told. The emphasis on the friendship between Ó Ceallaigh and Tomás in the framing narrative has allowed the guiding hand of the Gaelic

League to remain almost unobserved. The three books we know Tomás was shown by his friend-, the three books that have remained in the narrative of the developing writer even though he read so many more -- the works of Ó Laoghaire, Gorky and Loti -- are all works that were admired and promoted by the Gaelic League. The political identity of the writers of these books or the political load they carried -- Ó Laoghaire's multi-faceted involvement in the Irish language movement, Loti's fascination with the exotic and his Anglophobia, the Irish preoccupation and identification with a Russian renaissance -- is not made explicit in the framing narrative. The material about exotic places that Brian sent in his letters is not mentioned. The vast amount of material from England and America is similarly omitted from discussion. And Hamsun's Nobel Prize-winning work, though so significant to the story of Tomás' development as a writer, has all but disappeared from the record. We need to look more closely at these works and the ways in which they were read at that time in order to understand what it was that Ó Ceallaigh was offering to Tomás.

Ó Laoghaire was an enthusiastic worker for the cause of the Irish language and is said to have written over five hundred works in that language and on its behalf. He was nevertheless quite unknown until the Gaelic League began to promote his work and back him financially (<http://www.castlelyonsparish.com/peadarol.html>). His ambition to write "books" in Irish was fuelled by the fact that there literally were no "books" to offer students of Irish as there had been no material printed in the Irish language for the previous two hundred and fifty years or more. Centuries deprived of printed text had left the language without a standard written format. This situation gave rise to a debate about which form of the language would be most appropriate for the establishment of a modern literature in the Irish language (Purdon, 1999: 39). Some advocated the archaic language of the old manuscripts while others, Ó Laoghaire most notable among them, argued for the *cainnt na ndaoine* or "language

of the people". As persuasive as his arguments were, it was nevertheless the publication of his novel, *Séadna*, in 1904, that finally silenced the debate and settled the matter in favour of the spoken language of "the people". *Séadna* ensured that Gaeltacht Irish would become the vehicle for the modern literature of Ireland (Purdon: 42). The establishment of *cainnt na ndaoine* as the standard Irish for the modern canon gave rise to a fresh series of debates however, as there were three widely differing dialects of the language in the country, each pressing its claim to be the national language. Thomas Davis gave something of the flavour of the rivalry among the three language groups when he wrote that "the Munster person's speech is tuneful but inaccurate; that of Ulster is accurate but tuneless; the Leinster people's speech has neither flavour nor accuracy" (Purdon: 57). Having won the case for the *cainnt na ndaoine*, Ó Laoghaire's hugely popular novel which, according to its author, contained "nothing but the purest and most authentic West Cork *cainnt na ndaoine*", (O'Leary: 11) was pressed into service to champion the Munster dialect. Within a few short years, Tomás O'Crohan's *The Islandman* -- a work written originally in the Munster dialect -- would come to be regarded as "a vindication of *cainnt na ndaoine*" (Purdon: 63).

The works by Gorky are also mentioned in every account written of Tomás' genesis as a writer. Of "the Russian books", *My Childhood* and *In the World* (Gorky, 1913), Seán tells us that "Tomás read them and understood them well. 'I declare to the devil,' he said, 'he's a fellow just like myself.'" (Tyers: 114). Although Tomás' positive reaction to Gorky and his identification with Gorky's protagonist seem to validate the rationale offered in the narrative of his literary genesis, it does not explain why Brian chose this Russian model for his reluctant writer. The explanation lies in the influential opinions of cultural leaders such as Corkery, Hyde and Pearse. According to Brian Fallon, Russian writers such as Gorky had been held in high esteem in Ireland since Corkery first pointed to the Russians as suitable literary models for



Irish writers (Fallon, 1999: 103). Douglas Hyde expressed the view that “the revelation of the Russian temperament” by Russian writers has been “perhaps the chief event of nineteenth century literature” (O’Leary: p82). Pádraig Pearse held the view that the short story was the significant literary genre of the day and that Gorky -- “rather than Dickens” -- was the ideal model (O’Leary: 82). It was Pearse’s view that Irish literature would best be served by an approach that blended an appreciation of foreign models such as Gorky with a recognition of the riches of its own cultural past (80). As appreciative as Irish commentators were of Russian literary achievement, there was also an overtly political dimension to their praise of Russian writing. Not only was Gorky “not Dickens”, he was a member of one of the “long-ignored or suppressed cultures rediscovering their creativity throughout Europe” with which “there was an Irish sense of communion and solidarity” (80).

Loti’s writing, also identified consistently as part of the process that enabled Tomás’ writing, had enjoyed considerable popularity and influence in Ireland because of the initial favour it had found with J M Synge who had read it in 1898 and taken it with him on his journey to the Aran Islands. According to Skelton, it was the “picturesque and dramatic” aspects of Loti’s writings that drew Synge’s favour (Skelton, 1971: 25). Synge even goes so far as to acknowledge his indebtedness to Loti when he writes that “the general plan of this book [*The Aran Islands*] is, it will be seen at once largely borrowed from Pierre Loti...” (25). The Introduction to *Iceland Fisherman*, by Loti’s translator, Jules Cambon, offers some clues to the reasons why this text found such favour with those involved in the language movement [1906] (etext accessed 14/10/ 2003).

Though by no means illiterate, Loti professed not to read much. Cambon sees Loti’s reluctance to read as “the foundation and basis” of “a naïve simplicity which makes him very sensitive to the things of the outside world, and gives him a perfect comprehension of simple

souls.” Cambon continues: “he is not a reader, for he is not imbued with book notions of things; his ideas of them are direct, and everything with him is not memory, but reflected sensation” (Cambon, etext: 8). Cambon locates Loti’s appeal in his presentation of the exotic and in his portrayal of “the naïve soul of races that seem to endure ... as surviving representatives of the world’s infancy” (1). Loti’s work illustrates the gap that separates the urban French from the more exotic, almost “foreign”, members of the race who live at the extreme reaches of the nation, on the Breton coast and in the mountains of the Basque region. There is in Loti’s work, he continues, a representation of “the infinite sadness of human destiny” that speaks of all races while also portraying the uniqueness of each race that “cloak(s) itself in its own individuality” and “remain(s) a mystery to the rest of the world” (2). Loti’s heroes and heroines are to be found among “those antique races of Europe which ... have preserved, with their native tongue, the individuality of their character” (6). His Breton characters are “simple souls” with “hearts close to Nature”, “melancholy and noble” (6). The “poor”, “silent and tenacious” people of *Iceland Fisherman* live where “Europe ends ... and beyond remains only the broad expanse of the ocean”(6), “where people huddle together in a stand against the storms which come howling from the depths of the Atlantic” (7). So many of the phrases and notions used here in praise of Loti reappear a few years later in praise of Tomás.

When we turn to a contemporary review of *The Growth of the Soil* we see that it is thematically similar to Loti’s work (Worster [1906] etext, 2003). Worster’s review describes it as:

the life story of a man in the wilds, the genesis and gradual development of a homestead, the unit of humanity, in the untilled, uncleared tracts that still remain in the Norwegian Highlands. It is an epic of the earth; the history of a microcosm. Its dominant note is one of patient strength and simplicity; the mainstay of its working is the tacit, stern, yet loving alliance between Nature and the Man who

faces her himself, trusting to himself and her for the physical means of life, and the spiritual contentment with life which she must grant if he be worthy (1 -- 2).

Worster also writes that the story is epic in its magnitude, in its rhythm and in its “vast and intimate humanity” (2) and that its author is aloof from his characters but kindly, sympathetic and tolerant (2). Its hero is “deliberately shorn of all that makes for mere effect” and “stands out as an elemental figure, the symbol of Man at his best, face to face with Nature and life.” (11). Again, many of these phrases and notions recur years later in relation to Tomás.

The oversimplified account that is usually given of Tomás’ journey toward autobiography has two major effects. First, it distorts the cultural record and secondly, it masks the cultural program to which Tomás was subjected. The failure to take account of the vast amount of material entering the Island from America and England allows the perpetuation of the myth that the Island was untouched by the English language and culture. The disappearance from the record of books as significant as Hamsun’s work and of items as trifling as Brian Ó Ceallaigh’s newspaper clippings about China and Japan feeds the larger cultural myth of Tomás, the noble peasant, the naïve, native genius who wakened to write, almost unaided, the authentic story of his Island life, untainted by knowledge of any life but the one he has lived.

The oversimplification also disguises the process of grooming to which Tomás was subjected. It was clearly not simply a question of Tomás being prompted to write his own story on his own terms, aided only by the example of a book or two to show his suitability for the task: he was groomed to write a very particular story. Ó Ceallaigh’s offerings of material from Russia, China, Japan, Brittany, seem to reflect his desire to arouse in Tomás an awareness of the exoticness of his own way of life. The two texts mentioned in the “short version” of how

Tomás came to write, though both concerned with lives of hardship, appear dissimilar and unrelated and Ó Ceallaigh's choice of them a fairly random matter. The adding of a third text to the record however allows one to see a pattern. Tomás was offered one story after another of hard and primitive ways of life in places of extreme and dangerous beauty. These stories showed him that this was how he was being seen and made clear that he was being asked to write a particular kind of story, to write an authentically Irish hero modelled on Loti's fictional Breton fishermen and Hamsun's Norwegian peasant.

The precise nature of the coaxing process notwithstanding, it is a matter of history that Tomás did write his autobiography and that this was largely due to Ó Ceallaigh's coaxing. Most persuasive of Ó Ceallaigh's promptings was his suggestion that Tomás should leave a book or two behind him after his death. Tomás writes of his gratitude to Ó Ceallaigh on more than one occasion. "I realised that in many ways I was blind until I met him. The help of God is often nearer than the door" (Ó Coileáin: 236). Giving full credit to his young mentor, he writes: "I would not have left two books behind me," said Tomás, "were it not for the man who got me working. There are many wonderful things which people in isolated places could achieve if there were someone to inspire them and provide them with information just as Brian got me working" (236). In the years before he left Ireland, Ó Ceallaigh made strenuous efforts to get Tomás' work published. He took the manuscripts to the Society for Writing in the Irish Language who were unable to help because of Tomás' idiosyncratic script and spelling (Ó Coileáin: 253). From there, he went to Eoin MacNeill, Minister of Education in Dublin, only to find that his department did not yet have the means to publish a book (253). As he prepared to leave Ireland, he asked An Seabhac to assume responsibility for the manuscripts and their publication and, with the author's permission, handed the work over to him. An Seabhac wrote of Ó Ceallaigh: "Brian left in a lonely state and I never saw him again" (Ó Coileáin: 253).

An Seabhac, otherwise known as Pádraig Ó Sióchfhada, was a writer, a teacher and an organiser for the Gaelic League in Munster. He was a man of considerable power and influence, who went on to become the editor for the Educational Company of Ireland and the Talbot Press as well as a Senator in the Irish Government. An obituary written for him by Piaras Beaslaí demonstrates that An Seabhac's life was marked by the close connection between literature and politics that Malcolm Brown wrote of:

With all his literary activity, he did much work of other kinds for the nation. He was an organiser and a teacher of Irish and, in the days before 1916, when we were building up and arming the Volunteers, the Seabhac used meet me in Killarney and receive parcels of arms and ammunition from me, for which he handed me the payment for Headquarters. He was, at the time a Battalion Commandant. (1964).

An Seabhac had a certain degree of familiarity with Tomás' work before he took over from Ó Ceallaigh. Tomás had been sending him short articles at the journals he edited since 1908. He had also been kept informed of Tomás' progress by Ó Ceallaigh with whom he met quite often during the years of his correspondence with Tomás. Before he agreed to take over from Ó Ceallaigh, An Seabhac secured Tomás' permission to do whatever he thought best with the material. (254).

In his Introduction to *An tOileánach* An Seabhac indicates that he used the power Tomás gave him to make certain changes to the text. He writes cursorily that the length of the manuscript necessitated some omissions but that nothing had been left out that would have lessened the truth of the story. He also writes that he altered Tomás' spelling system to conform with what was acceptable at the time and that the dialect could not be left entirely intact as the book was intended for a wide audience. In what appears to be contradictory vein, he also writes that the author's grammar and idioms have been left intact.

An Seabhac's rationale for the changes are amplified in his article, *Tomás Ó Criomhthain, Iascaire agus Údar* (An Seabhac: 1992). The freedom with which he made the changes to the text reflects the attitudes and practices of the day. He, like Yeats and Synge, saw the language of the people as "essential raw materials to be reshaped by the creative artist out of his own experience of Gaeltacht life" (O'Leary: 158). Pádraig Pearse expressed a similar view. In 1906, he wrote that those seeking to build up a modern literature that would "express the soul of the whole nation" must "take what the peasants have to give them and develop it" (O'Leary: 46). An Seabhac's cavalier handling of Tomás' texts also seems to derive from his reading of the man whose work he had taken charge of. His appreciation of Tomás' abilities seems grudging in that he saw Tomás as a man indistinguishable from many other storytellers in the Gaeltacht. In his view, Tomás was set apart only by the fact of his taking to pen and paper. The strengths he recognised in this group from whom Tomás was indistinguishable were the possession of a good memory, an ability to arrange words and thoughts, a polished expression, a personal philosophy and an empathy for his fellow man (199).

He saw limits to Tomás' abilities, writing that the author had no knowledge of the craft of writing, that he was in fact ignorant that such a craft existed, and that his only talent was to be found in his story-telling, his vocabulary, his logic and his personal experience (200). He attributed the lack of tedium in Tomás' text to his own editing. He stated his view that because Tomás wrote about people he knew and events he had witnessed, he did not write from the imagination and did not "compose" (200). In support of this view, he cites Tomás' unwillingness to write a work of fiction about the Island as it seemed to him that such a work

would be a lie. An Seabhac saw *An tOileánach* as the book anyone who could write would have produced if he had lived that life.

The account of the changes he made offered in *Tomás Ó Criomhthain: lascaire agus Udar* is more detailed than the account he offered in his Introduction to the published text. It is nevertheless still far from frank or complete. The first change he discusses is that which he made to the spelling system Tomás had devised himself, not too difficult a task by his own account, as Tomás' system was not problematic for someone who read Tomás' dialect. Secondly, he removed from the text quite a lot of material that seemed repetitive -- storms, near-drownings, trips to Dingle and so on, in order to avoid boring the reader, as he expressed it. It seems he did not recognise that repetition inhered in Island life and that by removing the artistic rendering of this fact, he was falsifying or, at the very least, distorting Tomás' record of Island life. The third kind of change he instigated, by this account, was to ask the author to fill in what he saw as gaps in the text. To some of these Tomás agreed. To others, he did not. An Seabhac asked him to give more insight into the stories of the two women in his life, the girl from Inis Mhicileáin that he loved but forsook to marry according to his family wishes and the woman he married. He writes that Tomás viewed these very personal matters as "discretions of the soul", not to be aired before the readers of Ireland (An Seabhac: 203). On the other hand, he acquiesced to An Seabhac's request for an ending to the book that was more substantial than the one he first offered. Tomás' original ending was in the style of the traditional storyteller and was only about a page long. Even though he acquiesced, and even though he repeatedly professed his deep gratitude to An Seabhac he did not hide his irritation about this particular change. He wrote: "maybe it does not have such a short tail now. If there is a sentence in it which does not appeal you just leave it out." (Ó Coileáin: 255)

Finally, in this article, An Seabhac attempts to put to rest rumours that material had been cut from the text because it contained “immodest references”, stating that anyone who knew Tomás, knew that there was no immodesty or corruption in him (204). He also denies that the government had issued a special school edition devoid of offensive material with the disingenuous statement that “every line of text they received from me they published” (204).

We learn years later from Seán Ó Coileáin that, in regard to several pages of manuscript, there is even some confusion as to which text they actually belong, as the final parts of the *Allagar* were bundled in with the early parts of *An tOileánach*. We learn also that some of the text An Seabhac worked from had been reworked by Ó Ceallaigh before he handed it over. Ó Ceallaigh's linguistic shortcomings are evident to Ó Coileáin, to whom some of the rewriting looks “bedraggled” and “silly”, especially when compared with Tomás’ easy to read style of writing. It seems that Ó Ceallaigh left out words he did not understand, came back to them later and put in whatever he could work out himself.

An Seabhac’s handling of Tomás’ text comes under close scrutiny in a long study by James Stewart which confirms that what he published as *An tOileánach* was quite incomplete in comparison with the manuscript (1976). Commenting on the omissions An Seabhac made, Stewart writes that “the cuts listed were made to save face rather than space, because, mistakenly, they were believed to show the Islanders as either too punchy, too sexy, too sly or too slanderous” (235). Stewart observes that An Seabhac omits quite a bit concerning “human emotions”, specifically material concerning the girl from the Inis, the very material that An Seabhac said he had tried without success to elicit from Tomás. He also excluded several accounts of fights between Island people, one between some women quarrelling over eggs and another between some men fighting over a pot. He omitted some of Tomás’ harsh judgements of his neighbours and of Father Clune who had failed to acknowledge Tomás’



contribution to a work he had published. As Stewart points out, while the changes made in many cases improved the images of the protagonists, "it also leaves us with words and thoughts ascribed to the author which are not his" (235). In addition, details of the rituals of a wake were omitted as were some of the Island songs Tomás included, omissions which, as Stewart rightly says, rob the reader of some of the rhythm and flavour of Island life, rhythm and flavour Tomás had seen fit to impart. Tomás' desire to include songs in his record of Island life had already been an issue before An Seabhac's involvement in the production of the texts. Ó Coileáin tells us that Ó Ceallaigh had put a stop to the songs when Tomás was writing the first book. He tells us that Tomás had written a song "O'Neill's Castle" for *The Islandman* which, at the time of Ó Coileáin's article had still not been published. The significance of song to Tomás' articulation of his life may be judged from the words he wrote after this song. His words show his awareness of the restrictions imposed upon him and the compromising of his authentic voice:

Dúrt liom féin go gcuirfinn síos anso é ó bhíos i mbun gach cuntais  
do bhreacadh agus mar nár ghránna liom féin riamh an leabhar go  
mbeadh leathdosaon d'amhránaibh breátha ann.  
Dábur mise féin mo mháistir féin do chuirfinn leathdosaon  
d'amhránaibh breátha thall agus abhus insa scíbhinn [scríbhinn LS]  
seo, ach ní mé. Guth ó fharaire uasal atá 'na chónaí idt'ir Éireann  
at'a agam, agus ó ghlacas an ghuth táim toilteanach déanamh dá  
d'réir (Ó Coileáin: 247).

I thought I would include it here because I was determined to include every account and I had never objected to a book which might include half a dozen songs. If I were my own master I would include a half dozen wonderful songs here and there in this writing but I am not. The voice of a noble guardian who lives in Ireland has been adopted by me, and since I have adopted his voice I am duty bound to abide by his wishes" (De Paor, 2001).

Some of the omissions or substitutions of individual words reflect personal attitudes and preferences of the editor. Stewart gives the example of a whole passage omitted because it contained the word *mún* (urine), a word An Seabhac found too distasteful to use. For similar

reasons, he substituted *bolg* (belly) for *bleadar* (bladder). Another word banned from the text is *smuga* (mucus, snot) while *tóin* (backside, bottom) could not be made to disappear entirely from the text but had its number of appearances cut.

Other changes made by An Seabhac speak directly to the politics of culture that have always surrounded the Blasket texts. The people of the Blaskets had for some time been championed as the last speakers of an uncorrupted Irish language. It seems quite likely that it was to maintain the myth of cultural purity that had grown up around the islanders that he got rid of loan words from English that he considered insufficiently “naturalised” (239), words such as *lumpaí*, *compás* and *pob*. He deleted most references to “the appurtenances of royalty” such as crowns and palaces, drawing the line at *cúirt* (court) which he let remain, perhaps out of deference to Merriman's popular *Cúirt an Meán-Oíche* (*The Midnight Court*). Significantly, according to Stewart, he altered references to the English language that Tomás had made, minimising both the Islanders' abilities with the language and their need of it (240). The adjective *binn* (sweet, melodious) that the author uses to describe *Béarla* (the English language) is omitted by the editor. In this matter he is at odds with Flower who frequently reiterated his belief in an Irish culture that had always assimilated foreign influences easily and seamlessly (Sims-Williams, 1998: 77).

Stewart has come to see An Seabhac's edition as a step along the way to publication of the actual book that Tomás wrote. On this topic, he writes:

For those of us who have loved and lived with this book since student days, it had assumed something of the character of a sacred text, sacrosanct and immutable. It was therefore with an increasing sense of disillusion that the realisation grew... that what we had taken for a sacred text ... was no sacred text but a surrogate, which in content and phrasing owes not a little to arbitrary editorial decision and whim” (252-3).

The text *An Seabhac* edited and published as *An tOileánach* was eventually translated into English by Robin Flower who had been visiting the Island annually since 1910. To refer to him simply as Tomás' translator, as one recent commentator has done (Quigley, 2003) is to offer an inadequate portrayal of the complex role he played in the communal life of the Island and in its culture, as well as in the life of Tomás and the production of his texts. His friendship with Tomás and their cultural collaboration preceded Ó Ceallaigh's by seven or eight years.

Much more is known of Robin Flower than Brian Ó Ceallaigh. A dedicated and accomplished scholar and a prolific writer, he left a considerable body of writing that continues to make him known to readers today. His capacity for friendship and conversational ease differed greatly from the secretive reserve that, no doubt, was forced upon Ó Ceallaigh by his role in the Casement affair. Flower's personal qualities ensured him of an enduring place in the affections and reminiscences of many Islanders for decades. In addition, Flower was a prolific writer of academic and literary material who left many documents that testify to his love and respect for Blasket culture and allow his readers to see how and why he achieved his unique place within it.

