

The background of the cover is a photograph of a coastal landscape. In the foreground, there are stone ruins and a white building with a dark roof. The middle ground shows a green hillside leading down to a blue body of water. In the distance, there are more islands and a cloudy sky.

# ON AN IRISH ISLAND

*The Lost World of the Great Blasket*

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ROBERT KANIGEL

"Wonderfully vivid . . . A remote setting, a handful of young visitors, a collection of colorful locals, an ancient language and a story that spans half a century. . . . An exuberant and delightful book.

—*The Wall Street Journal*

*Faux Real*

*High Season*

*Vintage Reading*

*The One Best Way*

*The Man Who Knew Infinity*

*Apprentice to Genius*

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# On an Irish Island

ROBERT KANIGEL



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*Jacket photograph: Children by the Waves. Unknown photographer. Courtesy of Ionad an Bhlascaoid/The Blasket Centre Jacket design by Joe Montgomery*

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For Dottie, Peg, and Elaine  
City Slicker Farm, 1959–1960

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# Prologue

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Nineteen twenty-three was barely yesterday, a lot like today. People lived in suburbs and commuted to work. They traveled by tram and subway. They drove automobiles. They went to the movies, subscribed to magazines, looked up in the sky to see airplanes. Vaccines, flush toilets, best-seller lists, billboards, cameras, and power lines were part of their lives. The memories were fresh with visions of a war that killed with industrial efficiency. Picasso, Stravinsky, and Virginia Woolf had taught them to see through fractured lenses. Telegrams, telephones, newsreels, and radios had shrunk the world. If you were part of the great and growing middle class and lived in a place like Chicago or Berlin, London or New York, life could be pretty fast. You had your ambitions, you wanted more, you lived a busy life.

In the spring of 1923, George Thomson, a nineteen-year-old English boy, finished his first year at King's College, Cambridge. He'd grown up in a suburb of London. His father was a chartered accountant who hoped his son would follow in his footsteps. He was smart, had won a coveted scholarship to King's, was destined for distinction. At the university, he was a student of the classics, and later, when he took its daunting Tripos exams, he'd earn first-class honors.

But had he been able to, George Thomson later said, he would have taken a different path. All through his last years of secondary school, while studying Euripides and Plato, Ovid and Cicero, and then on into his first year at King's, he had been distracted by the events of the world. During his first two years at Dulwich College (a preparatory school), European armies still grappled along the blood-drenched Western Front. Yet it was not the Great War that compelled George's adolescent attention, but events in Ireland. Little rural Ireland, off the main stage of the world, had, beginning in 1916, endured seven years of rebellion and war—first against England, then in a cruel civil war that shed more Irish blood than had the British. It was Ireland, and all things Irish, that captivated young George Thomson.

Now, in August 1923, with the violence stilled at last, it could seem that the whole tortured recent history of Ireland had conspired to propel him across England, across the Irish Sea, across the breadth of Ireland, to a tiny quay at the foot of a precipitous cliff on the Dingy Peninsula. He was at the westernmost tip of Europe. He was in one of the wildest corners of Ireland, so forlorn, neglected, and poor that its people had been leaving it for America for almost a hundred years. George was bound for a tiny village perched on the eastern face of a great rock rising from the water three miles off the coast. Rowed by rough-hewn, wood-sweated men across this unpredictable stretch of cold Atlantic to that tiny backward slip of an island, he would step from the modern world into what novelist E. M. Forster would call, with only modest exaggeration, a "neolithic civilization." When he left the island six weeks later, he would be close to tears. The island would grip his imagination, grant him friendship and love that would overfill his life, forever alter his ideas about what life could be at its sweetest, and about how the world ought to be at its best.

The Great Blasket island, or An Blascaod Mór, as it was rendered in Irish Gaelic, is the large

among a group of seven small islands just off the west coast of County Kerry. For at least two centuries before Thomson's coming, about 150 people lived there, in stone houses dug into the slope of the hill facing the mainland. Virtually all were fishermen who, with their families, wrested precarious livelihoods from the sea that washed the island's shores. They hunted rabbits, harvested oats and potatoes from mediocre soil. They had limited relations with towns on the mainland, which they rowed across open water in small boats to reach. Evil weather sometimes kept them on the island for weeks at a time. They had no electricity, no plumbing, no church, no priests, no police, no taverns, no shops. They spoke Irish, though few could read or write it. English was for most of them unintelligible.

One summer's day in 1923, the way he told the story later, an islander, Maurice O'Sullivan, was "looking after a sheep on the hill-side, the sun yellowing in the west and a lark singing above." On the path ahead he saw a man approach, someone in "knee-breeches and a shoulder-cloak, his head bare and a shock of dark brown hair gathered straight back on it. He was growing afraid. There was not his like in the Island."

"God save you," said the stranger, in English.

"God and Mary save you, noble person," said O'Sullivan in the Gaelic ritual reply.

The young men sat down for a smoke. The visitor "tried to say something in Irish but O'Sullivan recalled. He couldn't, and tried again in English.

The Englishman was George Thomson, and after six weeks with O'Sullivan, talking together as they tramped over the hills and across the beach, his Irish grew readier and more fluid. Year after year Thomson returned to the island, his friendship with O'Sullivan deepening. Bound for international distinction as a classical scholar, he would encourage O'Sullivan to write an exuberant memoir of growing up on the Blaskets, *Fiche Blián ag Fás*, and help translate it into English as *Twenty Years A-Growing*.