His family background is more than usually pertinent to discussion as it sheds light upon the curiously diverse factors that went into the shaping of Robin Flower and his career. It reveals certain predispositions that equip him for the extraordinary role he is to play in the story of the Blasket Islands. For this interesting information, we are indebted to Flower's biographer, H. I. Bell (Bell, 1946). Though Yorkshire people, the Flowers were of Anglo-Irish background on both sides. His paternal grandfather, the Rev William Flower, led a sedate life as a well-known religious scholar and editor of *The Churchman's Companion*. He was also a writer and a translator. His son, Robin's father, Marmaduke Flower, led a more daring and

varied life. As a youth, he ran away from school in Dorset to go to sea. Within a short while, he somehow found himself fighting on the Confederate side in the American Civil War for a time but deserted the army. He next turned up digging for gold in Australia after which he returned to England only to be imprisoned for desertion. At this point, his life took an even more extraordinary turn. Recognised in court by the magistrate as a relative of the Vicar of Leeds, he was set free and took up a career in art, acquiring a reputation both for landscape work and portraiture before becoming an art teacher. Two of his works still hang in Pembroke College, Oxford (354).

It is not hard to detect in these two men some of the qualities that would come to characterise Robin Flower's own life. The scholarly interest and aptitude of the grandfather met with the unconventionality, freedom of spirit and artistic nature and talent of the father in the person of Robin, and endowed him with a peculiarly rich and diverse sensitivity that would inform both his professional life and his activity in the Blaskets.

Robin Flower's education and career was a long preparation for the role he was to play in the story of the Blaskets. He was educated in the Classics at Oxford after which he took up a position in the Manuscripts Department of the British Museum, at which he would work all his life. According to Bell, the skills and expertise he brought to his career included philology, linguistics and paleography. He was widely read: his love of the Classics was matched by a passion for medieval studies, his knowledge of which encompassed the cultures of almost every country in Western Europe. He had a wide knowledge of Irish and Welsh literature and was well read in regard to contemporary English and continental authors.

At some early stage in his career at the British Museum, he formed the intention of completing the Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts held by the Museum, which had been commenced by Standish O'Grady and left unfinished. To further this aim and to feed his

interest in things Irish, he began taking private lessons in Irish language. Reaching a certain stage and proficiency, he went then to Dublin for three weeks to take Marstrander's classes in "The Old and Middle Irish Languages and Literature". It was almost inevitable at this point that Flower would soon enough follow in Marstrander's footsteps to the king's house on the Blasket and to language lessons at Tomás' table.

As Sims-Williams points out (90), Flower's unique relationship with Irish culture and especially with Blasket Island culture is evident in the opening paragraphs of his two books, *The Western Island* [1944] (1978) and *The Irish Tradition* [1947] (1994). These passages show clearly that his deep erudition and experience with Irish manuscripts in no way cured him of a happy, personal susceptibility to romanticism. Preparation of the latter commenced in 1945 when Flower realised that serious illness threatened his long-planned writing of the history of Irish literature, and consists of a selection of his earlier work on the subject. It was published in 1947. The former, which first appeared in 1944, furnishes us with his personal account of his twenty years of involvement with the people of the Blasket Islands, "a period of grace which endowed him with inspiration, poetry and vision, besides the most loveable of nick-names" (Ó Lúing, 1981: 122). As a sign of their love for him, the Islanders gave him the name *Bláithín*, an Irish diminutive meaning "little flower" (Ní Dhomnaill, date unknown: 28).

The opening paragraph of *The Irish Tradition* sees Flower forego the customary detachment of the scholar and assert his own place as a participant within the tradition:

A visitor to Ireland familiar with Gaelic literature has his attention arrested everywhere in that beautiful island by many features, natural and artificial, which set him searching among his memories and clothing hill and river, rath and church and castle, with the lively and intimate colouring of long-descended tradition. And if he yields himself to the spell of that lure of recollection and summons back out of the past the kings and saints and scholars and poets whose names still cling about the places that they knew, he may be contented to recall that he is acting in the very spirit of those devoted scholars to whom that tradition owes its origin and survival.

That the visitor's response is almost involuntary as well as strong and immediate is suggested first by the mention of his attention being "arrested" and, later, by the picture of him yielding to "the spell of the lure of recollection". His description of Ireland as "that beautiful island" indicates that the response is personal and emotional. At first glance, his response recalls an extravagant emotion in the spirit of Synge but we quickly find that it is something else when Flower allows us to witness the very moment when the visitor becomes more than a sympathetic observer. He describes the beauty of the place triggering an active response from the visitor, sending him to search among his memories to invest what he sees with his knowledge of "the long-descended tradition". At this moment, his response to the place moves beyond emotional response to intellectual activity and the visitor becomes an active participant in the story, a late player contributing to the continuation of the tradition. Flower aligns the visitor with the "devoted scholars" who brought the tradition into being in the first place and then nurtured it and kept it alive. Such a visitor is no disinterested, impartial observer, but one who has consciously and willingly yielded to the spell, and can be no other but Flower himself, his identity only faintly obscured by the half-hearted attempt at a third person narrative.

With *The Western Island*, Flower's broad interest in Irish culture finds a very particular and personal focus. It provides us with his account of his twenty years or so of Island experience, and goes beyond revealing the depth, the complexity and the emotional nature of his response to the Island to show that he had a very definite place and function within its culture. Describing his journey into the Island as the text begins, he writes of the increasing sparseness of what he sees. Of the little railway station at Dingle, he writes: "you forget London and Dublin, all the cities of the earth, and with Gaelic faces and Gaelic voices about you stand in the gateway of an older and simpler world" (1). He goes on to introduce a little story about a

poet on his travels in these parts and the fearful respect he commands. With his little story, he asserts and demonstrates his own place within the tradition in two ways -- first, by imitating the ways of the traditional storyteller and secondly, by demonstrating his knowledge of local lore. He quickly follows this story up with another local anecdote about an Island woman on the mainland for the first time who cries out in fear when she sees Ireland spread before her: " 'What a wide, weary place is Ireland!' and, frightened by the vastness of the revealed world, turned back forever to her cosy, familiar island." (4). With these anecdotes, Flower signals that he is no outsider, observing, collecting and saving "folk" material as many of his peers and colleagues were doing. He is instead a participant operating within the tradition, transmitting its lore in accordance with Island practice.

Flower's first description of the Islands uses images which could almost as suitably describe the people of the Islands. They are "the peaks of hills sundered from their mainland brothers, and seen thus from above you would think them sea-monsters of an ancient world languidly lifting time-worn backs above the restless and transitory waves" (4). Like the Islands, the people are "sundered from their mainland brothers". They, too, "hail from an ancient world" to lift "their time-worn backs" above the waves.

Although Flower's description of the people in terms of landscape has much in common with Synge's writing, Flower's positioning of himself amongst the people, as participant rather than observer, prevents the conflation of people and landscape that marks Synge's work. In his account of a conversation with an Islander, Flower draws himself into the landscape, and positions himself among the people. His discussion of the emigration that is simultaneously destroying and maintaining the fragile fragment of Island life that remains, with its mention of Columbus, allows him finally to place himself overtly within his picture of Island life, and as a character within it: "'Wasn't it a great thought Columbus had', said a man to me

once as we lay gazing out over the Atlantic, 'to find out America? For if there wasn't America, the Island wouldn't stand a week'." (6). With this little anecdote, Flower presents himself as an "old familiar" of the Island, someone with time to laze about in its fields and with friends to keep him company while he does so.

His last words in "The Road to the Island" contain subtle advice to the reader that all is not as seems obvious in this world, that what seems accessible sometimes turns out to be remote and unwilling to yield its secrets. He writes: "The boat works out of the little harbour and sets a course along the shore under the cliffs. Here from the sea-level the Island, which had seemed so near from the summit of the cliff, withdraws itself into the distance behind the dancing company of the waves" (6). He is talking about so much more than geography.

With his last sentence in this first chapter of his book, Flower signals his entry into an entirely other world: "'Say your farewell to Ireland', cries one of the rowers, and I turn and bid farewell, not only to Ireland, but to England and Europe and all the tangled world of today." (6). This passage, so romantic at first glance, and so clearly at odds with Flower's scholarly awareness of the constant intercourse between cultures, nevertheless represents the literal truth of Flower's experience. Every journey he made in one of the little Island boats took him to a world where he was known by another name, where he spoke a language that was not his mother tongue and where his activity bore no resemblance to his days at the British Museum.

Each of these two passages reveals as much about Flower as they do of the Island. His deliberate lack of detachment is immediately and everywhere apparent in his writing, which is coloured throughout by his deeply personal, emotional responsiveness to the Island and all that it contained. Though the Flower who enters the Island is clearly a romantic, he is neither an uninformed fuzzy thinker nor a scholar coming to gain the language quickly and



leave. He has time enough to lie around in a field with an Island friend, contemplating the Atlantic and the discovery of America. He possesses a deep knowledge of “the lively and intimate colouring of long-descended tradition” (Flower, 1947, 1994: 1) and is able to summon up from his own knowledge of the past those figures whose names remain enshrined in local place-names. Though English-born, he is Hyde’s ideal Irishman, able to bring his knowledge of the past into a continuum with the present. For him, the place is neither empty nor unknown, nor has it ever been.

Like his predecessors, Flower is a devoted scholar, who recognises his own position within the Island’s oral tradition as the latest in a long line to whom the tradition owes both its creation and its continued existence. Participating in the tradition, he imitates local storytellers by weaving subplots into his stories and relates local lore about the different places he passes through. He could eventually “embellish every turn of the road from Dingle to Dunquin with a snatch of legend or folktale” (Ó Lúing: 122). What is more, he could eventually blend it “with stories of personal experience”, creating autobiographical tales that meld personal experience with the conventions of story-telling, as was the practice of other Island story-tellers. It is impossible to disagree with the spirit of Ó Lúing’s remark that *The Western Island* is “a book as Irish in its character as the *Acallamh na Senórach*, with its colourful mosaic of island poetry, prose, life, topography, medievalism and friendships” (124).

Flower expresses his feeling that “it is as though from a long absence we were at last home once more” in his account of his arrival on the Western Island with his new bride (1978: 12). Along with this feeling of having come home, he also reveals the awe with which he regards Tomás:

But a sudden feeling comes upon you of a new presence in the room. You look up and see, leaning against the wall almost with the air of a being magically materialised out of nothing, a slight but confident figure. The face takes your attention at once and holds it. This face is dark and thin, and there look out of it two quick and living eyes, the vivid witnesses of a fine and self-sufficing intelligence. He comes towards you, and with a grave and courteous intonation, and a picked and running phrase, bids you welcome. You have indeed come home, for this is Tomás Ó Crithin, the Island poet and story-teller (12).

In spite of the romance and the adventure of what has preceded it, Flower's "invocation" of Tomás "with all the enchantment of a Byzantine romance" (Ó Lúing: 125), provides this section of the book with its climax. In a variation on his earlier image of the Island's sudden withdrawal "behind the dancing waves", he now presents Tomás as a mysterious presence, suddenly felt, as the throng of Island children and neighbours are dispersing. In tandem, these two images combine to contribute to Flower's picture of an other, mysterious world in which things which seem solid recede from view and people appear from nowhere. A magical materialisation more than a new arrival, no indication is given of how long Tomás might have been there. His self-possession and his charisma seem unrelated to the slight figure he cuts, but stem instead from what is evident in his thin, dark face: "two quick, living eyes, the vivid witnesses of a fine and self-sufficing intelligence". His unremarked arrival, the sudden awareness of his presence and the mention of his quick, living eyes puts one in mind of Synge sitting as silent witness among the Islanders, but here, it is the peasant that is silently, and one guesses, shrewdly, observing the scholar. In contrast to the gravity of Tomás' courteous manner and carefully chosen words as he bids his visitor welcome, Flower expresses the fullness of his heartfelt response to the moment. He writes that his arrival on the Island signifies a homecoming for him and that it is the presence of Tomás that makes it so, specifically, the presence of "Tomás Ó Crithin, the Island poet and story-teller". For Flower, poetry and story-telling are intimately bound up in his sense of homecoming and the

bond between himself and Tomás is all but familial. It is idle speculation perhaps, but it is nevertheless tempting to wonder if Flower, who was twenty-nine when he first met the fifty-five year old Tomás, sensed a homecoming in Tomás' presence because he had already known just such an older man with a similar, self-sufficing intelligence and two quick and living eyes, that man his own father, Marmaduke Flower.

Both Tomás and Flower left records of their work practice. Tomás' description of the procedure they adopted is given towards the conclusion of *The Islandman*. He relates simply that Flower visited the Island yearly, that they spent two sessions each day writing together and that a part of each year was given over to getting the material into good order (238). Flower's more fulsome account of the method of work that he and Tomás adopted in the early years reflects the dominance of the older man in the proceedings (16). He relates that they decided that he should dictate Island tales and the poems of the Island poet, Seán O Duinnlé, which he knew by heart, and that Flower should write the material down from dictation and record the circumstances under which they were composed. The material that was produced under this regime was eventually published by James Delargy as *Seanchas Ón Oileán Thiar* (Ó Duilearga, 1956). His dedication of the work to the memories of both Tomás and Flower recognises the significant contribution each man made to this cultural project.

Flower has left a description of their sessions that shows the friendly warmth that coloured them:

And so, he sitting on one side of the table, rolling a savoury sprig of dillisk round and round in his mouth to lend a salt flavour to his speech, and I diligently writing on the other side, the picture of the Island's past grew from day to day under our hands. At times I would stop him as an unfamiliar word or strange twist of phrase struck across my ear, and he would courteously explain it, giving parallels from the local speech or illustrating with a little tale, budded off, as it were, from the larger unit." (16-17).

From this account, one senses that the friendship between the teacher and his student grew apace with the picture of Island life that was emerging from their labours.

Although Tomás was very much the senior partner in the relationship as they embarked upon their work together, the shared endeavours of Tomás and Flower allowed a mutuality of experience that was new in Island dealings with visitors. Each man had much to give and much to gain and was both teacher and student as their project progressed. While Flower was clearly gaining much more than the mastery of the language he had originally sought, it is also clear that Tomás was also gaining a great deal from his contact with Flower. Tomás enriched his mind considerably by drawing on Flower's wide knowledge of Irish and other literatures. They also conversed on a wide range of topics and corresponded when Flower was away from the Island. Such activities allowed Tomás to write on a much broader range of topics than the folklore material to which he had previously confined himself (Mac Conghail, 1994: 139).

The pattern of this mutually rewarding and satisfying relationship was magnified in Flower's relationships with the wider Island community. He did any task he was asked, finding no task too lowly for him: his first nick-name on the island was *an garsúinín an bhainne* (the little milk-boy), as it was his daily chore to get milk for the tea from a neighbour (Ní Dhomnaill: 28). From the very beginning, during his first visit in 1910, he worked alongside the men even though, by his own account, he lacked their strength and expertise: "I too worked on the road, wielding an inexpert pick amid the mockery of others, and taking long periods of rest to nurse my aching arms" (Ní Dhomnaill: 29). He left the Island with bandaged hands after this visit. Whenever he was on the Island, he would often join in the work of the island, frequently helping those who went to the hill with the donkeys to bring back turf. He

was known to like accompanying the men on their fishing trips and their journeys to the smaller islands, as well as his friend, the king's son on his journeys to Dunquin for the post.

Unflustered by the hardships of Island living, he is said to have shared the king's kitchen quite cheerfully with the king's domestic animals and poultry (Bell: 364) and left many statements of his gratitude to the Islanders. And, just as he entered fully into the life of the island, he shared his life fully with them. To whatever extent he observed their lives whilst among them, he allowed his own life to be observed. He brought his young bride to the Island for their honeymoon in 1911 and, in the years that followed, sent his children to the Island school whenever circumstances permitted during their annual visits.

He also experienced the full measure of the temperamental sea that gave the Island life its character. At its generous best, it allowed him one of the greatest pleasures of his life: "there is no greater pleasure on earth than to lie in the stern of a *naomhóg*, almost in the embrace of the water, as the strong rowers snatch the boat over the waves" (Flower, 1978: 6). At less than its best, it could be mean and unaccommodating as it was on the occasion when Flower found himself in a *naomhóg* on "an unquiet sea" with a dictaphone he was bringing, as well as a goat and an internal combustion engine. It was meaner yet when its turbulence prevented Flower and his family reaching the little harbour of Dunquin, forcing them to land at the foot of a cliff, up which they were hauled to complete their journey to Dunquin in a manure cart (Bell: 364). He shared in full measure the penultimate misery of island life when, from the cliffs at Dunquin, he was forced to watch the sea's savage punishing of the *naomhóg* carrying his wife, which caused many present to despair for those on board the little vessel (Ní Dhomnaill: 29). Thankfully, he was spared the common sequel to such an event.

Flower shared in more than the physical life of the Island. He also shared in its communal life. Bell writes of him going among the people, roaming the Island, talking with the men as they worked, and “taking down from their lips whatever of traditional lore they had to impart” (Bell: 364). However, he did not just collect from them, but swapped with them, often capping “their fine stories with equally good ones of his own, drawn from his treasure of medieval lore”. For which, we are told, the Islanders loved him as “nothing goes down so well in this part of the world as a good story, skilfully told” (Ni Dhomnaill: 29).

Flower did not “collect” cultural material from the Islanders. Instead, he gave back out of his own life when they exchanged life stories and thoughts with each other (Bell: 364). Conversations in the turf ricks could at times cover topics as diverse as the origins of the ogham stones and the war that was looming (Ni Dhomnaill: 29). Flower’s son, Patrick, recalls that his father enjoyed keeping the Islanders informed of the doings of the macrocosm (Flower, 1998: 26). Sims-Williams quotes an Island woman, Mrs Nance O’Sullivan, as having said that Flower was always a popular visitor to the Island because he gave them news of the outside world and talked about the British Museum. (Sims-Williams: 78). His popularity was no doubt enhanced by there being, in Ni Dhomnaill’s words, “no whiff” in his speech of the many hours he spent poring over dusty manuscripts (29). As she said, his learning sat lightly on him. He particularly enjoyed offering them interesting snippets of information about their own culture that they would not have known, such as the origin of the name of their island, in the Norse word, *brasker*, which meant “sharp reef” (Sims-Williams: 78).

He also delighted in sharing his pleasure when he detected connections with other literatures and traditions in Island lore. He recounts one such moment in his Preface to *The Western Island*, when the Islanders were reciting a litany of proverbs provoked by discussion of the deaths that had occurred in Flower’s absence. The recital ends with *Cá’il an sneachta*

*bhí comh geal anuirig?* (Where is the snow that was so bright last year?), which Flower counters with François Villon's "Où sont les neiges d'antan?" (Where are the snows of days gone by?) (Flower: viii). Flower's pleasure almost leaps from the page when he tells of Tomás asking if Villon was a Connaughtman and, upon learning that he was a Frenchman, remarking dryly that he would not put it past the French to have made this remark first. He relates with similar delight a conversation with a cowherd about a proverb in common use on the Island. When asked of its origins, the Islander told Flower that it had come down from Thomas à Kempis, to which Flower added that á Kempis had encountered it first in the Bible (93).

Flower not only connects Island culture with the cultures of the wider world in this text, he also positions himself within the tradition by aligning himself with Seán Ó Duínnlé, the Island poet:

In Ireland, as in medieval Europe, the tales spread among the people of the roads, the wandering harvesters, the tramping men and the beggars, the poor scholars and poets and migratory schoolmasters. Seán had graduated in this university of the road; and if we can find, as I have found on the Island, a tale which can be traced back, through the jest-books of the Middle Ages and the sermon-books of the preaching friars to the Arabs of Africa, and through Persian books to ancient India, it is by such men that it has been carried from extremest East to farthest West, to die at last by a turf fire within hearing of the Atlantic wave (1978: 95).

Once again, while seemingly discussing matters of Island culture and without mentioning himself, Flower asserts and assumes his own cultural position within the tradition. In marked contrast to other men of letters of his day, such as Yeats, Synge and An Seabhac, who saw the contents of the oral tradition as raw material for their own art, Flower expresses a relationship between himself, a scholar, and the Island poet, practitioner of the oral tradition. He and the poet have a lot in common. They are both literary men, tellers and translators of tales. Each has spent his life collecting and disseminating the popular culture of Ireland.

Flower, no less than Ó Duínnlé, is a traveller, a scholar and a poet, carrying tales from one place to another. Ó Duínnlé, no less than Flower, has “graduated”, not from Oxford but from his university of the road, from which he has garnered “an immense store of knowledge, tales and poems and sayings, all that vast flood of popular tradition” (95).

Flower was special to the people of the Blasket Islands. It has been remarked that he is mentioned frequently in Blasket literature without a word of criticism and that every Islander was his friend (Ó Lúing: 130). One Island woman told Binchy that she would “confide things to Bláithín I would not reveal to the priest.” (Ó Lúing: 135). They were drawn to him because “he possessed to an enormous degree that rarest of virtues, the ability of being *iseal-uasail* – lowly and noble at the same time, and able to mix with all” (Ní Dhomnaill: 28). Flower reciprocated their feelings for him. He wrote to his friend, Richard Best, “I am enjoying myself wonderfully and by my thinking there is no place in the world like it [...] the people are good beyond belief to me.” (Ó Lúing: 126).

Discussing Flower’s incurable romanticism, Sims-Williams observes that Flower allowed himself to be absorbed by the culture instead of standing outside it, that he became an “honorary insider” and even that he “went native” (Sims-Williams: 90). A reading of Flower’s life suggests however, that he had already been absorbed by the culture before he ever went to the Blaskets, and that this had happened during the years he spent tracing the development of Irish thought in the old manuscripts for which he was responsible. He wrote to Best:

the manuscripts are the living literature, the immediate voice of that vanished world, and as text succeeds text and cycles of legend alternate with homilies and translations we can watch the very movement of the Irish mind very much as a scientist pictures the past to himself from the fossil deposits in successive stratifications (Ó Lúing: 129).



Island experience allowed him to engage even more deeply in the culture that had already long fascinated him and to make the connections between past and present that Hyde believed were essential to the formation of an Irish consciousness. The fact that he made so many journeys to and from the Island and that he spent so many summers of his adult life there suggests that he went well beyond becoming an "honorary insider" -- that he achieved an Island life and identity of his own. His nickname is but one of many signs that this is so. He had Island experiences of his own and stories of his own that became part of Island lore. His family life was entangled with the life of the Blaskets. He became a part of the community, one of "that lamenting company" mourning the death of the king and Tomás and a part of an old world that was passing away (viii). He became a part of the oral tradition he came to study, describing one of his works as "the song we made together of the vanished snows of yesteryear" (viii).

At the end of his life, as his health and memory failed, his memories of the Blaskets remained. After his death in 1946, in the only ceremony of its kind ever to take place there, Flower's daughter scattered his ashes on the Island, in accordance with her father's wishes and with the consent of the remaining Islanders. And so, like the tale he traced from the east which came to die "at last by a turf fire", Flower remains forever part of the Island he loved, coming to rest himself "within hearing of the Atlantic wave".

Barbara Flower wrote to her mother that when her father's wishes had been fulfilled, all those present "prayed for Bláithín's soul" and said: "Tá sé sásta anois." ("He is satisfied now"). (Stagles, 1977: 10). The Islanders' feelings for Bláithín, never in doubt, is delicately expressed in the reminiscence of Máire Guiheen, one of the witnesses to the scattering: "We all came down the hill silently, thinking in our hearts of the happy years he spent on the Island with his wife and family." (Stagles: 10).

Flower's contributions to the service of Irish literature were many and varied. His *Love's Bitter Sweet* (1925) offered versions of sixteenth and seventeenth century Irish poems (Welch, 1996: 199) while *Poems and Translations* (1931) contained some of his own poetry as well as the translations signalled in the title. Bell reports that his poetry was considered good and his translations of old Irish poetry "masterly" and notes that some of Flower's original poetry could have been mistaken for modern renderings of old Irish poems (367). Publication of his three-volume *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the British Museum* (1926) which surveyed the broad canvas of Irish literature was recognised as a major event in Celtic Studies (Bell: 367). With this work, Flower had aimed to "study the literature in its growth, to delimit its different classes, periods and districts, and, in particular, to isolate the foreign influences by the method of determining the sources of translated texts" (367). In doing this, he identified the foreign sources of several texts that had previously been believed to be Irish originals (367). A later publication which takes the place of the history he had long intended to write, *The Irish Tradition*, offers a survey of Irish literature drawn from his earlier lectures and writing, regrettably necessitated and truncated by his final illness.

As we have seen, Flower came to the Blaskets with an Irish background of which he was proud and in which he was interested. He came equipped with a wide scholarship that found its focus in Celtic and medieval studies and its passion in Irish literature and language. He had a romantic enthusiasm, usual enough in Celticists of the time, from whom he differed in his disbelief in the notion of an untainted Irish culture, the result of his scrupulous study of old Irish manuscripts and the identification, in some cases of their sources. These attributes found full expression in his contact with the Blasket Islands. He went far beyond allowing himself to be absorbed into its culture to claim his own identity and place, not only in the Island community as *Bláithín* but also, as *spáilpín* (a seasonal, migratory worker), in the literary

tradition of Ireland. By virtue of his family background, his training, his devotion and passion, he did not “go native” as has been suggested, but was “native”.

As "native", as a much-loved participant in the cultural life of the Island, Flower was ideally placed to translate Tomás' autobiography into English and make it available to an English readership. His translation of *An tÓileánach* has always been more widely read than Tomás' Irish original and has been reprinted repeatedly since its first publication in 1929. Bell described it years ago as “a masterpiece of sympathetic interpretation” (363). John McGahern acknowledged that he had been forced to admit, after attempting to translate Tomás' work himself, that Flower's translation was much better than he had previously realised (1989: 55). More recently, Declan Kiberd described it as “an excellent translation” (2000: 529). Although no-one has pointed to any specific inaccuracy or misrepresentation of the author in Flower's translation, it does not enjoy universal approval. It is sometimes subject to a general disapproval of translation as a suspect and inferior cultural activity and product. Some critics apply the “lost in translation” view and argue that there is something intrinsically untranslatable in Tomás' writing and that reading Tomás in translation cannot give an accurate picture of the Tomás that is accessible to readers of Irish. Ó Conaire, for instance, in the Radio Teilifís Éireann series and subsequent CD, *Blasket Island Reflections* (2003), expresses the view that Tomás' mastery of language and literary techniques is lost in translation and that the poetry of *An tOileánach* is missing from the pages of *The Islandman* (Track 14). The CD breathes new life into the view of J. A. Brookes who, in 1956, described Flower's translation as “a failure” and *An tOileánach* as “an untranslatable book”. As diverse as these criticisms are, they each suggest that Flower's translation represents an impediment to the reader's experience of “the authentic” or to the reader's access to Tomás himself. There have been many developments in translation theory in the years since Translation Studies was recognised as a discipline in

the 1980s (Lefevere, 1992: xi) which may help with a new assessment of Flower's achievement in *The Islandman*.

Embedded in the negative attitudes to Flower's translation are long-held views of translation recently reinterrogated in the light of literary theory. Criticism of his work seems to give particular expression to the general disapproval to which translation was for centuries subjected. It was long thought of as a second rate literary activity, always subordinated to its "original" and often considered a betrayal of a pure source (Bassnett, 1996: 10-11). Regarded as a mechanical task and a derivative product, translation has played second fiddle to the original text that always enjoyed the privilege of prior existence (12). Translations, skilful or not, were often counted among their authors' minor works, reflecting a view of translation as an apprentice task.

Over the years, there have been many attempts made to define good translation, much of which centred on methodology. Even so, larger issues were often implicit in the discussion. Dolet's sixteenth century treatise on the subject, *La manière de bien traduire d'une langue en aultre*, expresses five guiding principles that remain central to the craft (Bassnett, 1996 :14). First, the translator must achieve a perfect understanding of his author's subject matter and avoid obscurity in order to produce a clear document. Secondly, he must have a perfect knowledge of the source language as well as of the target language and ensure that neither language is diminished by the act of translation. Thirdly, he should not translate word by word, as this would render translation an act of slavery. His fourth rule advocated the use of the vernacular and the avoidance of archaisms, latinisms, novelties and rare words. Finally, the translator should attempt to create a text that is satisfying to the soul and pleasing to the ear. According to Bassnett, informed by the work of Hermans, these rules express an early awareness of translation's role in the creation of national culture, as translation practised

along such lines asserted the value of the vernacular over the classical languages favoured by the ecclesiastical authorities of the day. One can thus detect in Dolet's treatise an early form of post-colonial resistance to imperial authority. Six years after the publication of his five rules, Dolet was hanged and burned at the stake for heresy committed when he translated a text that was not Christian (Bassnett: 14).

In the seventeenth century, Dillon Wentworth, the Earl of Roscommon, offered a verse discussion of the relative merits and difficulties of writing and translating, positing a symbiotic relationship between author and translator as the means to good translation:

'Tis true, Composing is the nobler Part,  
But good Translation is no Easie Art,  
For the materials have long been found,  
Yet both your Fancy and your Hands are bound,  
And by improving what was writ before,  
Invention labours less, but Judgement more.

Each poet with a different talent writes,  
One praises, one instructs, another bites.  
Horace did ne'er aspire to Epick Bays,  
Nor lofty Maro stoop to Lyrick lays.  
Examine how your humour is inclin'd,  
And which the Ruling Passion of your Mind.

Then seek a Poet who your ways does bend,  
And choose an Author as you choose a Friend;  
United by this sympathetick Bond,  
You grow familiar, intimate and fond.  
Your Thoughts, your Words, your Stiles, your Souls agree,  
No longer his Interpretor, but He. (Lefevere, 1992: 43-5).

The central concerns of these early commentators continue to preoccupy recent and current research into translation practice which intensified with the recognition of Translation Studies as a discipline in the 1980s. The establishment of this discipline brought with it a shift in focus from a concern with the methodology of translation to a consideration of its location and significance within cultures. In particular, the early awareness of the role of translation within national culture, shown by Dolet, has been amplified and examined along lines that

resonate with the concerns of post-colonial theory, culminating in the recognition of translation as a mode of cultural politics.

Certain key issues have preoccupied translation theorists in recent years. At a practical level, they have sought to address the lowly position of translation in the academic world where it was long considered a menial intellectual task (Hope, 2001: 10). Related to translation's erstwhile reputation as an inferior product, translation theorists are examining the possibility that the translation might constitute a new original. Derrida and de Campos each conclude that the translation is indeed an original by virtue of the fact that it comes into being after its source text (Bassnett, 1996: 22). Interestingly, Lawrence Venuti points out that this has become an issue of central importance to copyright legislators in recent years (1995: 9).

The question of the faithfulness required of the translator (Lefevere: 59) has taken on a new complexity with the recognition that the efforts of the translator extend well beyond an attempt at linguistic equivalence to embrace a complex tangle of ideological and poetic judgements. Venuti writes of "canons of accuracy" by which translation is produced and judged (37). He writes:

Fidelity cannot be construed as mere semantic equivalence: on the one hand, the foreign text is susceptible to many different interpretations, even at the level of the individual word; on the other hand, the translator's interpretive choices answer to a domestic cultural situation and so always exceed the foreign text. This does not mean that translation is forever banished to the realm of freedom or error, but that canons of accuracy are culturally specific and historically variable (37).

The translator has a wide range of strategies at his disposal, ranging from conservation of a sense of the foreignness of the text by means of reproduction of some of its cultural signs, to naturalisation which transforms the foreign text into a cultural replica of the receiving culture (Aixelá, 1996: 54). These strategies are identified and examined at length in Venuti's discussion of the "invisibility" of the translator in which he demonstrates that cultural

and political implications attach to each of the options open to the translator, options he terms “foreignisation” and “domestication”.

Venuti directs us to a lecture by Schleirmacher in 1813 for a response to the question each translator must face before he begins his task: why and how do I translate? (19).

Schleirmacher saw only two possible modes of translation: “either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him, or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him” (19-20). Venuti adopts the options proposed by Schleirmacher as the basis of his concepts of foreignisation and domestication. Schleirmacher’s “leaving the author in peace” becomes Venuti’s “foreignising method” which places “an ethnodeviant pressure” on the cultural values of the target-language readership, “sending the reader abroad” (20). “Leaving the reader in peace” becomes Venuti’s “domesticating method”, “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values” which “brings the author back home” (20).

Venuti outlines the processes by which domestication occurs (1-6). Briefly, domestication requires an invisible translator whose skilful manipulation of the target language and fluency make the translation seem transparent. This transparency is thus an illusory effect of a fluent discourse that is devoid of any linguistic peculiarities that might draw attention to the “language” matter of the text at the expense of its subject matter. A translation that achieves transparency seems to reflect the author’s personality and intention as well as the “essential meaning” of the text. Ultimately, the transparency that marks a domesticating translation allows for claims of accuracy to be made. Venuti identifies several dangers inherent in the domesticating strategy of translation that stem from an emphasis on accuracy which, he says, often occurs at the expense of form and manner in writing. This often results in the flattening of an author’s idiosyncratic style and the elimination of the stylistics of his

national language (6). Venuti links this homogenisation of the discourse of the nation to which the author belongs to the hegemonic power exercised by English -- language nations whose attitudes towards translation show them to be "imperialist abroad and xenophobic at home" in their relations with cultural others (17).

Venuti follows Schleirmacher's lead in favouring the foreignising strategy of translation over that of domestication. He writes:

Foreignising translation signifies the difference of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language. In its effort to do right abroad, this translation method must do wrong at home, deviating enough from native norms to stage an alien reading experience [...] (20).

He sees foreignising translation as a desirable "strategic intervention" in today's world politics that might usefully contest the unequal cultural exchange between the "hegemonic English -- language nations" and their "global others" (20). He takes the view that it allows both the possibility of and the form for a resistance against the "ethnocentrism, racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism" of English -- language cultures (20).

As we have seen, translation is now recognised as much more than a linguistic exchange. It is a reinscription that mixes at least two cultures in a complex process involving two languages and two literary traditions (Aixelá: 53). The complex networks of concepts, ideologies, people and objects that belong to the two cultures must be balanced in the rewriting that is translation. Cronin observes that the act of translation involves an effort to match like and unlike, familiar and foreign (Cronin, 2000: 4) in a long and sometimes uneven process that "is present from the very moment the Self looks at the Other " (Delisle, 1995: 223). Every translation carries two burdens -- it must at one and the same time be a text and represent a text (Aixelá, 1996: 60). His chosen strategy notwithstanding, the translator faces the task of producing a literary artefact that will be acceptable to the receiving culture



while representing a document that already exists in another language and belongs to another literary and cultural tradition. Thus, it is always subject to evaluation by two distinct and differing cultures (Aixelá: 53).

Developments in literary theory are responsible for many of the shifts in attitude towards translation (Bassnett: 13). In its concern with the relationship between reader and writer, post-modernism accords a special place to the translator (11), who functions as both reader and writer at any given time. Bassnett reminds us of Derrida's belief that there is never an absolute meaning behind which there is nothing:

Difference is never pure, no more so is translation, and for the notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of *transformation*: a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another. We will never have, and in fact never had, to do with some 'transport' of pure signifieds from one language to another, or within one and the same language, that the signifying instrument would leave virgin and untouched (Derrida, 1981: 20).

She also points to the fact that Barthes' notion of the "death of the author" (Barthes, 1988: 167) has led to fresh consideration of the once lowly status of translation, as many consider that it implies the death of the "original" (13). Such a concept strips the source text of its old authority and releases translation from its former identity as derivative and from its old place in the shadows of literature.

The important role that translation has played in culture and literature down through the ages is now recognised. Translation is seen to be both a process and a product that enables the construction of culture (Cronin, 1996: 140). The significance of context to translation is recognised: as every translation is written and received in a context (Lefevere, 14), it always offers a number of readings: "Translation, like all re-writings, is never innocent. There is always a context in which the translation takes place, always a history from which a text emerges and into which a text is transposed." (Bassnett: 21).

As the work of Venuti demonstrates, the strong and intimate links between language and power often turn the discussion of translation into a power struggle in a cultural context (Bassnett: 21). Aixelá considers that an unstable balance of power is inherent to translation because of the dynamic nature of translation itself and the fluctuating nature of inter-cultural relationships (57). Translation has an inevitable politics in that it effects a comparative evaluation of the two cultures it connects (Mulhern: 164). This awareness has led to the view that translation is not about one culture, that it does not express one culture. Rather, it concerns two cultures at their point of contact. Bhabha identifies translation as the *locus* of cultural meaning:

We should remember that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national anti-nationalist histories of 'the people'. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves (Bhabha, 1994: 38-9).

These developments in translation theory over recent years offer useful tools with which to re-evaluate Flower's translation of Tomás' autobiography. His discussion of his approach to the task of translation, contained in his Foreword to *The Islandman*, reveals he based it on his symbiotic relationship with Tomás. He initiates his discussion of the decisions he made regarding the translation with remarks about his long experience with the author and the vivid picture of him conveyed in the book. In translating *An tOileánach*, Flower was attempting to "convey this double image" of the man he knew and the book in which he saw him so vividly pictured.

In his Foreword to *The Islandman*, we see Flower grappling with Schleirmacher's question: why and how do I translate? At the outset, he acknowledges the impossibility of achieving linguistic equivalence between Irish and English, languages which are "so widely separated in their mode of expression that nothing like a literal rendering from the one

language to the other is possible" (ix). Recognising that there is never just one way to effect a translation, he then proceeds to discuss his various options which, at first glance, are not too unlike Venuti's concepts of foreignisation and domestication. He quickly dismisses the option of foreignising the text for the English readership, considering and rejecting the use of a synthetic language, the "literary dialect" often used at that time to imitate Irish speech on the stage or in books. In this, Flower differs from other translators of his day, including George Thomson and Moya Llewellynn-Davies whose translation of Muiris Ó Súilleabhain's *Fiche Blián ag Fás* preceded his translation of *An tOileánach*. The sound reasons for his rejection of the foreignising option mode of translation lie in the cultural politics of the day and of the recent past. As we have seen, English literature had produced a distortion of Irish discourse that was boorish and foolish, liberally peppered with faux ethnic markers of the "begorrah" kind. The response of Irish cultural nationalists, in its attempt to rehabilitate the image of an Irish national character, produced a stage discourse of Irishness that, though less offensive than what it sought to correct, was equally distorting in its tweekness.

Flower spurns the charm of a literary dialect and the ready applause it meets with, saying that: "it does not to my ear however convey the character of the language as naturally spoken by those to whom it is their only speech" (x). By saying that the literary dialect renders "the effect of Irish speech" and that it has an "effect of great charm", Flower suggests that such a medium actually comes between the writer and the reader, impeding the reader's access to the text. He sees "something artificial" in such a dialect, a "suggestion of the pseudo-poetic", and considers it a medium incapable of conveying "the forthright, colloquial simplicity of the original of this book" (x). With these remarks, Flower makes it plain that he is seeking to produce an impression of transparency in his text and to allow the reader as much access to the author as he, as a translator, is able.

For similar reasons, he rejects the more sophisticated forms of literary English, choosing instead “to adopt a plain, straightforward style, aiming at the language of ordinary men who narrate the common experiences of their life frankly and without any cultivated mannerism” (x). In this he echoed Tomás himself who is said to have boasted that he wrote in a direct manner that any child of the Island could understand.

Recognising and regretting the loss of “the constant charm of Irish idiom, so delightful in the original”, he knew it would not be remedied by dressing the text up in stage make-up: “rouge is no substitute for a natural complexion” (x). With these remarks, Flower demonstrates his sensitivity to the shortcomings of both modes of translation: the “constant charm” of Irish idiom is inevitably lost to the domesticating mode and yet the foreignising mode could only produce a counterfeit version of Irishness. Flower’s rejection of cheap applause and easy charm, his decision not to make Tomás and his companions quaint or cute or charming for the English readership is the foundation of the integrity of his translation. It indicates the translator’s fidelity to his subject as well as to his text in that he chooses to represent its essence rather than to strive for an effect.

Flower’s unwillingness to exoticise the Islanders in his translation coupled with his obvious desire to write a fluent and transparent text combine to give the impression that he chose to domesticate Tomás’ original text. However, this impression is complicated somewhat by the complexity of Flower’s own cultural identity discussed earlier. An Englishman with Irish grandparents and Irish leanings, an academic said to have “gone native” on the Blaskets, Bláithín whose children attended the Island school, he was not making something foreign familiar to his English readers. Rather, he was making something familiar to him, familiar to others. In so doing, he eluded both categories described by Venuti. His place within the Blasket culture, his Blasket identity, his Blasket life, made him unable to take up either option

completely. It would have been alien to Flower to exoticise the culture to which he himself belonged. Similarly, it would have been equally impossible to domesticate a culture to which he belonged. In bringing the Tomás' autobiography and Blasket culture to an English readership, Flower showed himself to be truly a man of Bhabha's Third Space, that place where cultural meaning is found and where the burden of cultural meaning is borne. A true explorer of the Third Space, Flower achieved what Bhabha suggested was possible: he avoided political polarity and, "no longer his interpreter, but He", achieved the fusion of other and self.

Modern translation studies would see Flower's translation as a re-writing that mixes two cultures, or at the very least, provides a space where two cultures meet. Flower was not the only man in this Third Space. There was another translator there already. In the act of writing, Tomás had become not only the Island's first writer but its first translator as well. A man bridging two eras, he translated the Island's orature into literature, its voice into text, in order to preserve self first for its own sake and then to make it known to the Other. He turned the events, companions and surroundings of his life into the stuff of literature. As An Seabhac wrote, "Tomás made an enduring book of the story of his life". A translator in its most basic sense, he bore his story to safety with some urgency just before the culture from which it arose succumbed. The several phases of cultural production that called *The Islandman* into being bear out the view of Octavio Paz that we encounter the world as an ever-growing heap of texts "each slightly different from the one that came before it: translations of translations of translations" (1992: 154). He continues:

Each text is unique yet at the same time it is the translation of another text. No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation -- first from the nonverbal world, and then, because each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase (154).

From this point of view, Flower's translation is no less "original", no less "authentic" than the text Tomás produced.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, Flower's translation continues to meet with resistance despite the lack of evidence of any linguistic ineptitude or impropriety on his part and despite the fact that it offers a reading of the man, the culture and the book from a highly informed, privileged and sympathetic viewpoint. Such resistance overlooks the cultural context of cooperation in which it was written, circumstances which others believe produced "a masterpiece of sympathetic interpretation" (Bell: 363). It also overlooks the fact that, prior to translating the source text, Flower had recognised the need to preserve the Irish language of the Island and contributed significantly to the process, and so would not have wished to replace or obscure the source text with his translation. Even though it has always been more widely read than the Irish source text, his translation in no way eclipsed Tomás' writing as they each had their own readership. It must be acknowledged, happily or otherwise, that Flower's translation made Tomás known, not only to English readers in faraway places but also to the majority of Irish people within Ireland who had no Irish. Other explanations for the resistance to Flower's translation must be sought as it is not to be found in his text.

Ireland's cultural identity is complicated by the fact of there being two national languages (Consalvo, 1994: 305). The first official language, Irish, is used by a small minority of the population while the second language of the nation, English, is used by the vast majority (303). While some believe that the nation at large only makes a token use of Irish, others deny this strenuously. This fundamental disagreement has placed translation in an awkward cultural position. The desire to cultivate a distinctive modern Irish voice and to develop a modern Irish canon as part of a process of "national rejuvenation" (Ó Corráin, 1990: 99) brought the question into sharp focus at the time of Revival. The prevailing view of the day was that

“the aim of Irish letters . . . should be to undo the neglect of the past and express the real Ireland for her own people rather than exploit her for the gratification of a foreign audience.” (99).

Judging by extracts from several letters presented by Michael Cronin, (Cronin: 150-151), resistance to translation from Irish to English was a common stance in the early twentieth century. Richard Henebry wrote of an Irish text in 1909:

To a person whose mind is charged with English it is strange, uncouth and foreign. To one reared through Irish it is the same tune he has always heard; he knows it. But how to define its tone, its atmosphere for foreigners? It cannot be done, it is the other way, it differs in everything and entirely from the way of the strange people. Nor can it be translated (151).

Writing to Lady Gregory after the publication of her *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, Eoin MacNeill suggests that the Gaelic League view of translation was that it “depriv(ed) the Irish language of her sole right to express the innermost Irish mind.” (150). MacNeill had concerns of his own about translation from Irish into English:

Reading translations exposes to the danger of looking at things from the English standpoint; and it might be said that the better and more faithful a translation is the worse it is, for it will keep people from going to the original where alone the literature can be judged for what it is really worth (151).

It is to such views that one can trace the resistance that still impacts upon Flower's translation today. In contrast, Cronin himself describes translators as “inventive mediators (who) have shaped every area of Irish life for centuries, but (whose) role has been ignored” (Cronin: 1). He later describes translation as:

a meeting ground where all the peoples and languages of Ireland have gathered at one time or another in the island's history. Translation implies in both a geometrical and linguistic sense, movement, a resistance to fixity. Its momentum is dialogical. The contribution of translators to the languages, literatures and cultures of Ireland has been immense. It is a debt that is rarely acknowledged (6).

One must wonder if the negative attitudes to Flower's translation that linger are attitudinal remnants of some of the old notions of translation. Perhaps the preoccupation with finding or maintaining a distinctive Irish voice and the formation of an Irish canon bespeak a fear of the disruption of something precious, private and still fragile. Perhaps it is a refusal of the "dialogical" nature of translation that is problematic: an Irish identity predicated on its difference from Englishness probably allows no real desire for English understanding of something that has been read as an emblem of Irishness. It might be that such a reading will reveal troubling similarities as well as differences, as Lévi-Strauss so famously remarked:

Did not my mistake [...] lie in the belief that men are not always men? That some are more deserving of our interest and our attention because there is something astonishing to us in their manners, or in the colour of their skins? No sooner are such people known or guessed at, than their strangeness drops away, and one might as well have stayed in one's own village. (1961: 326-7).

Perhaps, although it is true that a culture shared is never diminished, there remains an unwillingness to gratify a foreign audience. It must be said, however, that the English-reading audience is growing less foreign every day.

Ireland's new, freely chosen identity as a member state of the EU offers an opportunity to reassert its old identity as a European country and to reconsider Ireland's national identity in broader terms than in opposition to its old enemy. It will also necessitate a willingness to embrace translation which has played a central role in the development of European culture, which has been described as a culture of translations (Lepenies, 1992: 14). Lepenies writes of the productive tension in this culture of translations that led to the development of a European consciousness while making the individuality of national cultures more visible. He quotes Hilaire Belloc's belief that the transnational unity of Europe was the direct result of every European cherishing the uniqueness of his own national culture.



Flower's translation can be seen as only one of many refractions of the culture in which Tomás lived and about which he wrote. There is much that can be said about the creativity of Tomás' enterprise which was called into question by An Seabhac, but that is a matter for another day. All that needs to be said here is that, even if one is in agreement with An Seabhac, the fact remains that Tomás chose to record certain events and not others, that he used certain words, not others, and thus offered his own refraction of his culture. A second refraction was commenced by a well-intentioned Brian Ó Ceallaigh, according to his own imperfect understanding of Tomás' language, a refraction mercifully cut short by his sudden departure from Ireland. It was further refracted through An Seabhac who used the control he was given by the author to bring the text into conformity with what he thought should have been written and, more often, what should not have been written. So we see that *The Islandman* is much more than a negotiation between two languages and two cultures. Here we have the culture of the Blasket Islands refracted through the culture of Ireland, its conventions and its needs and refracted again through language, and to some degree, the culture of England. We also have, in An Seabhac's editing, peasant culture subject to the agendas of Irish academe and Irish politics.

If we consider the final two refractions of island culture, that of An Seabhac and that of Flower, we see that one offers a correction of the author, the other an expression of the author. If the modern reader of Tomás has his approach to the author obscured, it is not only or mainly because of Flower's translation. The reader who approaches Tomás through the Irish language of the first and second editions faces many of the same impediments as the reader in English: neither had access to what Tomás wrote.

A denial of the bridge between cultures offered by Flower's translation would see Tomás and his book islanded forever, growing more ghostly as years go by. This is something

that Tomás himself would have regretted. It should be remembered that he was not translated against his will or in his absence; that he was impatient for Flower, who was delayed by illness, to finish the task; that he was pleased with the result. It should also be remembered that Tomás himself sent his book out into the world, an autographed copy to his son in America. The inscription in this copy that found its way from the author's hand to the New World shows that no loss of cultural identity attached to this event: Tomás comments on the specialness of such a gift to a son from a father, "and he an Islandman".

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **"Each With His Own Tune": The Personal Voice of Tomás O'Crohan**

In their exploration of the paratext that has long coloured the reading of Tomás' work and limited recognition of his literary identity, intention and achievement, the previous chapters have recast the events portrayed in the framing narrative as a series of dialogues that translated Tomás into the Islandman. While much of the dialogue that called the Islandman into being remained outside his pages, those pages nevertheless bear its imprint. These chapters reconsidered the impact of the persons, processes and philosophies that facilitated, mediated and constrained the production of Tomás' texts. They demonstrate the need to interrogate further Tomás' sense of agency in the production of his own texts and contest the impression one gathers from the paratext that the dialogues in which he was engaged were unequal. Like the latter-day "ancient" that he was, engaged in a dialogue with modernity that replicated the mythic dialogue at the heart of the *Acallam na Senórach*, Tomás negotiated a profound cultural shift. He brought the habits and practices of orality into contact with the page and mediated a cultural exchange between the oral tradition of the Island and literature. In doing so, he also moderated a dialogue between the Island and the wider world.

Dialogue implies voice and indeed there are many discussions of Tomás' voice in the critical literature. The commentary on voice expresses two broad, related themes. The first is that it represented something larger than, other than, the voice of Tomás himself. The second theme offers an understated and often grudging recognition of the individuality or personal quality of the voice. The earliest expression of these views is to be found in the writing of An Seabhac:

Nach fogair iontaiseach an smaoineamh é sin -- na mílte dár ndaoine romhainn a mhair is d'oibrigh is d'imigh arís i ndearmad na síoraíochta is nár fhág laoi ná litir ina ndiaidh orthu féin, ar an saol a chaitheadar, ar a saothar laethúil, ar a bhfáthaibh imní is áthats is bróin, ar a dtinteáin mar a mbídís féin is a mná is a gclann -- imithe gan fiú a n-ainm a shíniú i leabhar mor na beatha so? [...]

Ach ní raibh sé i ndán do Thomás Ó Criomhthain imeacht mar a ghluais a dtáinig roimhis. Dar Leat, ba gheall le hinspioráid ón tseanshaol san atá marbh a thug i gcomhar le chéile na nithe éagsúla a chuir i gcumas duine den dream deiridh den tseanaimsir sin an scéal tábachtach a scríobh sé orthu a chur le chéile. An saol dob aithnid dó agus dóibh sin, agus gur de é féin, thug Tomás Ó Criomhthain teanga dhó, thug sé cumas labharta dhó, níor bhalbh a thuilleadh é. Dar Leat, b'é bhí i dTomás' Ó Criomhthain insa ghnó ná athgin chorpartha de mhian d'fhás i slua san na marbh sa tsaoil eile a chuaigh roimhis san iarthar san le céad go leith bliain -- mian gearáin toisc a gcuimhne féin a dhul in éag a luaithe cuireadh na seacht sluaiste chré chaisle os a gcionn, agus mian fós chun a scéal a chur síos i leabhar mór na beatha ionas, mar a dúirt Tomás féin, 'go mbeadh cuimhne i mball éigin orthu, mar ná beadh a leithéidí arís ann' (1992: 198-199).

Isn't it an amazing thought -- the millions of our people before us who lived and worked and are lost in the annals of time, who never left a poem or even a letter behind them to tell of their lives, their daily routines, the reasons they experienced happiness or sadness, the homes they inhabited with their wives and children -- gone without having even signed their names on the great book of life ? [...]

But it was not to be the fate of Tomás Ó Criomhthain that he should go the same way as previous generations. You would think that he was inspired to write by the need to put together the various aspects of the life of this final generation of the old ways and lifestyle, that this was what got him to write this important work. The life he knew and that these people knew, he who was one of them gave a voice to these people -- he gave them the ability to speak, they were no longer muted. You would think that this work of Tomás Ó Criomhthain sprang from the dead generations in that western place for one hundred and fifty years, their frustration that their thoughts and minds were lost at burial, and his own desire to write his and their story in the Great Book of Life in order that, as he said himself, 'there will be a memory somewhere of them, because their like will never be seen again' (trans. De Paor).

In this passage, An Seabhac reiterates his identification of Tomás with a silent peasantry from whom he was distinguished only by the fact of his writing that was first

expressed in his Introduction to *An tOileánach*. It demonstrates again, that although An Seabhac was its champion, he continued to underestimate the cultural legacy of the oral tradition. His statement that the peasants left no poem or letter behind them overlooks the fact that although they left no written documents behind them, the peasants of the Gaeltacht left not just poems and songs to their descendants, but more importantly, the tradition of poems and songs as well. The passage also shows that An Seabhac continued to overlook the personal and individual voice Tomás inscribed in his texts in favour of a communal, representative voice that expresses a past and a present that he links with death. He represents Tomás as something very like a medium channelling the ancestors, his writing called into being by a call from the grave and motivated by a desire to give voice to the "dead generations". He conflates the life Tomás writes with the life of his community past and present. What he writes is "his and their story". An Seabhac again invokes mortality in relation to Tomás' writing when he describes the people to whom Tomás belongs and for whom he speaks as "this final generation". The voice An Seabhac encounters in Tomás' writing is thus the voice of the dead and the not yet dead, but not Tomás' own.

Danielle Jacquin also privileges the communal over the personal in her reading of Tomás' literary voice. Although she asserts a recognition of a fusion of a personal voice with a communal voice in Tomás' writing and considers this a source of literary merit in his texts, it is the communal voice that excites her greatest interest (1998). She reads into Tomás' act of writing the lending of his voice to a mute peasantry and so hears a collective or communal voice in his words. She hears it in his use of proverbial sayings, in his quotations from his ancestors, in his use of a "we" that most often signifies his whole community and in his use of the Irish habitual tenses which expresses custom and habit endlessly repeated. She also hears the voice of Tomás as mythic -- as representative of the traditions from which he

sprang. Jacquin describes his language in terms that imply something more than Tomás' own linguistic choice -- the *caoint na ndaoine* (language of the people). This in itself makes his voice somewhat more representative than personal and idiosyncratic -- indeed, Jacquin describes it as *le dialecte de la tribu*, the "dialect of the tribe" (17). The description of Tomás' voice in terms of the *caint na ndaoine*, reminds us that the Gaelic League, whose scholars and spokespersons had played important roles in bringing Tomás' pen to paper, had made a conscious and deliberate decision to adopt *caint na ndaoine* as the form of the Irish language on which they would base the anticipated modern literature in Irish. As Jacquin points out, seen in the light of the cultural politics of the day, writing in the *caint na ndaoine* was to commit an act of Irish patriotism: "*Employer ce dernier [caint na ndaoine], c'est croire au gaélique du monde dans lequel on vit, croire à son avenir, faire acte du patriotisme*" (17). Whether Tomás would have considered the language he used in his writing as his own or as *cainnt na ndaoine* is now a matter for speculation. Nevertheless, Tomás' voice came to be heard, immediately upon utterance, as the voice of his "silent" ancestors and of his unheard community, as the voice of a seasoned practitioner of the newly fashionable *cainnt na ndaoine* and as the voice of Gaelic League ideology.

In spite of her assertion that the fusion of Tomás' personal voice with a communal voice gives his work a literary significance, Jacquin's discussion of his personal voice gives the impression that there is very little expression of a personal voice. She asserts that a personal voice makes itself heard even though Tomás' autobiography was not intended to shed light on the events of the writer's life or on the "evolution" of his personality but was, she writes, like Péig Sayers' story, motivated by a desire to serve the Irish language. According to Jacquin, the "I" of the text is merely a vehicle that allows the depiction of the effects of the passage of time on the individual and on the society. It is not the site of a search for identity or

an exploration of ego. Her discussion of Tomás' personal voice describes it as serious, austere, devoid of poetry and fantasy and clinically objective. It is her view that Tomás does not reveal himself as an individual in his texts.

It is also often written that Tomás' voice is authentic, but much of the discussion of this view shows a similar equivocation as the discussion of his personal voice. While James MacKillop describes Tomás' voice as the most distinctive of the Blasket writers, he also describes Tomás as but one of "the poor farmer-fisherfolk of the islands", "speaking in their own voices", that brought the Blasket Islands into the literary history of Ireland (1987: 50). For MacKillop, the authenticity of his voice lies in the fact that the texts concern themselves with the portrayal of communal life rather than with the private concerns of an individual. Similarly, Jacquin attributes the authenticity of the voice to the fact that one can verify various matters related in the texts by comparing the versions of events offered by several Blasket authors, and by reference to independent sources rather than by attention to the voice itself (18-19). The authenticity that is much praised in Blasket literature is thus of an anthropological or ethnographic kind rather than the philosophical, religious or existential authenticity that might be read if the personal quality of the writing had been of more central concern.

It often seems that the personal voice of Tomás is heard emerging from behind, or in spite of something else, something larger than his own life. There seems to be two layers of voice, one almost obscured by the other. John Wilson Foster hears the personal voice of Tomás more clearly than most and comes closest to closing the gap between the representative and personal voices in Tomás' writing (1982: 51-52). He hears Tomás' voice as the ambiguous voice of an ancient man abruptly awakened to the imperatives and perils of modernity and to a new sense of self. But while he hears the highly personal and individual voice in this, Foster also hears it as the representative voice of an ancient who not only

wakens but articulates. The terms in which he describes this ambiguous voice are nonetheless well-chosen: it is, he writes, stern, circumspect, independent and individual, a voice of integrity (52).

The long preoccupation with the representative function ascribed to Tomás' texts and with the "authenticity" of the record encased in its pages has dominated and compromised the exploration of voice in Tomás' texts. Such exploration has been further inhibited by the frequent assertion of a "transparency" in the social record embedded in the texts. The reading of the texts for the "authentic", the "representative" and the "transparent" has had several effects. First, it undermined any search for the personal voice in the texts. Secondly, it fostered the implication that the author wrote without deliberate artistic intention, design or skill.

Tim Enright wrote that "living speech would be the hallmark", not just of Tomás' work, but of all the Blasket books (O'Crohan, 1986: 2). Although it is certainly true that many of the voices in Tomás' texts are vibrant and vital, what we have in his texts is not living speech but a literate and literary rendition of living speech, filtered not only through Tomás' memory but also through his creative sensibility and control. The voices in the texts and the dialogues in which they engage are artistic literary constructions that Tomás manipulates for his own literary purposes. It is in the matter of voice that the author's subtle, skilful artifice is at its peak, if not at its most obvious. His construction and deployment of voice is an artistic strategy by which he not only expresses his society, as is commonly observed, but also makes himself known. In addition to constructing and manipulating the voices of a legion of characters, Tomás also constructs a narrative voice which ages and evolves apace with the literary representation of his life. It is a personal voice that progresses gradually towards expression of the author's fear of oblivion and his desire for a personal relationship with his reader.



Mikhail Bakhtin pointed to the significance of voice in literature when he wrote that voice is the only means by which the narrator and other characters of a text can become known to the reader (Vice, 1997: 112). Although Tomás' well-known preference for concrete expression over abstraction would separate him from the theorising of Bakhtin, he nevertheless demonstrated an almost Bakhtinian awareness of the significance of voice in society and in literature that he demonstrates in several diverse ways within his texts. Not only does he exhibit skill and delight in his literary representation of the Island voices he has known, he also takes voice as one of his great themes, exploring its significance in relation to identity, its relationship with knowledge and wisdom, with strength and power. He demonstrates both the utility of voice and its occasional futility. Finally, he also writes of the power of voice to arouse a sense of the aesthetic in those who hear it, offering several instances of his own artistic, aesthetic response to voice.

Of Bakhtin's theories on voice, those of greatest interest to a discussion of the writing of Tomás are his theories of polyphony and monologism. In her most useful and succinct discussion of these two modes of voice, Sue Vice defines polyphony as "multi-voicedness" (113); she also offers Roger Fowler's description of it as a musical metaphor that "refers to the co-presence of independent but interconnected voices" (112). The voices in a polyphonic text are dialogic in nature; conversely, dialogism is impossible in the absence of polyphonic voice. A polyphonic text shows "several consciousnesses" meeting as equals, engaged in dialogue (Morson and Emerson, 1990: 238).

Vice's discussion of polyphonic voice demonstrates that the author's management of the voices in the text is his key to his construction of character. There is what she calls "a central democratic equality of utterance" (112) in a polyphonic text that has, among others, two important effects. First, the narrator of a polyphonic text is not the omniscient source of

supplementary information about the other characters or of information withheld from the other characters, but a character in the text on an equal footing with other characters. As Morson and Emerson point out, the author plays two roles in such a text: he sets up the world of the text as a world in which several consciousnesses meet and enter a dialogic relationship and then, in a quite separate role and function, he enters into the dialogue he has brought into being (239). The second effect of “the democratic equality of utterance” is that the voices of the characters of such texts, the main source of the reader’s knowledge about them, seem to be so autonomous that it is easy to forget that their utterance is indeed the literary creation of the author. Such characters can seem to be the authors of their own world views and discourses, rather than the product of the author’s “artistic finalizing vision” (Bakhtin, 1973: 3), and allow the reader to forget that the author is still the creator of the text. The power to fashion the text is still his and the polyphonic voices given play in his text are but part of his artifice, as are the encounters with and between them (Morson and Emerson: 239). Polyphony is thus not what it seems but a literary fabrication of such vigour that it hides the creative and controlling hand of the author.

The “multi-voicedness” of the polyphonic text is replaced by the lone voice of the narrator in a monologic text. While many voices in a polyphonic text have “the power to mean”, in a monologic text, this power belongs to the author alone (239). As Vice puts it, there is only one cognitive subjectivity in monologic discourse in which everything else becomes “merely objects of the cognition” (113). The author’s ideology dominates the monologic text and provides it with a unity of vision (238), his “truth” informing its entire structure (238). The author’s concept of “truth” allows no other (234); it does not treat as equal any other “truth” explored in the text (238). The author controls all points of view expressed in the text, mediating between characters and readers as he sees fit (238). But just as polyphony is an

effect produced by a certain literary intent and artistic dexterity, monologism is a literary impression that is qualified by the fact that it is not truly possible, as any author's use of any language or style assumes the existence of a listener or a reader (Newton, 1997: 2). Though polyphony and monologism are essentially impossible phenomena, they are useful concepts that allow fresh thought on the matter of Tomás O'Crohan's "voice". An examination of his management of voice in both *Island Cross-Talk* and *The Islandman* reveals Tomás to be a highly skilled and dexterous literary craftsman.

As its name suggests, *Island Cross-Talk* is a text replete with voices. It contains a collection of short pieces, some short essays, some dialogue, some pieces in which narrative and dialogue combine, and one dialogue formatted as a small drama. Viewed as a whole, this collection demonstrates Tomás' artistic versatility. With this text, the author also initiates his thematic consideration of voice, commenting frequently on the many modes and functions of voice, on its power and its limits. He points to voice as a preserving, archival medium in the oral tradition when he notes that many a deed lives on in the conversation of the Island for a very long time. He celebrates conversation as one of the special delights of Island life and shows its many social functions. He shows for instance that it provided sport and entertainment that helped the Islanders through tough times and bad weather, as we see when Séamus and Séamaisín entertain their neighbours with a funny quarrel when sheltering from a storm. "Everyone in the glen burst out laughing and, though the shower was hard and heavy, we never noticed it passing, over the sport with the pair of them" (117). The value of conversation as welcome distraction is also demonstrated on many occasions, often provided by Tadgh the Joker. "Tadgh the Joker spent a good stretch of today here with me in my own house and I didn't mind how long it was, for every syllable that passes his lips whiles away the time for you, no matter whether you are burdened with worry or free from care (129). He

shows "story" to be even more significant than mere entertainment or distraction. It is a nourishing and essential resource, "carried home" in one story as food or fuel is in others (117). Finally, Tomás also underscores the power of voice to awaken a sense of the aesthetic in a susceptible spirit such as his own with several stories that show him stopped in his tracks by Island voices.

The language of the dialogues in *Island Cross-Talk* is very different from the language of the narrative passages though both modes of writing are marked with a characteristic pithy understatement. The voices of the Islanders that we "hear" in the dialogues are individualised in that they each express the concerns that characterise their owners. They do, however, share many common linguistic features as one would expect in members of such an enclosed community. The dialogues abound with exclamations, invocations, blessings, curses, flattery and insults. The punctuation of the dialogues gives the clue to the variety and balance in the mode of expression in Island discourse. Questions, statements, exclamations, prayers and curses are all woven into a fabric that gives a vivid sense of the personalities of the speakers and of the Island community itself. The voices are affectionate, combative, humorous, dour, competitive, superstitious, religious, fearful and fearless. They are also often ironic: in particular, affectionate terms of address such as "my sweet man" are most often sharply ironic as they often precede a tongue-lashing of the said sweet man.

The voice that is most often and most clearly heard in the text is aged and masculine. Tomás, aged and masculine himself, plays two parts in the text: he is a character, a man of the Island among his peers as well as the author narrator. When he first appears among his fellow Islanders, (14), he insinuates himself discreetly into the text, his appearance in the text being similar to his entry into a room that Flower described in *The Western Island*, discussed in a previous chapter. Functioning as a foil to Tadgh, he only has four words to say in this

piece. A man of few words, he is often the man with the last word on whatever is being discussed but just as often the man who is proved wrong. On one occasion, he shows himself foolishly on the shore to gather food without a pot to contain what he finds (109). On another, he is reproached for his foolish question about the zealous work on the island (115), and on another he shows himself wrong about the melting snow at the end of winter (118).

As the narrator of the text, his measured voice speaks in contrast to the extravagance of the language used in the dialogues. Discussion of character or event and elaboration of theme are written efficiently and plainly, the spare prose giving a sense of the bare beauty and hardness of the place and circumstance. His narrative voice discusses such diverse matters as nature, world affairs, Irish politics, his neighbours and, less commonly, his own life. While the views this voice expresses are often those commonly held on the Island, they also often reveal the gap between Tomás and his fellows. His narrative voice is as varied in tone as the voices of other Islanders: it is by turn profound, sensitive, philosophical, imaginative, gentle, harsh, judgemental, approving, paternalistic, understanding, antifeminist, respectful, patronising, hectoring, boasting and modest. The variety of voices in the text exhibits the skilled versatility for which Tomás was famed in other areas of his life. It is this narrative voice that brings us closest to Tomás.

When the voices of these texts are considered in relation to Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, it is clear that *Island Cross-Talk* is a polyphonic text. This is borne out to a certain degree by the literary representation of Tomás' fallibility which allows the possibility of other points of view being represented in the text. The text also contains a remark by Tomás that suggests the possibility and likelihood of a polyphonic text: "on days when some of us meet together, everyone voices his own opinion. There are some with something worthwhile to say and those who rattle on but say nothing." (117).

The voices of the text, however, appear to speak with an autonomy that even exceeds that which Bakhtin requires of a polyphonic text. The frequent fierceness of the exchanges between Islanders, the vehemence, the extravagant language, the outbursts, the lack of restraint as they battle each other, combine to create the illusion that the characters of the text are autonomous people. Their language and their voices seem at times not only beyond the control of the author narrator but also outside the control of the speakers themselves, so seemingly unruly is their dialogue. The creating hand of the author is indeed well-hidden.

Tomás' exploration of voice is not confined to the literary representation of his characters and himself. He also comments specifically and explicitly on the matter of voice many times in *Island Cross-Talk*. In a story that turns on the difficulties caused in a bilingual community when the characters each speak a different language and so cannot communicate, Tomás remarks that the lack of language makes fools of men and that a man without language is like a man in darkness (55). These remarks point to his awareness of language as the means by which experience is mediated and knowledge and wisdom are gained. Those of us who have never spent a night in a *naomhóg* in the darkness of the Blasket Sound, can but faintly appreciate the power of the image of darkness that Tomás uses to describe existence without meaningful voice. It is an image of a most profound danger and deprivation.

Although he expresses a deep fascination with voice in its many modes, Tomás is also very discerning and refuses to lend his ear to certain forms of discourse. He stays aloof from the Island parliament debate as he disapproves of the standard of what passes as debate (75 -- 6). He finds arguing voices an incomprehensible, foreign-sounding gabble (94). He also sometimes finds Island chatter tiring (78).

Tomás comments directly on the voices of some of his neighbours, the first being the loud, booming, bumptious voice of Tadgh the Joker who even whistles loudly (154). In his

passages that concern Tadgh, Tomás shows that in the matter of voice, volume does not necessarily equate with power or effectiveness: Tadgh's voice does not prevail over his wife's in an argument and it does not prevail over the succession of asses he can neither train nor command. Telling of a day of great fun on the island, fun provided by Tadgh and his "half-blind black ass", Tomás writes:

they have no control over him at all by now, because his master is like an army major or an admiral on the high seas, his bark is so harsh. The result is that the ass, even if Tadgh is saying his prayers, senses some threat to himself and stands shivering in his skin in dread of him (27).

There is more to Tadgh's voice than boisterousness however. Tomás shows it to be sometimes trivial (105), sometimes "a ranting commotion" (163), sometimes expressing weighty concerns about the changes in the world that they were living through (119) and sometimes subdued by worry (177). In his creation of the colourful Tadgh, known to the reader only by his voice, Tomás shows himself to be a skilled writer able, not only to vary and modulate the voices of his characters, but also to use his representation of their voices as the key to his characterisation. He also takes advantage of his character's voice by using it to further the narrator's discourse on voice, commenting for instance on the folly of his boisterousness.

Tomás also discusses the voice of the Island king several times in *Island Cross-Talk*. It is a voice that stands in marked and deliberate artistic contrast to the loud, blustering voice of Tadgh. The king is a fine figure of a man with a voice to match (68). He is a man with two languages and is able not only to command people but also, unlike the hapless Tadgh, able to command animals. Tomás' own respect for the king shines through in "The King's Speech" which illustrates the authority of the king's voice on the Island. So profoundly did his speech affect some who heard it, they thought the king had heard a voice from Heaven and shivered

in fearful response (74). It is this authoritative voice that represents the Islanders in business on the mainland, and delivers news from the mainland back to the Island; it is his voice that reads aloud the mail that he brings in to the Island along with the newspaper.

While the voice that dominates *Island Cross-Talk* is aged and masculine, the voices of women, though less frequently heard, are by no means inconsequential. They are strong and express many of the same concerns as those that weigh on the men of the Island. In a story of two parts, one particularly strong-voiced woman outdoes Tomás in the matter of early rising and goes on in the second half to curse her husband for bringing her bad news (123). The voice of Nell is also very strong: not only does she hold her own in banter with Tadgh, she also speaks up on behalf of four old women whose suffering had been forgotten in the talk of the distress on the Island caused by a tobacco shortage (181). We hear the voices of young women, similar to the voices of young women of other times and other places, discussing marriage prospects and body image (58) and the voice of an older woman, Síle, sadly agreeing with Tomás' rude remark that the bloom has left her cheeks (140). We hear Péig and Máire discussing the anxiety being felt on account of the shortage of food on the Island and God's Providence, with Péig's famous faith having the last word (44). A similarly pious encounter between Tomás and a woman praying for fine weather for crossings to and from the mainland results in Tomás showering her in a praise he rarely gives to women (206).

Tomás' own voice in conversation with women is most often paternalistic, quite often anti-feminist, sometimes insulting and hectoring, rarely generous or praising. Several times he comments on the voices of women, usually to remark that they talk too much, and usually at the well. In the throes of one such discussion, he remarks that the language of women is quite unintelligible to him: "[...] although I was not too far away from them at the time and they were speaking Irish, I understood their chatter no more than if they had come from France." (69).



Another similar passage, also decrying the talk at the well, ends with a surprising remark: "I suppose if six of the best of these women were in Dáil Éireann it would not prove so hard to make the laws of the country as it is" (82). No doubt the remark is laden with irony but I wonder whether its target was the women or the Irish parliamentarians.

In spite of his inability to comprehend the talk of women, Tomás nevertheless responds to the female voice as he shows when he recounts his several experiences of it stopping him in his tracks. The first of these occurs on a beautiful, fine winter's day when, bored with his prayerbook, he encounters a group of youthful girls and boys, the girls dancing and the boys playing football. Only one girl was singing for the dancers: "Facing each group of dancers, a young lass sat on a wall lilting for them. A man of discernment would travel far to listen to them, their voices were so sweet" (155). Tomás' use of number here, his shift from singular to plural, indicates he is not only responding to the singing voice here but that he is also moved by the sounds of youthful enjoyment as the young people dance and play. In an effort to describe the strength of his response to the experience, Tomás, a man of deep religious faith and reverence, writes: "I suppose, may God forgive me, if I had gone to that point first, I would be without rosary or prayer out of my little book that day" (155). This anecdote gives us so much more than a little scene drawn from Island life. It also gives us something of Tomás himself, adding a layer to the reader's sense of who the author narrator might be. The anecdote does more than demonstrate something of his artistic temperament and sensibility artistic however. In his representation of his response to this aesthetic experience as being so strong that it overcomes his customary fidelity to religious duty, Tomás expresses the centrality of the aesthetic to his experience of life. So significant is the aesthetic to him that it either supplants or supplements Tomás' experience of the spiritual through his religious practice.

A similar story is recounted almost at book's end when Tomas writes of being stopped from his work by a voice sounding in his ear, "a voice that soon made me lay aside the shovel and brought my work to a stop" (200). As Tomás frequently draws attention to his work ethic in both texts and shows that it is only in rare circumstances that he allows his work to be interrupted, this story again attests to Tomás' almost involuntary deep response to the aesthetic. He quotes lines from the song that was being sung by three groups of four young women, each with a white kerchief under her arm:

"I'd grant her the palm of all beauty,  
But for Ireland I'd not tell her name".

This passage has the air of a set-piece about it, with the use of the number twelve, the touch of the white kerchieves and the wholesome separation of the sexes, prefiguring the "romping of comely maidens" of an Ireland DeValera had not yet dreamed of. If it is, as I guess, that with this anecdote, Tomás is telling us about an event that may or may not have happened, it becomes clear that what is being conveyed in this piece is something about Tomás himself. He tells us that he is so taken by the singing that "whatever the state of my old bones I would have been happy to follow them for three miles". Tomás, the champion of hard work, underscores the power of voice over him when he adds that he managed only a little work that day. The man who would only allow his work on land or sea to be briefly interrupted by a death in the family or the wider community, would gladly lay his work down when his sense of the aesthetic was aroused.

Tomás' sense of the aesthetic is also often associated with the natural world. His discussion of voice is so frequently embedded in a contemplation of nature that it suggests a dialogue between the Islanders and nature itself. A second encounter with youthful singing voices expresses this dialogic relationship. It concerns some little girls who take turns to sing

verses from a song in a journal of the Gaelic League when they are visiting Tomas. Singling one girl out as the best singer, he writes:

...she sang them exquisitely from the page and to exactly the right air. It would be hard to find a girl so young who would be more gifted for singing the verses. That is no wonder, for it is the sound of Gaelic that filled her ears as soon as she appeared in the world and, from then on, it was the roar of the sea and the moaning of the north wind that entered her head through both ears day and night (166).

The sea and the north wind, the constant companions of the Islanders, are voiced beings that utter, filling the ears of Island people and endowing their voices with special qualities.

The dialogic relationship between the Islanders and nature is again underlined in a passage that I believe to be the most beautiful of Tomás' published writings, "A Fine day in March" (73). It describes his stroll around his "native place" on the first summery day in months. As in many other passages in the text, a change in the weather or season moves Tomás to a contemplation of nature which in turn gives way to a reflection on the power of God. This is a common pattern in Tomas' mode of thought: the contemplation of a scene or phenomenon of nature often leads him into a consideration of divine nature or of the human condition.

Many signs were visible to me now that had been hidden by the winter. The little birds were skimming the waves, each with his own tune. Anyone would say they were a small shoal of people just let out of a college of music. The usual fish of the sea -- the fish always there during their season -- were venturing to raise their heads out of the water from time to time, so that you would imagine they were greeting one another. Indeed, who dare say otherwise? Is not the same Master over them and ourselves? (73).

Tomás and his fellow Islanders read nature for its signs, its language. They are able to do so as they are part of it themselves. This piece is especially interesting in that it offers a reversal of Synge's response to voice. While Synge heard the voices of the Islanders as part

of nature, their talk as one with the crying of gulls and the braying of donkeys, Tomás portrays the voices of nature as being as laden with meaning as the human voice. In this beautiful passage, Tomás blurs the boundaries between man and nature: the birds resemble a "shoal" of people, a collective noun usually applied to neither man nor bird, but to fish. The birds are raising their musical voices, joyful in escaping confinement, like students let out of school, and like Tomás himself, out and about again after the confinement of the harsh winter months. Fish, not normally known for their ability to communicate, leap from their natural place to express their joy and greet each other. The voices of the fish and the birds may not be denied. They come from the same Master that gives Tomás his voice. And here, in this passage, they are not just the voice of nature but the voice of Tomás as well: they are not just signs in nature that he is reading, they are the voice of his experience.

The voices inscribed in Tomás' texts reflect the fact that Tomás and his neighbours lived not only in nature but also under nature. There were extreme circumstances that occurred on the Island that profoundly affected the human voice in very particular ways. Tomás writes of a time when three successive days and nights of blinding fog prevented some men of the Island from getting back from the mainland and their relatives from tracking their progress across the sea (133). Nature was depriving those who waited in the fog of both knowledge and sight. The third night had their relatives on the Island still unaware of their fate and growing ever more fearful. From the dense fog that encompassed everything came the sound of a keening voice, a ghostly voice grieving a death not yet certain. A voice of great import and great impact, a voice without body, without any other form of presence, it was a pure and powerful expression of what Island life often entailed. It mocked the voices of the occasional visitors who came, like the visiting priest on fine, calm days and pronounced the Island a very fine place indeed (122).

The futility of voice in the face of calamity is also discussed in a passage about a gale over the Island that blew outhouses, rooves, livestock and possessions from the Island. Its severity rendered mankind powerless and useless, leaving no alternative but to sit it out (185). The voice we hear is a useless voice, shouting ineffectively into the eye of the storm, asking for help no-one can give, speaking words no-one can hear. The same gale has a woman in her cottage on her knees praying while her husband whimpers in the depth of their cupboard.

These passages demonstrate that Tomás expresses the relationship between the Islanders and nature in terms of voice. He uses strategies of voice and discussions of voice to demonstrate his own place within nature as an Islandman, to show that the same nature that makes man's voice eloquent in joy can also leave it mute with pain, fear and sorrow. He shows that the voice of the Islandman is stilled by grief. The keen was permitted to the women. Tomás writes, when he tells of the death of Péig Sayers' son in a fall from a cliff similar to the fall that had killed his own son some years before, that "there was silence in our house as the sorrow was too great over the way he died" (79). Even Tadgh's voice is subdued when his son is missing, quietened by the sorrow he feared was coming his way (177).

Although Tomas' second book, *The Islandman*, is a very different work, it has certain things in common with *Island Cross-Talk*. Again, the subject matter sprang from the hitherto hidden life of the Blasket Islands. It was composed and transmitted in the same way as the earlier book, a few pages at a time to Brian Kelly and, later, to An Seabhac. The similarities between them are attested to by the fact that there was some confusion as to which text "owned" a few loose pages, as the final part of *Island Cross-Talk* were bundled in with the early parts of *The Islandman* (Ó Coileáin: 235). Perhaps it was what they had in common or an expectation of "more of the same", coupled with Brian Ó Ceallaigh's infelicitous handling of the early pages of the second work, that led to An Seabhac's uncertainty. Tomás himself,

however, was clear that they were very different works and wrote explicitly of his conscious and deliberate separation of the two undertakings:

Dúirt sé (Brian Kelly) gur shaor cloiche me féin agus go mbíonn an chloch chúinne curtha roimis an gcuid eile. [...]. Dob é an chéad rud do dheineas ná an compas do chur ina shuí agus na clocha cúinne do tharrac amach chuinn ná beadh aon bhaint ag an saothar do bheadh tharam leis an saothar do bhí romham. Do thosnaíos ar mo scéal féin Meitheamh 1922 agus do leanas air go Meitheamh 1924 (Seán Ó Coileáin: 235).

This translates as follows:

He (Brian Ó Ceallaigh) told me I was a stonemason and that the cornerstone should be established before my work could begin. [...]. The first thing I did was to situate the compass and remove the cornerstones, so that there would be no connection between the work I had completed and the work I had yet to complete. I began writing my autobiography in June 1922 and I continued to June 1924 (trans. Áine de Paor, Sydney, 2001, 3).

The author's words show his clear intention to embark on a new and separate task, a task that would take him into a new genre and require of him, for the first time in his writing life, a continuous narrative. They also show an evolution in his purpose from one text to the other. Although an autobiographical persona is inscribed in *Island Cross-Talk*, it is as a more explicit and deliberate telling of his own life that Tomás embarks upon in the writing of *The islandman*. These new intentions and new narrative form result in a discernible shift in voice.

The text is dominated by a narrative voice that is, like the dominant voices of *Island Cross-Talk*, aged and masculine. It differs from the dominant voices of the earlier text in that it asserts an overt presence in the text, reminding us from time to time of the author at the controls. This is a departure from *Island Cross-Talk* where, for the most part, the controlling hand of the author remains hidden from view in exuberant polyphony. On more than one occasion in *The Islandman*, Tomás writes: "I remember..." (74) or: "I remember it still...", asserting the presence of the narrator in the present while recalling people or events of the

past. He several times draws deliberate attention to the authorial presence in the text, with remarks such as “this very day of writing” (110) and “I’ve already said in this book...” (117). With his remark, “looking round me in the year 1888” (167), he locates his story in a time and a place and puts himself squarely at its centre.

The narrative voice of the Islandman openly asserts its control of the text at several points. Tomás opens his third chapter with “I may as well give some brief account here of the way we managed things in this Island when I was young...” as though it were he, and not An Seabhac, who had thought to include this subject matter. This chapter seems to interrupt the flow of the narrative, and its topic is something that An Seabhac says he had to ask for (O Coilean, 254). At another point, Tomás makes clear his authority over his characters and his own role as something quite like a puppet-master or a master-of -- ceremonies with “I must leave them now to rub along together till my story brings me back to them again” (64). This posture of the author narrator draws deliberate attention not only to his own presence in the text but also to the fact that what he is inscribing is a literary artifice of which he is in control. In similar vein later in the text, while discussing the life of his brother and his family in America, Tomás writes: “I don’t mean to spend much of my story talking about them, but ...” (171), indicating somewhat ironically that he is simultaneously in control of his text yet unable to control of its contents. It is a strategy reminiscent of the effect achieved in *Island Cross-Talk* where the rambunctious voices of his characters appear to be beyond the control of the author narrator. While the contradiction in the narrative posture Tomás has adopted here expresses well the circumstances in which Tomás was living in those days -- while Tomás’ thought that he was managing the relationship with his brother, it was his brother who was in fact taking charge (172) -- it also serves a literary purpose and produces a literary effect. Even as he asserts his control of the text, he also endows the narrative voice with an apparent naïveté

and guilelessness that gives the impression that what we are getting is a straightforward, transparent record of the author's reminiscences as they occur. This serves not only to hide the author's controlling hand but also to encourage the reader's belief that what he is reading is an unrestrained, unvarnished "truth", a belief essential to the success of an autobiographical project.

The narrative voice differentiates itself from Tomás, the character and hero of the text who is even addressed by name in one conversation reported in the text (128). As with the Tomás of *Island Cross-Talk*, Tomás the Islandman is a fallible character, his imperfections exposed by the author narrator. The first of his speech acts to be recorded in the autobiography is the lie he told to get his sister Nora into trouble (6). He is sometimes wrong about things and he is sometimes afraid (122). Rare though it is, he writes of his shame at having passed out in the canoe after drinking something, leaving his brother to save them both from a storm (175).

Unlike the narrator, Tomás the character is not always in charge: he defers to the judgement of his sister in regard to the match he should make and later, defers to his brother in work matters for the sake of peace. The resentment he nursed on account of both of these events is clear to the reader, but perhaps not to the narrator, who seems most interested in illustrating the forbearance his character showed in acquiescing. The narrator also seems oblivious to his hero's obsequious reactions to certain outsiders that he recognises as people of importance, such as the captain or crew of sailing ships that pass by the Blasket, and the parents of Eileen Nicholls who drowned with his son, Donal. There is something less than heroic in the exaggerated courtesy he displays in his dealings with these people which stands in undignified contrast with the roughshod way he deals with and judges many of his fellow-Islanders. It is a behavioural echo of his preoccupation with what other people see when they



look at him and his fond imaginings about what others must be saying about him and his brother, or about him and the other Islanders that was first expressed in the story of his first work boots (44). The narrative voice also often distinguishes between Tomás then and Tomás now. In his telling of his young life, he more than once deflates the self-important young boy that he was, gently and affectionately mocking his tendency to pomposity (74). With occasional phrases such as “nothing mattered I thought, so long as I could have the turf cut...” (92), the narrator lets it be known that his thinking has changed since those early days of his life.

The controlling and dominating voice of the narrator has a profound impact on other voices in the text. It is a filter through which all other voices are heard. Other voices are heard only at a tangent to the narrator’s story of his own life and as they impact upon him, and are neither rounded nor autonomous. These voices never reach the reader unmediated as the voices of *Island Cross-Talk* seem to. This, combined with the darker material of the autobiography make it inevitable that, for the large part, the voices of *The Islandman* lack the liveliness of the characters of the earlier book.

While Tomás uses both dialogue and narrative in each of his two books, the ways in which he uses these forms differ widely from text to text. The dialogues in *Island Cross-Talk* were often shaped and balanced to stand alone and complete while nevertheless contributing to the organic wholeness of the text. The dialogues inscribed in *The Islandman*, on the other hand, are neither as tailored nor as discrete but embedded in and dependent on the narrative of the text for part of their meaning.

In *Island Cross-Talk*, the dialogue is sometimes employed to delineate character, sometimes to showcase the Islanders’ delight in wordplay and sometimes to demonstrate Island philosophy or coping mechanisms. As we have seen, the voices in these dialogues are

abundant, varied and autonomous. Dialogue between characters takes a different form in *The Islandman*, and is used more sparingly, less frequently, as the text progresses. The speech of the Islanders represented in *The Islandman* is less peppery and nuanced than the dialogues of *Island Cross-Talk*. As Tomás moves more deeply into the story of his own life there is a gradual but discernible stilling of these external voices.

Dialogue is put to a variety of purposes in the autobiography and reflects a variety of deliberate artistic choices made by Tomás to create various effects and prompt a variety of responses from his readers. First, the purpose of dialogue sometimes seems to be purely literary, to provide some variety in the format of the text or to add a splash of colour. Such dialogues reflect a craftsman's attention to form in his literary work. Secondly, some dialogues seem to be written as representative or typical conversations that Tomás remembers or imagines remembering. The speech of his mother for example, when she offers food to her scholarly brood during their school lunch break is the speech of the pragmatic and caring character that Tomás has drawn and was probably representative of the speech of many Island women during the school lunch break. The speech he puts in the mouth of his mother on these occasions could have been written by any script-writer for any mother character. Finally, some conversations are recalled and recorded in direct speech because of their singular significance to the telling of Tomás' life, the direct speech being a dramatic representation of the memorable-ness of the moment. His recollection of a remark made by his mother provides an instance of this: "He's young, and learning's to be got in his day, and he can stay at school till he's picked up all there is there." (19). His rendition of this remark in direct speech, imitating a verbatim recall of the event, lends a dramatic edge to the moment that indicates its significance to Tomás. It was significant because the matter of education was close to his heart and the promise of the words was unfulfilled.

A conversation between Tomás and his father late in the text, where his father's voice was rarely heard, is similarly rendered in direct speech to convey its enduring significance in Tomás' memory:

'Father,' I said to him, 'wasn't I thinking that it was in the little field you were since you had your morning meal?'  
'I don't hanker after it much,' said he.  
'But you had a great fancy for it at first.'  
'I had, but I don't feel like that now. I shan't see a potato come up in that field.'

There are many things that we do not heed until it is too late.  
And after my father was buried I regretted that I hadn't questioned him and asked him whether he had seen or heard anything in the field when he visited it. No doubt, something of the kind happened to him, considering that he dated his life's end so accurately. (168).

Dialogue between characters, represented in direct speech, is used more freely in the early sections of the book than in the later parts. In these earlier pages, the recollected happiness of his early childhood is expressed in the robust and affectionate voices of his parents, his siblings, his friends and neighbours. The conversations between his parents are good-natured and their words to him are kind and nurturing. Laughter between them and around them is reported on several occasions. His father's voice is kind and protective (12), and occasionally conspiratorial as he helps Tomás evade his mother's reprimand (11).

In spite of his admission in *Island Cross-Talk* that he finds the talk of women foreign and unintelligible, we see in *The Islandman* that this was not always so, for the first voices heard in this text belong to women. The narrator's initial descriptions of himself as "the scrapings of the pot" and "the old cow's calf" (1) echo the voice of his neighbour, the grey woman, and reflect the lasting impact of her voice on his childish ears. The significance of her voice in the life of Tomás is reflected in the fact that the first direct speech in *The Islandman* is hers (2). Her tale of the wheat ship initiates Tomás into the oral traditions of the Island and her view that the ship wrecked on the Island was sent by God to save the Islanders is reiterated

several times as part of Tomás' childhood learning (5, 10). The keening voice Tomás hears more than once in the grey dawn is hers; it awakens in him a sympathy that he rarely expresses in either text (52). It is her voice that is heard alerting the Islanders to the threat of invasion one such morning (52), the use of direct speech to narrate this last event communicating the shock and the immediacy of the threat. His mother's voice is reported more than it is heard. Tomás expresses his memory of her mostly in terms of her fine, strong appearance and in terms of her actions and habits. We see her often but rarely hear her voice; when we do, it is temperate, sensible and authoritative (13-14). Her voice is not heard again after Tomás leaves his childhood behind.

Two female voices of central significance to Tomás' life story are never heard. The first belongs to his sister, Maura, who stymies the match that Diarmid has all but made for Tomás with the girl from the Inis, Tomás' first love. Her voice does not speak but is reported by the narrator in terms that do not conceal Tomás' enduring bitterness over the affair. She was "like a woman reciting a litany, till she had the whole lot of us tame as a cat" (145). The second and the more significant of the voices we never hear is that of his wife, Maura Keane. The match with her is accepted with a heavy heart, there is no courtship and the description of the wedding festivities is anticlimactic. There is no doubt that this is the point at which the voices of women become unintelligible to Tomás, as from this moment on they are all but silenced. The author is able to exert a power that the Islandman himself could not.

Of the other voices that colour the narration of Tomás' childhood, the King's is most frequently heard. His presence in the text demonstrates Tomás' discernment in matters of character and his capacity for enduring friendship. His voice is sometimes used to express childish wonder at things seen for the first time on the Island. He answers Tomás' astonishment at the strange language he was hearing at school with an admission that he

does not know what the “gibberish” is either but “I fancy it’s a sort of talk nobody will ever understand around here” (16). A conversation between Tomás and the King demonstrates the amused wonder of all the little scholars at the sight of the school inspector with four eyes (38). The depth of their friendship is expressed in Tomás’ remark, “[...] for I knew his voice better than any of the visitors to our house” (62).

The strongest voice in the text, apart from Tomás’ own, that of his uncle Diarmid, peppers the account of Tomás’ adolescence and manhood. As often as not, Diarmid speaks with a booming, boisterous voice, not unlike Tadgh’s voice in *Island Cross-Talk*. It is a voice that is sometimes boastful, antifeminist and insensitive, sometimes full of frivolity and rakishness. The strength of this voice in Tomás’ text reflects the significance Tomás attached to his uncle’s words in life and, indeed, it is a voice that speaks at many important moments in Tomás’ life and from which Tomás accepts counsel and draws comfort. It is Diarmid that speaks up for a match with the girl he knows Tomás loves; his is the voice that announces the death of Tomás’ mother in the cold hour of dawn and comforts him so many times after the many deaths in his family. Tomás also speaks of his respect for Diarmid’s voice on matters of the sea. Even so, it is a voice that is reported as often as it is heard speaking for itself.

The scattering of Tomás’ childhood family is shown to result in a muting of voice, in a move towards silence. The sombre mood of the new life is marked with a change in voice within the text:

You see how soon we were scattered! The merriment, the jokes, the fun that never ceased -- before meals, at meals, and after meals -- it was all gone now, and not a sound was to be heard but the voice of the old hag opposite and the droning of Bald Tom (65).

This passage prefigures an even more profound shift towards silence that accompanies Tomás’ rendering of his many family tragedies into text. Other voices, apart from those of Diarmid and Pats are heard less often in the text after Tomás’ marriage and are

subdued by the narrative voice. The voice of Tomás' wife is never heard and his own voice is never heard speaking to her or to his children. Nor are the voices of his own children ever heard. In spite of Tomás' statement that the day on the hill with the poet marked the day his life changed, his manipulation of voice within the text itself makes it clear that it was the day of his marriage when everything changed for Tomás. His account of this day is the fulcrum of the text and it is marked with a subsequent stilling of voices other than the narrator's. The narrative voice becomes impersonal and detached as it recites the story of his family life and resumes its customary style only when he resumes his discussion of the work he had in hand. In the drift towards silence, the unruly, exuberant autonomy of the voices in *Island Cross-Talk* and, to a lesser extent, in the early parts of *The Islandman*, is gone, and so is the *joie de vivre* it expressed. The textual shift towards silence mirrors the steady emptying of the Island, where the keen had come to be heard more often for those departed for America than for those departed for the next world. As the narrator unfolds the full picture of life in extremis on the Island, human reaction finds its expression beyond the keen, beyond the prayer, in a growing silence. In his valedictory pages, Tomás finally gives his frank appraisal of the fishing trade he has plied most of his life in this most telling remark: "... the misery of that sort of fishing is beyond telling." (243).

Tomás' literary reconstruction and representation of his voice is marked by a gradual silencing of all voices but the narrator's. It uses silence as the natural voice of many of the darker human emotions. Most trivial of these perhaps, his ill-concealed resentment of his brother rarely finds expression on Tomás' lips. Far more significantly, his grief at the loss of so many of his family circle is expressed in terms so understated they are not far removed from silence. Hearing the news of the death of Péig Sayers' son plunges Tomás' household into another silence, not only for the Sayers boy, but for their own loss of years gone by. On

another occasion, Tomás' voice is silenced by his fear for his neighbours and kin out on the sea in a wild storm (122-3). We read of the silence that falls on the house of Pats Heamish's house when he is sick, his family deprived of the song and story of the Christmas period (136). And less benignly perhaps, silence is the voice of resentment. It is a mode of expression that allows Tomás not only to write so tersely of his wife and his marriage but to deny her any voice at all in the telling of their life together.

The silence that has its literary representation in this text was often a judicious strategy in Island life. Rather than the source or cause or evidence of gaps in the author's armour, silence has been a literary choice and a literary device strategically employed. The narrator draws attention several times to the power and sometimes the danger of voice. He writes of the impossibility of keeping a secret on the Island in one place (195) and, in another, tells us that "neither luck nor good fortune ever attended anything that runs in people's talk" (214). Elsewhere, he writes of the great harm done in a small community by scandal-mongers (158) and by "babblers". Perhaps the most startling discussion of the power of voice occurs early in the text when Tomás writes of the cursing, by Islanders and, he believes, by God, of men who came to take rent from the Islanders. Such was the power of the curse that only one of the cursed rent-collectors died in his own bed; the others all died in the poor-house (57).

Island speech had several expressions that were repeated like mantras in the face of death and grief. Countless times do we hear the refrain, "the dead do not feed the living" and, less often, "we must endure it and be content" (186). In life, these refrains stifle the sounds of mourning and mobilise the sufferer for the "grinding toil" Tomás tells us always accompanies times of trouble in the Island. In the text, these refrains offer a literary reflection of this most necessary transition from grief to work, silencing mournful talk and mobilising the narrative. This is most evident in Tomás' account of the period following the drowning of his son, Donal,

with Eileen Nicholls, where he writes of Diarmid's comfort which took the form of silencing his despondent talk. Tomás credits this help and this strategy with his recovery.

At first glance, the gradual and eventual stilling of all voices but Tomás' own voice might seem to be a shift away from polyphonic discourse towards monologism. Characters other than Tomás are flat and lack the autonomy associated with the characters of a polyphonic text. Tomás is not only the hero of the text, he is the only truly realised character in it. The rest are tangential to him. The author narrator's discourse dominates the text and provides a lot of the information that supplements the words of the other characters. It does not take long however, to realise that *The Islandman* is in fact a dialogic text in which the dialogue of central significance is no longer that between the Island characters he has written but in the dialogue between Tomás and himself and Tomás and his reader.

In fact, the entire text might well be read as a long and subtle dialogue between the reader and Tomás. The little asides and parenthetical explanations that dot the text seem to be for the benefit of an unseen someone who does not know the Island. When the narrator writes that "I may as well give some brief account here [...]" , his colloquial speech and casual attitude appear to reflect composition on the run. Little remarks such as "-not that I'm throwing that up against them [...]" give the impression of a gossipy little session between friends. Rhetorical questions such as "what do you think?" (48, 75) and "what was I to do?" not only imply the presence of someone at the other end of the book and address the reader directly: they also show that Tomás' sense of "audience" now links a literary reader with the oral listener of his earlier experience. The narrator seems to confide in the reader at times, drawing him into private spaces and a conspiratorial sharing of secrets, with phrases such as "keep it dark!" (61) and "may God forgive me!" for writing something he knows he should not. Having drawn the reader in, the narrator seeks to persuade him of the truth of his narration with



phrases such as “for to speak the truth [...]” (129), “I promise you, friend of my heart [...]” (140) and “I give you my word [...]” (143). The fact of the dialogue with his reader is made clear and explicit near text’s end when Tomas addresses the reader directly: “what you’re reading now, reader, is the fruit of my labours.” (240).

As I read Tomás' account of his own life, I feel that his many explicit addresses to the reader are meant for me. His partner in dialogue at this moment is me.

## CHAPTER SIX

### "Sé Seo Mo Scéalsa": "This Is My Story" – Tomás O'Crohan and Autobiography

*Sé seo mo scéala*, "this is my story" wrote Tomás as he made his first attempt to draw his autobiography to its close (Ó Coileáin: 255). This conclusion was rejected by his editor, An Seabhac, who demanded something more suitable or substantial from the writer. Though he complied with the request and in so doing wrote the chapter that has become the most famous of the book, Tomás was clearly irritated by An Seabhac's criticism of his original ending, as his terse reply to An Seabhac makes plain: "maybe it does not have such a short tail now. If there is a sentence in it which does not appeal to you, just leave it out." (255). The incident is significant for several reasons. First, in using the customary words of valediction of the traditional storyteller to close the written account of his life, Tomás gives literary representation to a moment of dialogue between the past and present, recording a significant moment in the translation of the old traditions of the culture into the new medium of writing. Secondly, in using these old, formulaic words, he declares his ownership of the story that has been told, he acknowledges his place in the old traditions and he asserts and affirms his identity as an author. Though his protagonist self's identity as a writer is rarely given more than scant acknowledgement, as it is the heroic Gaelic fisherman that dominates most discussion, his identity as a man of letters is clearly inscribed in both *Island Cross-Talk* and *The Islandman*. Finally, the negotiation between the two men displayed in this incident shows that, in spite of Tomás' declaration that it is his story, his agency in the writing of his autobiography is constrained and incomplete.

The last chapter charted Tomás' manipulation of voice that represented in a literary way the stilling of the lively voices Tomás had once known, producing a growing solitude in the

narrative voice that gradually took on the semblance of a monologic discourse. In the solitary note he strikes, he comes to resemble W. E. B. Du Bois who described his own life-writing in terms of soliloquy, as “the soliloquy of an old man who dreams of what his life has been, as he sees it slowly drifting away, and what he would like others to believe.” (Du Bois, [1903] 1976: 12-13, cited Smith and Watson: 13). When applied to the writing of Tomás, this moving description of autobiography as soliloquy evokes the loneliness of the Island writer who once described the intimacy of boyhood friendship in terms of knowledge of his friend’s voice. It also invites further consideration of the great silence at the heart of the text and shows it to be a literary representation of his response to his experience, rather than a failure of words or a lack of literary skill to which some commentators ascribe his reticence. The silencing of all but the narrative voice also has the effect of putting the narrator squarely in the spotlight and foregrounding Tomás’ identity as a writer.

The movement towards linguistic stillness has an autobiographical significance that is multi-layered. While at a prosaic level, it may reflect Tomás’ growing confidence in his construction of voice in the new medium, it also conveys an emotional response to the forced journey back through the dark days of his life that the act of writing the autobiography demanded. It also reflects the steady, inexorable movement from the sense of communal identity he set out with to the eventual awareness of his own essential solitude. As it grows, solitude becomes his theme and his motive and offers him the opportunity for writing, so it is in many diverse ways that the growing silence and solitude nourish his writing.

With his many direct addresses to his reader, Tomás asserts not only his desire for dialogue but also his identity as a writer, most particularly his autobiographical intention. Each time he addresses himself to the reader, he puts the “I” of the text in front of the reader’s eyes, making explicit the autobiographical intent of his enterprise as well as his desire for

relationship with his reader. The readership with whom Tomás engages in dialogue is drawn from many quarters. His first reader was Brian Ó Ceallaigh: he engages in writing his life, in large part, at Brian's behest and, in part, out of loneliness for Brian. He writes with Brian's pen and sends his writings in letters to Brian. Beyond Brian, his earliest imagined readership, as he contemplates the great project of the writing of his life, is composed of his fellow Islanders. Tomás' earliest and most fundamental literary concerns were for this Island readership: he did not want to write a story that would bore his neighbours who knew his life story as well as they knew their own; nor did he wish to offend them with any form of untruth about Island life. We have seen that, at a late stage in his writing process, he also engages in the significant but largely hidden dialogue with An Seabhac whose influence over and presence in the text was almost invisible to the wider readership as it resulted mostly in erasures. The early readership of which Tomás was mindful also includes Flower, Tomás' trusted friend and translator whose sensitive reading expressed his long association with the writer, his society and his text. The identities of these early readers, An Seabhac and Flower, serve as a useful pointer to the largely ignored fact that Tomás has always had readerships in two linguistic communities, Irish and English. As already mentioned, as I read Tomás' autobiography, I feel that his many explicit addresses to his reader noted in the last chapter are meant for me and that I am his partner in dialogue at this moment. I read this text, in which Tomás' own voice becomes the only voice, as a cry from the Islandman for and to a readership that will keep him from oblivion. His community now lies outside the Island.

In spite of Tomás' assertion of his identity as a writer and of his autobiographical purpose, and in spite of the fact that his work is routinely referred to as an autobiography, his intention to write his own life quite often goes unremarked for, as we have already seen, Tomás' work is often discussed and valorised in other terms, often praised for its language or

for the authenticity of its documentary information about the mysterious hidden world of the Gaeltacht, specifically Island life, now gone forever. The valorisation of Tomás' texts for these reasons not only fails to take the man at the heart of the texts into account, it also gives the impression that Tomás is somehow separate or separable from the society he is writing from and about, a view contested by Mikhail Bakhtin who believed that as an autobiographer's awareness of self arises from and grows within a dialogue with his society or, more precisely, in innumerable dialogues with many members of and factions within his society, his society is invariably and inevitably implicated in the story of his own life (Smith and Watson: 34). There is a similar difficulty with discussion of the texts that praise them for their language and ignore the man who wrote them in that it also implies a separability of man and word. Interestingly, Robin Flower wrote on these very issues several times, drawing attention to the inseparability of Tomás and his Island and of Tomás and his language. Anticipating Smith and Watson's identification of the body as an autobiographical site, Flower wrote of Tomás and the Island:

He had lived on the Island sixty years  
and those years in the Island lived in him,  
Graved on his flesh, in his eye dwelling,  
And moulding all his speech,  
That speech witty and beautiful  
And charged with the memory of so many dead. (Flower, 1978: 14).

Similarly, of Tomás and his language, he wrote in his Foreword to *The Islandman*: "... the style is nonetheless unmistakably his own, and to those who have known the man his whole figure and character is implicit in the manner of his writing" (ix).

The relationship between the writer of autobiography and his society is a central concern of life-writing theory. Laura Marcus, for instance, draws attention to the dialectical relationship between the individual and his society (1994: 185). Smith and Watson also write of the importance of the relationship between the individual and the "collectivity" to which he belongs (168) and of the tightrope he walks between identification and differentiation (32).

Tomás provides us with an interesting case study of this issue -- while stressing his reverence for the habits and traditions of his culture, he nonetheless strains to assert his own individuality and allows himself to evolve. Though he cuts an increasingly lonely figure as his writing continues, and though his voice moves ever closer to lonesomeness, Tomás remains in dialogue, writing back to his culture and forward to his readers.

There are many explanations for the near disregard for Tomás' autobiographical intention. First might be the long-held view of autobiography and other forms of life writing as inferior literary forms. "Personal" stories were denigrated as trivial while those originating from within an oral tradition were subject to a particular scorn and either viewed as "anthropology" or patronised as "folklore" (Smith and Watson: 118). All such stories were denied the identity of literature. Perhaps, when a narrative is designed to be read or comes to be read as reflective of or in connection with a national myth and a national pride attaches to it, its origins in a lesser literary form are best ignored. An explanation more specific to Tomás lies in the high value put on the transparent record of a precious relic of Gaelic Ireland, of the magical west his work is said to offer. Such a view is implicit, for example, in the remarks of Ó Tuama who, we have seen, saw *The Islandman* more as the "biography of a community" than as the autobiography of the author.

This is a view that chimes with that of An Seabhac who, as mentioned earlier, was dismissive of Tomás' creative endeavour and described the book as the book that anyone who had led his life would write, if they could write. Such a reading views Tomás' account of a personal and individual life as typical and representative life, and reads Tomás, not so much as an "everyman" but an "any man". Ó Tuama's view of *The Islandman* as the "biography of a community" is contested to a degree by Foster who considers the autobiographical aspect of Tomás' enterprise at greater length than most commentators (1987: 323-340). Even so, for

Foster, the autobiographical aspects of *The Islandman* are only a part of Tomás' intention and achievement, matched if not surpassed in significance by the authenticity of the history and folklore he embedded in his text. A near-denial of the autobiographical intent is expressed by Jacquin who states a view that the author is more interested in conveying the material facts of his Island life than in delineating the development of an ego or personality. It seems that such views do not diminish with the passing of time. As recently as 2003, Harrison, who reads *The Islandman* as a social document, gives faint and grudging acknowledgement of the autobiographical intent of the author: "Tomás makes little effort to introduce us to the particular psyche of being an Islandman but his personality and his personal life are not completely hidden" (490).

Recent work on the theory of life-writing would challenge these conventional readings of Tomás' autobiography. Autobiography theorists have in recent years demonstrated the impossibility of autobiography offering anything resembling the "transparent record" that *The Islandman* has for so long been said to represent. Notions such as "historicity", "truth" and "authenticity" have been examined in relation to autobiography and found to be elusive, fluid and impossible to verify (Smith and Watson: 10-13). Notwithstanding the significance of the historical, geographic and socio-political elements that make up what Smith and Watson have coined "the site of narration" (56), the reading of autobiography for historical or sociological fact or information has given way to more complex modes of reading that recognise that what is represented as "the past" cannot truly replicate it, as what the autobiographer writes can be nothing other than a version of his memory of his experience of the past. Autobiography is now seen to be a creative genre that can only offer an interpretation of the past in acts that try to recover it (Smith and Watson: 16). It is seen to be performative in that it creates a shaped

identity from a less shaped life experience. In Smith's words, "it is a narrative artifice that privileges an identity that does not exist outside the author's pages" (1987: 5).

Those hoping to mine an autobiographical record for historical fact or authenticity need to recognise that the record is both incomplete and selective. As Du Bois' description of his own autobiography makes clear, the "facts" chosen for representation in the written and permanent record of a life are determined by a number of factors. His use of the word "soliloquy" evokes drama, the genre with which it is associated, and a sense of audience that undercuts the notion of solitude even as it expresses it. His description of his life story as "a dream of what his life has been" highlights the imaginative dimension of autobiographical writing. The fact that it is slowly drifting from him as he writes it situates the "facts" recalled in an emotive setting that impacts inevitably upon their significance. Finally, his choice of "facts" is influenced by his desire to offer a version of his life story that "he would like others to believe". Thus, the "facts" of autobiography, like the "facts" of the synthetic historians and those of oral tradition, have a politics. As Smith and Watson point out, while autobiography can offer facts, they can never be all the facts. What is remembered and what is forgotten depends on many things that include, among others, the situation of the autobiographer as he writes, the audience he imagines will "hear" his soliloquy as well as his own needs and point of view at the time of writing. For these reasons, what is recalled and what is not is far from stable or permanent. While Tomás expresses an initial anxiety about truth-telling in his life story and a desire to be truthful, he acknowledges both the necessary selectivity that must be exercised and the inevitable incompleteness of the record he has written of his life when he declares that he only wrote of the things that meant most to him (1951: 242).

While there is something undeniable in Stanley Fish's remark that an autobiographer cannot lie "because anything they say, however mendacious, is the truth about themselves,



whether they know it or not" (1999: A19, cited Smith and Watson: 12), the "truth" of the autobiographical record has also been shown to be an elusive quantity that is quite different from truthfulness (12-13). While the notion of "truth" suggests something that can be empirically tested and found to be incontrovertible, "truthfulness" is more an attitude of the author, more personal, more open to question and interpretation. It is inevitable that there will be differences between the "truth" observed by onlookers and the truth recalled and represented by the author as well as between the differing truths perceived by individual readers in their individual dialogues with the author.

The issue of truth in autobiography is further clouded by the fact that autobiography has many constitutive features in common with fiction (Smith and Watson: 7). As the autobiographer's story inevitably implicates other people in the telling, its pages are full of characters who were once people. These characters are sometimes made to speak in direct speech, in words "remembered" or created by the writer. The life represented often has a plot and a tidiness it did not have and could not have had in the living of it. The preoccupations of the author in life become his themes in literature, his home place his setting. For all these reasons, it is not always easy to distinguish autobiography from novel. The distinguishing feature is that autobiography offers an apparent guarantee of truthfulness that resides in the synonymy of the author and hero of the text (Smith and Watson: 8).

The notion of "meaning" in autobiography has been shown to be similarly difficult and unstable: as autobiography attempts to interpret the past in the present, its significance must change as the present changes. It is now commonly held that the truth and meaning of an autobiographical text is dialectic, located in the relationship between reader and writer that is variously described as pact (Lejeune, 1989), dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981), or intersubjective exchange (Smith and Watson: 13). The political reading of Tomás that has prevailed for so

long has been predicated on a twentieth century echo of the *Acallam na Senórach*, an imagined dialogue between Ireland's past and present.

Reading life-writing in search of "authenticity", as many have done in the case of Tomás' work, is problematic for several reasons. For one thing, it implies a stability and permanence of culture that does not exist and implies an original state more valid than the one being lived, a state that should prevail still or should prevail again. Such a view denies the evolutionary nature of society and culture. It also denies the members of that culture any individuality, any diversity and any choice or opportunity for change or dissent. Such a static form of "authenticity" is especially inappropriate when applied to Tomás who was very independent in his outlook and who embraced changes he approved of and often introduced them to the Island community.

Authenticity is also compromised when an autobiography has been produced from a "coaxing" situation (Smith and Watson: 55). "Coaxing", we have seen, refers to a person or a set of circumstances that elicits the writing of a life from its owner (50). The coaxing influence inevitably remains in the text to some degree. While it is true that Brian Ó Ceallaigh initiated a coaxing process that produced Tomás' autobiography, it is also true that the story was coaxed to a considerable degree by Tomás' own desire to write a book and by his awareness of the precariousness of Island life. Tomás' willingness to comply with Ó Ceallaigh's wishes precludes the possibility of an unmediated authenticity residing in the text (55). Further, the two sets of motives in this coaxing situation makes it inevitable that there will be at least two stories encoded in the text for, as Smith points out, coaxers always get the story they ask for (Smith, Graduate Seminar, Latrobe, 2002). While the coaxing process instigated by Brian Ó Ceallaigh is well known to Tomás' readership, the impact of his self-coaxing has until now gone largely unexamined.

Editorial activity has a further compromising effect upon the “authenticity” of the text as the editor must, again to varying degrees, impose his choices upon the writer, deciding how the story should have been written, asking for inclusions, insisting upon deletions. Such deletions and other gaps and silences which represent the parts of the story that cannot be told are referred to by Smith as sites of “constraint” (Smith and Watson: 169). Sites of constraint imposed upon a text by someone other than the author often reflect anxiety about what might be disclosed about the group or nation to which the autobiographer belongs. Many of An Seabhac’s editorial interventions have already been identified. On one hand, he asked for material that the author had no intention of writing: this sometimes concerned mundane matters, such as information about their houses; at other times, it was on sensitive issues such as Tomás’ loss of his first love and his unwanted marriage. On the other hand, the editor also removed anything that offended his own sensibilities, anything that showed the Islanders in a less than favourable light and anything that revealed the Islanders’ facility and enthusiasm for the English language or culture. He also removed many of the songs that Tomás included in his manuscript. The impact of this upon the autobiographical aspects of Tomás’ work is yet to be fully assessed. It is a matter of some considerable importance for, as the matter of the song Tomás sang at his wedding demonstrates, Tomás’ choice of songs for inclusion sometimes contains delicate autobiographical material that cannot be expressed in any other way. There were times when Tomás could sing what he could not say.

The author exercised a certain degree of agency and authority over his text by agreeing to some of An Seabhac’s requests and refusing point blank on others. He exercised it more fully however at points in the text where deeply sensitive material was excluded or erased from the record as a result of his own judgement. Such sites of constraint that originate with the author himself also seriously compromise the notion of an authentic record but, more

importantly, they also attest to the authenticity or integrity of the writer. The most significant of Tomás' self-imposed sites of constraint include the story of his love on the Inis, the details of his married life and his reactions to the many tragedies of his family life. It would be all too easy to misread his silence or near-silence on these issues as a sign of hard-heartedness or of literary inability, as evidence of the disinclination to reveal the "particular psyche" of an Islandman. Any of these judgements would be both inaccurate and unfair. The sites of self-imposed constraint in his texts have an autobiographical significance in that they give literary representation to the self-restraint he exercised in life. They constitute literary acts of personal authenticity or integrity and demonstrate his deliberate exercise of authorial authority and his agency as a writer.

There is evidence to be drawn from within Tomás' texts and from outside sources that point to silence as a response to loss that is at one and the same time instinctive and strategic. Though Tomás relates the drowning of his son in *The Islandman*, the key to understanding his near clinical communication of the fact is to be found in his earlier work where he tells that the death of Péig Sayers' son brought silence back into his own home as the memory of their own relative and his death was rekindled. Micheál Ó Dubhshláine gives us an account of Tomás near-mute reaction to his son's death that makes it clear how filled with pain and meaning the silences in Tomás texts can be:

When Tomás Ó Criomhthain and his brother Paddy came into the quay, sorrowful indeed was the sight that met them. Afterwards people said that Tomás knew right away that it was Domhnall, his own son, who had drowned. He could see the soles of the boots and the pattern of the hobnails. He had repaired the boots himself. He ran to the body of his son and gave out a great cry of sorrow and horror that could be heard all over the village.

Méiní was watching: 'Great was the sorrow felt for Tomás Ó Criomhthain that day when he returned home from fishing and found his son drowned before him on the quay, stretched in quiet death, it gripped his heart, the young man that he had left at home [...] (96-97).

Ó Dubhshláine also provides us with Seán Ó Criomhthain's recall of the day which also draws attention to his father's almost wordless response:

That day struck a blow on Tomás' health that took a long time for him to recover from"

'It isn't too bad,' said he, 'if the other woman [his daughter who almost drowned in the same incident] lives.'

When he was told that she lived and was out of danger, he never did anything else but to go on his knees and kiss Domhnall on the mouth and then kissed Eibhlín's hand as well."

'I leave everything else for the God of Glory to lay out the road for you both to the Kingdom of Heaven,' said he, 'and to give me the grace of patience to carry this cross.' (97).

His final word on the matter was that "God and time will heal our wounds" (98).

Tomás' marriage is another site of great constraint that originates with the author. The meaning of his silence on his marriage and on his wife becomes a little clearer when, realising that he will never address the issue directly in his writing and, remembering that he expressed in song what he could not write in his own words, we look for more oblique clues in his text. The key to the intimate meaning of this silence lies in the beautiful passage he wrote about the old people lying in their bed near the fire:

The old people used to spend the night in that [a post-bed or a bed on the floor] beside the fire, with an old stump of a clay pipe going, or two pipes if there were two of them living, and smoking away; they would have a wisp of a straw for a pipe-lighter. A good fire of fine turf smouldered away till morning; every time they woke they took a light from the fire and puffed at the pipe. If the old woman was alive, the old man would stretch across to give her a light from the wisp; then the smoke from the two old pipes would drift up the chimney, and you could imagine that the couple's bed was a steamship as they puffed away in full blast (26-27).

This beautiful and evocative passage, so eloquent in its expression of Tomás' grief for the lack of a lifelong companion with whom to face old age, allows his reader to see that he was deprived, not once but twice, of this kind of companionship that he can only imagine -- first, when he forsook the girl on the Inis and again, when his wife passed away from this

world. While Tomás asserts that he only wrote of the things that were important to him, there is much to suggest that he deliberately refrained from writing the things that mattered most.

With its many discussions of authenticity, autobiography theory in recent years has demonstrated the impossibility of the kind of “authenticity” traditionally associated with Tomás' texts. Critical and cultural emphasis on this fallacious authenticity has contributed most significantly to the misrepresentation of Tomás' autobiographical identity as a writer in several important ways. First, it played down the integrity of his literary instincts by presenting his concerns about the suitability of his own life as the subject of life-writing and about truth-telling as the naïve concerns of an inexperienced writer instead of as the concerns of a writer wanting to stay true to himself. The emphasis that has been placed upon the authenticity of the historical or documentary record has obscured the authenticity of the personal record. The concerns Tomás expresses when contemplating the autobiographical project reveal his desire to write an authenticity that is personal and idiosyncratic even as it gives literary representation to his communal experience. The issues he identifies as significant obstacles to the writing of his life, far from trivial and far from naïve, continue to concern theorists in the field of autobiography down to the present day. Tomás' first concern reflects the fact that autobiography was long considered the prerogative of the great man of public life (Marcus: 1; Smith and Watson: 111-119). The second points to Tomás' awareness that the boundary between fiction and autobiography is not always clear-cut.

The construction and representation of Tomás as a literary naif has obscured his long experience as a writer. While the usual version of the story is that visitors were drawn to Tomás because of his speech, and that the process that turned him into a writer emerged from this, it seems quite likely that the opposite is true. According to Seán Ó Criomhtháin, Tomás was already known as a writer before Marstrander's visit in 1909: Cormac

Ó Cadhlaigh, who came to the Island looking for language not long after Synge's visit in 1905, did so because he had already read Tomás' writings in Irish (89). Similarly, An Seabhac advised his Irish language students to seek Tomás out as a teacher, not because he had heard Tomás speak but because he had, as editor of various Irish language journals, read the writings Tomás had sent him, seeking publication. The Irish language newspapers to which Tomás contributed for many years before he wrote the material that became *Island Cross-Talk* and *The Islandman* included *An Claidreamh Soluis*, *An Lochrann* and *Fáinne An Lae*. He even won several prizes for his writing, including one from *Fáinne An Lae* (Ó Coileáin: 245). His daughter-in-law writes of him receiving a prize: "He won a statue of Queen Taillean and a very nice gold and silver medal -- from Dublin they both came." (NíShúilleabháin, 1978: 23). No doubt, his prizes confirmed Tomás' confidence in his own abilities and called to mind the school prize he won in his childhood, when he was known as "Donal's scholar" because of his love of learning (Tyers: 112).

The framing narrative also fails to disclose the extent to which his literary activity had become an integral part of Tomás' life, long before he countenanced the possibility of writing the autobiography. While some commentators express concern for the difficulties Tomás faced in trying to reconcile his writing with the other activities and responsibilities of his Island life, it seems that Tomás himself did not find it problematic as he did not make the same division between life and art. Tomás demonstrates this in a letter to Ó Ceallaigh, where he writes about newspapers and books coming into the Island and the loss of Irish among the older people in the Island and then, in the next sentence, goes on to say "'the girls are putting manure on the land. They have thirty donkeys." (Ó Coileáin: 238). Books, newspapers, manure and donkeys were all threads in the same fabric. Another remark of Tomás shows reading and writing simply took their place among many activities in his daily life: "a portion of

every book I have read. I cannot manage reading, writing and other little things. Although I enjoy these things a lot." (Ó Coileáin: 237).

While many readers have commented on the fact that Tomás had a pencil and paper to fish from his pocket on the famous day that the poet interrupted his work (O’Crohan: 87), investigation of this incident makes it clear that the pencil and paper would have been in Tomás’ pocket on any day the poet cared to call upon Tomás’ services and confirms that writing was an integral part of Tomás’ daily life, a part of his habit. Again, it is Seán who gives us insight into both the broad issue of his father’s identity and activity as a writer and into the specific incident. Discussing his father’s writing of poetry, Seán says:

He used to compose it while working. When he was cutting turf and got tired -- in those days the tea sold by Kruger’s mother and Pats Néidi’s wife in Dunquin, may the Lord have mercy on them, was packed in white paper pound bags. Tomás always held on to those white bags. They were very handy for him because he’d put them into his pocket together with a pencil, and he composed most of his poetry when going to the strand or up the hill saving turf. He’d sit down on a little mound, have a smoke and write down the verses. He’d come home then in the evening, take out one of those big donkeys of foolscap pages, write down the verses and then send every piece he had composed to Fionán. [...]. He continued to write until his hand and leg became paralysed. (Tyers: 116).

Tomás identified himself as a writer many times in his texts. His correspondence also reveals that he shared fully in the writer’s lot. On the one hand, he sometimes experienced and expressed uncertainty and lack of direction in his writing life: “Yes my friend, I am able to write again. I stopped for a week as I had written papers of not very good quality. I was thinking that I had lost direction. Sometimes I feel that what I have written is inferior.” (Ó Coileáin: 240). And on the other hand, at other times, he expresses a cocky self-confidence: “Ireland would be in a sickly condition the day that a book by Tomás Dhonail MhicCrimhthain would be in the shops without being sold.” (Ó Coileáin: 242). He also



vacillated between asking for direction and resenting direction, wanting feedback and independence at the same time.

We know Tomás corresponded on matters of literature with influential men of letters and, a more experienced reader than many thought he was, showed himself to be a mature commentator with firm opinions on matters of the language and literature of not one, but two languages. In a 1915 letter to Seosamh Laoide, a founding member of the Gaelic League and an author, Tomás writes of a book called *Tonn Tóime* that he has just read:

The book is clever, one of the best I have seen yet. A lot of others have quite a bit lacking in them. It is almost impossible to build a house if all you have to work with are large stones without little pebbles among them. It is the same with big words. Little appropriate words are also needed to be clearly understood. You will meet an Irish person who has a difficult word in Irish -- which will astonish you -- but he has no ability to use the language effectively. The man who has poor English has the same disease -- you will hear occasional wonderful words in English from him. It is the pebble-stones that are really lacking in Irish at the moment. (Ó Coileáin: 239).

Finally, the growing importance of writing in Tomás' life is reflected in the fact that he hoped to live by writing, inspired perhaps by the example of "John Synge" who told the Islanders many years earlier that he lived by writing. In a letter to Ó Ceallaigh in July 1923, he asks: "Can you think of any plan that would give me a pound a month to keep me working without leaving the writing?" (O Coileáin: 243).

While these little facts demonstrate Tomás' willing embrace of the writerly vocation, it is the evidence of his son that gives us the full flavour of his relationship with the craft. At the request of Pádraig Tyers, Seán paints a picture of Tomás when he was writing, a ceremonial, almost sacramental picture that dignifies both the craft and the craftsman:

There was a table here in the corner at the right-hand side of the fire-place. Tomás would pull up the table. There was a lamp high on the wall with a mirror on it behind the globe and two wicks, each of them as big as a light-house. Tomas would draw up to the fire. His pipe was always on the hob along with his tobacco. He'd smoke a fine blast of the pipe and then turn around, get his foolscap ready and set to work with his pen, a beautiful one which he had got from one of the visitors. I can't say if it was Brian Ó Ceallaigh or Cormac Ó Cadhlaigh who gave it to him, but i still remember the name on it, Waterman's. .... He used to write depending on how long the house was quiet, and according as thoughts occurred to him he'd put the finishing touches to them, and he was often writing when I came home. It might be ten o'clock or half-past ten and Tomas would still be on the pen. (113).

In his portrayal of the little ceremony with which Tomás concluded his writing session, Seán reveals Tomás' view of his pen as an important, perhaps sacred item:

It was a Waterman's fountain pen, and every night when finished with it he'd dry it with a piece of cloth and a bit of paper and put it away. If a butterfly or a cricket in the corner as much as touched it he'd nearly kill them. Not a hand was to be laid on the pen in case it might be damaged. (113).

Far from being the naive and inexperienced writer portrayed in the framing narrative, Tomás was already well-known for his writing and secure in both his identity and his vocation as a writer as he contemplated the writing of his autobiography. Even at the formative stage of the process, as he was being "coaxed" by Ó Ceallaigh and subjected to attempts to influence the kind of story he should produce, Tomás had reasons of his own for writing his autobiography and so might be said to have coaxed himself. His self-coaxing reflects not only his inner, private dialogue with self but also the number and nature of dialogues with others in which he was engaged. Many of his reasons are offered in the final pages of *The Islandman*. The first explanation he offers reflects something of the warmth of his dialogue with Ó Ceallaigh as well as Island custom. It is simply that he is not one to refuse a request and so wrote to satisfy Brian whom he sorely missed (239). A page later, he talks, less specifically, about his language work and says that he has been doing it "for the sake of the

language of our country and of our ancestors" (240). This sentence sits rather strangely in the text, to the eye of this reader, voicing an ideological point of view that is new to the text and so seems to reflect his dialogue with members of the Gaelic League. A further reason, given a few lines later, sounds more like Tomás who could mourn a death in one sentence and complain in the next about the expense and inconvenience that follow a death. He writes that his language work has kept him from starvation: "I hear many a fellow saying that there's no use in our native tongue; but that hasn't been my experience. Only for it I should have been begging for my bread!" (241). The final reason he offers, which includes the most famous line from the book, reflects a dialogue between literature and mortality itself:

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 (244).

This compelling reason for writing accords with an explanation Tomás offers in a letter-essay, where he writes again of the relationship between himself, literature and mortality, or perhaps, more accurately, immortality. In this letter, Tomás reveals that he was persuaded to write by the argument that he should not allow himself to die with his work unrecorded and forgotten as the Island poet, Seán Ó Duinnshléibhe, had done:

Ina dhiaidh seo, gan mórmhoill, do chuir sé cuntas chúm gur mhór  
an trua mé bheith díomhaoin gan rud éigin do chur ar bun go  
mbeadh mo chuimhne ann agus mé marbh, agus gan mé bheith  
mar an file Seán Ó Duinnshléibhe, agus gur cheart dom cúpla  
leabhar do scríobh an fhaid do bheinn beo chuinn go mbeinn beo is  
mé marbh (Ó Coileáin: 235).

Shortly after this, he approached me with the idea that I should do something to be remembered by after my death, and that I should not be like the poet, Seán Ó Duinnshléibhe, and that I ought to write a couple of books so that I would be remembered long after my death (trans, De Paor).

The fact that there are at least two sets of motives, two sets of imperatives coaxing the autobiography into being, one set from within the author himself and the other coming from other people, creates a certain tension in the text and makes it inevitable that the text will contain more than one story. The tension between the two stories encoded in the text is the key to its "authenticity". Tomás' willingness to give others what they ask of him, born of Island custom, while remaining true to his own authorial intention, involves him in a complex literary game that he does not always control. With the grace of a tightrope walker, he negotiates the constraints of the competing dialogues, attempting to reconcile the coaxing of others with his own wishes and intentions as a writer. It is in this negotiation that his authenticity as a writer lies and the nature and extent of his accomplishment can be most fully appreciated.

So, finally, who is Tomás? Having argued for the recognition of the literary nature of this text, as opposed to its documentary value, for recognition of the autobiographical intention at its heart and for the "authenticity" of the writer, I will depart from the tracing of fact and attempt a search for Tomás' self in some of the literary aspects of his texts, in his themes and, taking a hint from his love of concrete expression, in his imagery.

There is evidence of the dialogue between An Seabhac and Tomás and of the positive impact of the long negotiation between them in the text's beginning and at its end. Although the title of the book was prompted by An Seabhac, there is much both in the text and outside its pages to suggest that Tomás "grew into" this marker of identity and made it his own. It has been pointed out that it is doubtful that Tomás would ever have named himself or his text *Islandman* as he would never have referred to his birthplace as "the Island". The title of *Islandman* was bestowed upon the book, and on the man, by An Seabhac (Ó Coileáin: 255), no doubt to take advantage of a wide fascination with the Blaskets and their exotic character, so useful to the cultural politics of postcolonial Ireland. The use of the definite

article in the title signifies that he is the one by whom the others are measured, the one by whom all will be remembered. The title also signifies the distinction drawn repeatedly in the text between Islandmen and Irishmen: "we are not to be put in comparison with the people of the great cities or of the soft and level lands" (243). The extent to which Tomás made the identity of Islandman his own may be gleaned from the copy of his autobiography that lies now in the Heritage Centre in Dunquin, a centre dedicated to preserving the story of the Blasket library, a library that began with Tomás' writing and has now expanded to some thirty or so volumes. It is the copy he sent to his son, Tomas, in Hungry Hill Massachusetts, in which he inscribed the following:

"Dear Tomás  
I send you this book which your father has written on his own life.  
Perhaps every father is not in a position to do this and he being an  
Islandman. September 16, 1929." (trans. Proinsias Fachtna, 2002).

As he commences the writing of his life, Tomás allows us to see Tomás the child, cosseted like a bird in the nest in an idealised setting. The image extends with his portrayal of his school-day lunchtimes when his mother would throw limpets from the pot to her hungry children as a bird would distribute food to her chicks. We see communal values and traditions in play as the story of Tomás' life proceeds -- the love-struck young man who gives up his love to make an arranged marriage in accordance with parental direction and communal custom, and who nurses the resentment throughout his long life; the industrious and resourceful husband who builds his own house stone by stone and feeds his family with what he brings from the perilous sea; the father who loses six of his ten children to sickness and accident; the widower left with dependent children; the reliable neighbour who recognises the necessity of cooperation in the circumstances of Island life; the responsible citizen who stays sober while his neighbours get drunk on a night out on the mainland. With his representation of these facets of his life, Tomás gave his coauthors what they asked for and satisfied the thirst for the

material facts of the culture and society within which he lived. This aspect of his story shows the development of Tomás the fisherman that is often the focus of such a reading of this text.

From the opening page, it is clear that Tomás is his own hero. His text offers not just a picture of heroic activity but also, and more importantly, a meditation that subtly charts Tomás' evolving understanding of the concept of heroism in tandem with the evolution of Island life throughout the sensitive period of its decline. It offers several models of heroism each of which sustain Tomas for a certain period but which ultimately fail him. As Tomás writes the successive stages of his life, he explores these heroic models as they supplant each other. His portrait of a blessed infancy with which his exploration of heroism begins presents him as the child of exceptional parents, which both marks him out and equips him for the epic heroism of his adolescence and early adulthood. This section of his story is alive with tales of danger and physical prowess, offering epic tales of dangerous voyages, seal-hunts and sea-monsters, of diving for treasure in underwater caves, of risking his own life and saving his uncle's. Indeed, as we have seen, many commentators have detected the influence of the old hero-tales and wonder-tales of Gaelic tradition in these sections of Tomas' autobiography. These tales gradually give way to tales of heroic and often humorous Island resistance of "unpleasant strangers" such as the bluecoats which take their cue from Fionn the trickster, so popular in the story-telling tradition of the Island. Finally in the later stages of the text, and especially in the moments identified by Mark Quigley as "meta-autobiography" (2003: 382), when heroic drama gives way to sad reflection, the fisherman gives way to Tomas the hero-poet, heir to Piaras Ferriter and the Island poet. This identity, though always in the background and mentioned in passing from time to time, especially in *Island Cross-Talk*, is now deliberately and fully foregrounded as the writer addresses himself personally and explicitly to

his reader. It is obviously ironic that his voice should be at its most explicit in this chapter he did not wish to write, that this most writerly moment in Tomás' discourse was called into being by An Seabhac who, in so many other ways, muffled the writer's voice, but there is a broader cultural significance to this fact. The book closes as it began, with suggestions from An Seabhac that Tomás negotiated, accepted and truly made his own.

As the impending and inevitable demise of Island life combine with Tomás' advancing years to endow his life with reminders of mortality, it is not surprising that his text should also offer a meditation on this theme. The most interesting aspect of this meditation is that Tomás encodes his discourse on mortality not in connection with his maritime activities, and not in relation to his many tragic losses, but in the representation of his relationship with the craft of writing. Thus, while the fisherman is no doubt the more visible of the "selves" Tomás inscribes in his text, it is by no means either the only or the most important one. His preoccupation with a regret that much of the Island poet's lore died with him, and his citing of his own desire to remain known after his death as an initial motivation to write, signal the writerly identity he also wishes to declare. As his meditation on this theme continues, we see that writing allows him to remain fully engaged with life when circumstances rob him of his old mode of existence. We see that his literary craft allows him to continue living on his own earnings and on his own terms, thus giving him the freedom to reject the pension that he saw as death's unwelcome herald. As he pursues this theme, the voice with which he speaks is both highly personal and resolute, even as he gives voice to "the dead generations" and his own "final generation".

While Tomás the hero is strong in deed and disposition -- his ability to do and to prevail matched by his ability to endure -- the personal quality upon which all else rests in his self-portrait is his industriousness. Both *Island Cross-Talk* and *The Islandman* show that the "self" Tomás writes is above all else a worker, by choice as well as by necessity. His notion of

work dominates Tomás' definition of self and of others: his competitive nature finds its source and inspiration in his identification of his family as the hardest working people in a hard working community. He frequently expresses the satisfaction and pride he takes in his own work ethic. The importance to society of a communal work ethic is also made clear when Tomás writes of the negative impact of the words of the "lazy babbler" who encouraged the Islanders to look for money without work. The loss of the work ethic is linked explicitly to the disruption of the social fabric. Clearly, for Tomás, work strengthens and dignifies both the individual and the community. It is both life-defining and life-sustaining. Work also provides Tomás with a remedy for illness: he says he only has to work in the fields to throw off the effects of illness. Work also provides a panacea for grief. Time and again, the grief-stricken Islanders are mobilised with the aphorism that the dead don't feed the living, a call to arms that takes them back to the field or the sea.

In the unfolding of his life story and of his evolution as a writer, Tomás charts the evolving relationship between "sensible" work and writing. He expresses a series of attitudes to the craft, beginning with the resentment he felt in his early days, when writing impedes his "sensible" work. This gives way to a graceful accommodation of his scholarly work around the imperatives of his role as a fisherman which in turn gives way to the recognition of his ambition to hold a book of his own in his hands before he dies. Along the way, he allows us to see the tension between the physical work of an Island man and the work of a man of letters played out in his life. We see how often these worlds collide or coincide as well as how often the competing demands of these rival strands of his life are accommodated. Tomás has, for instance, his customary pencil and paper in his pocket when the poet accosts him on the hill (87). He knows that poets are poor workers in the field as he has had the experience himself



of not working well when trying to compose quatrains at work (86). While a poet's wit is a powerful weapon and one to be feared, Tomás writes that the haft of the fork he takes up as a weapon in a desperate battle with a large seal is "as useless as a pen" (75). He several times likens the building of a sentence to the building of a wall, using the metaphor of words as stones and writing as a form of building suggested to him by Ó Ceallaigh and used about him by Flower.

While autobiography theorists have long since recognised that autobiography is often the writing of a person who cannot truly imagine the world deprived of his own presence, gerontologists have recently given more specific recognition to the fact that elderly life writers such as Tomás often use the autobiographical moment to engage with transformation, to reconfigure the past in such a way that it constructs the possibility of a vibrant and viable future (Gattuso, 2002). This remains the case even when the autobiography thematises issues of aging such as loss and decline.

And so it was with Tomás. At some time, far from being the impediment to his work that he once thought it was, Tomás' language activity becomes his work. At first it supplements and then it becomes his livelihood. As "work", writing allows Tomás to avoid receiving the pension and, in so doing, to avoid a life of passive dependence that he saw as the true cause of personal decline and social decay. It also allowed him to reject the message of imminent death that he believed the pension announced and to remain instead engaged with his changing world.

Tomás signals several things when the craft of writing becomes his "work". First, he points to the evolutionary nature of both existence and "self" as he acknowledges a new and evolving identity. He shows himself to be a person not just commemorating the past, as is commonly suggested about his writing, but living very deliberately in the present and engaging

with the future. He also points to an evolving concept of heroism when he writes that the language work he did with Father MacClune was the hardest work he ever did on land or sea, indicating that the heroic fisherman of the early epic tales has given way to an equally heroic writer. Finally, Tomás' recognition of writing as his work endows the craft with a dignity he had not recognised in his youth. It is a sign of his knowledge that writing will sustain him, console him and heal him just as his old work in the field or on the sea once did. The fact that his work never ends is a sure sign for Tomás that life is still to be lived. It is in these issues that the meditation on mortality lies.

The evolutionary nature of human life and experience is also expressed in Tomás' use of another image not unrelated to language and Tomás' identity as a writer -- the image of the tongue. Rather than the disembodied, disempowered organ that signals the disfigurement of the author, recently suggested by Mark Quigley (400), it is an image related to and evolved from the image of teeth that the author repeatedly celebrates throughout his text. At various stages of his autobiography, Tomás uses the image of teeth as a symbol of Island strength and vitality (Foster, 1998: 46). The strong teeth of the old days resulted from the healthy diet of the traditional Island life, an abundant but simple diet and, in turn, kept the people healthy. Teeth simultaneously reflected and maintained the vigour of the Island community. As traditional ways are abandoned and new foods and new ways enter Island habits, as the community declines and grows old, the teeth become weaker. As John Wilson Foster writes, "O'Crohan's pride in his teeth is his pride at being a survivor of a more rugged epoch in island history" (46). As Tomás ages and Island life declines, the "teeth of a fierce tradition" (46) are lost and the "fierce tradition" must now be sustained by the tongue. As the old way of life loses its teeth, Tomás shows the tongue to be the new signifier of Island vitality. Whatever vigour remains in the Island is now maintained and expressed in terms of the tongue.

Tomás asserts his identity in the final paragraph of his autobiography where he writes: "Since the first fire was kindled in this island none has written of his life and his world" (245). His use of the image of fire is most telling in several ways. Not only was fire the first of mankind's technologies, the first tool to allow some mastery of human circumstance, it was, in the Celtic mythology relating to islands, the means by which enchanted or mythical islands were made real or taken into possession by mortal man. Myth has it that some mortals who experience such an island and fail to disenchant it are themselves destroyed by their experience. According to T J Westropp, "of folk-lore, the power of fire to disenchant and fix firmly any phantom island is a cardinal article of belief" (Westropp, 1912: 258). By linking the oldest technology of mankind with the technology that had come to the Island by his own hand, Tomás makes explicit his claiming of the Island as his own through his writing. By his writing, he has disenchanting the mythical space and he has himself survived the experience. When he reveals that the bird cosseted in the nest at the book's beginning has become a rabbit crouching in its burrow, sheltering from the Atlantic gale that blows over its head, we see that he has indeed saved his Island from the romantic mists in which it had been enveloped.

These lines of the text reveal the dramatic reconfiguration of both self and Island that has occurred during the writing of Tomás' life. The link he makes between fire and writing declares his unequivocal appropriation of the identity signalled by the book's title. He is certainly the Islandman and the Island is certainly his. His work, his writing, has preserved himself and his Island from the oblivion that would otherwise have followed evacuation and ensured that, just as he wished, he has remained known after his death.

While there is an elegaic air about the text, part of which comes from the reader who knows, as Tomás could only guess, that Island life as he knew it did end, Tomás' work is not simply a lament for what was passing and now has passed. It is the expression of a man who refuses to acknowledge death's messenger or pass silently into history, choosing instead to engage with change and embrace modernity through the act of writing.

Far from exemplifying the static, fixed and moribund authenticity many have attributed to his text, Tomás' autobiography reveals and exemplifies the evolutionary nature of human life, of tradition and the personal nature of authenticity. It is the vehicle by which he secures a future for himself as well as a past. The lament for the lost fisherman should also be a celebration of the writer he found himself to be. This text, *The Islandman*, is indeed as many have remarked, a wonderful source of material about the "hidden Ireland" of the Gaeltacht. It is also true that it is a piece of writing in Irish that still attracts study and appreciation. But it is also, most decidedly, the very personal autobiography of an extraordinary individual that offers a construction of self that allows for multiple readings of which the fisherman and writer are but two.

Tomás continued to write almost till the end of his days, stopping only when impeded by physical frailty. Even then, he dictated the things he wished to write to Seán who acted as his scribe. The significance of writing in his life, made clear in the valedictory remarks of his autobiography, is again made evident in a remark in one of the last letters he sent to An Seabhac a mere few weeks before his death. We see clearly in this letter that the craft of writing has been of the highest importance in his life. As his many talents and abilities desert him, he does not lament the loss of the strength to fish, or to build, but he does mourn the loss of the ability to write.

*In extremis*, he identifies himself in terms of his writing:

Cé is gur do dhuine mhuinteartha atáim dá insint nách ar fónamh dom i láthair na huaire. An lámh do scríobh *An tOileánach* ní féidir léi greim do chur im béal anis ná fiú amháin an cnaipe do dhúnadh dhom. Táim im mhairtíneach agus is dócha go mbead anois an fhaid is beo dhom. [...]. Sé mo thuairim láidir ná béarfad ar an bpeann go bráth arís, ach b'fhéidir nár cheart giréan ar dhein sí dhom. (Ó Coileáin: 259).

It is to a relative that I am dictating this as I am not well at the moment. The hand which wrote *The Islandman* cannot put food in my mouth or even close my buttons. I am now a cripple and in all likelihood will be one for the rest of my life. [...]. I feel I will never take pen in hand again, but perhaps it is not right to complain after all that writing has done for me.

## CONCLUSION

### **“All That Seaboard A Silent Land” – Echoes of Voices Still**

In the course of my research, I have seen and heard Tomás’ autobiography referred to as both a masterpiece and a piece of minor literature. The ambivalence toward the text that is evident in these two views has its origins and explanation in the politics of culture that I first encountered on my initial research trip some years ago.

While, no doubt, many readers who acclaim the text as “masterpiece” do so in response to their own reading, it is likely that many others have been influenced to form such a view by the romantic framing narrative that has accompanied the text since its first publication. For such readers, the judgement of “masterpiece” might spring from the representation of *The Islandman* as the utterance of a heroic late survival of the old Irish nation or from the romantic representation of the author as a literary Rip Van Winkle who, prodded out of his slumber, suddenly awakened to write the story of his Island life just before it ended.

Those who count Tomás’ autobiography as “minor literature” may also find the justification for their view outside his pages. At its most elementary, such a view might draw strength from the size and status of the tiny community from which Tomás wrote. It might also reflect the once-prevalent view that “peasant writing” lacked the sophistication worthy of the name of literature. Or perhaps it derives from the old scorn for material that had emerged from an oral tradition, and its association with anthropological writing, also viewed as inferior in literary terms. The long disdain for life-writing, now discredited, that caused autobiography to

be considered a lesser form of literature may also have contributed to the view. Finally, in regard to the translated text, the old view of translation as a suspect cultural activity and as an inferior literary enterprise no doubt contributed to a less appreciative view of *The Islandman*.

There is not a little irony embedded in the framing narrative's depiction of Tomás' literary identity and status. The politics of culture hold the key to this irony: the myth of the naïve native genius was produced and promulgated by the editor in spite of his scant regard for Tomás' individual artistic vision. The author's words were, in the eyes of his editor, and in a situation repeated in many such encounters throughout the Gaeltachtaí, not much more than the raw material from which he might fashion something literary. It is this same scant regard for Tomás' skills as an author that is also responsible for his mentors reading the fisherman they had asked him to write and ignoring the writer character they did not fully realise he was.

Examination of the politics of the day also suggests that I was meant to feel a sense of transgression when I first stepped into the world of Blasket literature. It confirms the feeling I had of entering a private, protected space when I undertook the study of Tomás' writing. The protective, sometimes even possessive attitudes towards the Blasket texts that I encountered are a legacy of the early and enduring Revival representations of the Blaskets as a precious late survival of the famously "hidden Ireland". The excluding notion that the meaning of the text will elude foreign readers is a version and a remnant of the Gaelic League desire to wall the culture and render it impervious to the gaze and influence of outsiders.

Whatever their views of Tomás' writing may be, most readers nevertheless unite in a melancholy sense of loss in relation to the Island and its literature. It is a sense of loss Tomás himself experienced when the Island Poet died:

It is a constant theme with Tomás that we have come too late and that Seán died too early. 'If only the things he had to tell you could have been written down,' he says, 'you would have seen something. For he never forgot anything that he had heard once, and he had travelled the world listening, and there was no song or story that he didn't keep in his memory till the day he died. You would listen to him talking all night, and he would never say the same thing twice in the one night. There are no tales in Ireland since he died. (Flower, 1978: 100).

Tomás' regret for what was lost in the passing of the Poet was echoed by Flower's sadness as he witnessed the beginnings of surrender of the old culture to the books and newspapers that were coming into the Island. Ironically, while Tomás regrets that writing has come too late, a response that indicates his engagement with modernity, Flower, the Romantic, regrets that it has come too soon.

Here I thought was the clash of the two traditions, the oral and the printed, vividly presented in the figure of that old man [Seán Eoghain]. Twenty years ago his mind was alive with antique memories, and in him, and in men like him, the old stable world endured for centuries. But now the fatal drip of printer's ink has obliterated the agelong pattern, and it is only by a glint of colour here, a salient thread there, in the dulled material, that we who strive to reconstitute something of the intricate harmony wrought into the original fabric can imagine to ourselves the bright hues and gay lines of the forgotten past. The world has turned to another way of life, and no passion of regret can revive a dying memory. What on that Island has to-day been experience to me will tomorrow be history as remote as Troy and Ninevah and Ur of the Chaldees. We can preserve a little of that tradition in the ink that has destroyed it. But the reality of the tradition is passing from us now, and I can only think that the world is poorer for its passing. (1978: 70-71).

With Island life drawing ever nearer to its inevitable close, John Caball draws attention to the ambivalence the Blasket Islands themselves arouse in Islanders and observers alike. It was a harsh and hostile place that probably should never have been inhabited, yet they who dwelled there and we who observed, all mourn its passing. Caball's valediction also nods to the politics of culture that link the Island and its literature to Irish cultural politics :



Tragic, too, it is to look out at the Blasket Islands and know that human life itself is ceasing on them, even if we think that living souls should never have had to shelter themselves at all on such windswept rocks. [...]. The now silent Blaskets fashioned a book or two within the last half century, which Ireland -- the real Ireland -- will not let die [...].

Yet all that seaboard is a silent land, or so we have felt it as we walked the roads of it. It is, however, a silence that excites rather than assuages: there are always presences." (Caball: 7-8).

So contagious is the gentle melancholy aroused by the Blaskets that it has reached around the world to touch me in Australia. It puzzles me as I try to account for my own sense of loss as I close the book of Tomás' life, for the moment at least. As someone "outside the culture", the passing of the Blasket community does not disturb my sense of self or nation. Though full of admiration for the lost community, I recognise its demise as a natural part of the life cycle. Tomás' society grew, flourished, matured, declined and passed away according to the laws of existence that bind us all. As Tomás said himself, no man lives beyond his day, and this is true of societies as well.

My sense of loss is for the pact between an author and his reader that is now ending, for a dialogue that is drawing to a close. My sadness is for a voice that I heard, that is now stilled but is still ringing in my ears. Tomás wrote that he might not be forgotten. He has achieved his aim. He is read with astonishment by his new readers and fondness by his old readers. Some say the Blaskets and the writing that came from them "haunt the Irish imagination" (O'Toole: 81) but I am haunted too -- not because I am Irish but because Tomás was a great writer and I, his reader, remain captivated.

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