"There is no doubt but youth is a fine thing, though my own is not over yet and wisdom comes with age," O'Sullivan begins the story of his life. It's a high-stepping affair, brimming with energy, filled with youthful adventure, the inspiration for a film script Dylan Thomas left unfinished at his death. E. M. Forster wrote the introduction. It would be reviewed adoringly in Europe and America, appear in numerous translations, earn a permanent place in the Irish literary tradition. For Thomson, the companionship he enjoyed with O'Sullivan and the other islanders with whom he played, worked, danced, and traded tales reached deep into his life. He'd remember always the bleak beauty of the Blasket, its conviviality, the warmth of his relations with the villagers. His friendship with Maurice was the most important of his life.

Even in stripped-down form this makes for a nice story. Yet, astonishingly, it was not the first time, or the last, that it or something like it had been enacted on the Blaskets. Eighteen years before, in 1905, the playwright John Millington Synge, a key figure in the Irish literary revival and friend of the poet Yeats, visited the Great Blasket; the island touched him, too. Anyone who'd lived with Irish peasants, he wrote in the preface to his most famous play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, "will know that the wildest sayings and ideas in this play are tame indeed" compared with those heard in the Aran Islands, which he'd also visited, or on the Blaskets.

That's how it was all through the first decades of the twentieth century: Thomson and Synge were just two in a line of scholars and writers who first came to the Blaskets to learn



spoken Irish, influenced islanders to see themselves through new eyes, and helped spawn a remarkable literary flowering—a succession of books, originally in Irish, but later widely translated. First Tomás O’Crohan’s *The Islandman*, in all its dignity and grace. Then O’Sullivan’s joyful *Twenty Years A-Growing*, and Peig Sayers’s bleak and wrenching *Peig*. Though stylistically distinct, each told of a vulnerable, wave-lapped few square miles breathing its own unlikely island air, aware of its historical fragility. “I have done my best,” wrote O’Crohan, “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.”

With the success of these first books came other memoirs, collections of letters, works of history, linguistics, and folklore. All billowing up from a tiny, sea-bound community largely cut off from the twentieth century. “If we put them all together, side by side,” George Thomson said years later, “we have a little library of fifteen or sixteen volumes, the Blasket Library. And this is something unique. There’s no such collection in any other language, a collective portrait of a pre-capitalist village community, made by the villagers themselves, at the very moment of transition from speech to writing.” Several of the books achieved international renown. Many remain in print. One was required reading in the Irish national school system for three decades. Together, they represent a poor Irish-speaking peasantry, their hard lives close and cooperative, rich with story, song, and dance, cut off from the clamor of modern life—and, inevitably, reflecting back at us our own soft, technology-thick lives.

*On an Irish Island* tells the story of George Thomson and the other scholarly visitors to the island in the years after 1905, their impact on the island and its literary legacy, and on the islanders to whom they grew so attached. It tells of a dying language and what hope of its revival meant to Ireland in the early twentieth century; of the Irish oral tradition as it was lived on the Great Blasket and embodied in Ireland’s most famous storytellers, and in the lilting cadences of Irish and its stage-Irish imitators; of life on this stone outcropping in the Atlantic before it was abandoned, its residents dispersed to the mainland and to America, its life cut short by the irresistible forces of modernity.

I learned the rudiments of the Blasket story only in 2005, on my honeymoon in western Ireland, where my wife and I had gone on the recommendation of friends. On our second day there, in the tiny sea-facing town of Dún Chaoin, we visited the Blasket Centre, established by the Irish government in the 1990s—on the mainland, just up from the sea, within sight of the island—to tell the Blasket story. And there, as it happens, Sarah and I had our new marriage’s first, um, *tiff*.

We had been at the Centre for several hours, viewing a documentary, taking in images and artifacts from a vanished world, wholly absorbed. But enough is enough, and by now it was late afternoon. I was in the bookshop, irretrievably lost among the Blasket writers. But Sarah was finally ready to go—and by now a little put off by her new husband’s seeming obliviousness to all but these books. Were we to spend our *entire* honeymoon in the Blasket Centre?

We left. We returned to America. But the Blaskets had gotten under my skin. And it wasn’t alone the islanders who fascinated me, but the visitors—writers and scholars from Oslo and London, Dublin and Paris, city people all, who’d left behind their libraries and dusty archives, traveled across the breadth of England and Ireland, and found friendship, and sometimes

love, in this harsh, remote, astonishingly beautiful place.

I didn't just then think about writing about the Blaskets myself; that came some months later. I'd been reading a book on quite a different subject, one with no trace of Irish content. It was called *Wrapped in Rainbows*, Valerie Boyd's fine biography of the legendary African American novelist Zora Neale Hurston, author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. During the 1920s, when Hurston was a graduate student in anthropology at Columbia University, her adviser sent her to America's black rural South to collect folklore—songs and stories and other ways of knowing—from her own people. There, a world opened up to her, unseen, unknown, disappearing, that her city friends could scarcely have imagined.

Reading Boyd's book, I was struck by how similar it seemed to the vanished world and culture of the Great Blasket. And on both sides of the Atlantic, in Hurston's black South and at the edge of West Kerry, and at almost the same time, people realized that it was only so long before the lore of the people, their old rural community life removed from the clamor of the city, was gone entirely; that in its disappearance something precious was being lost; that vanishing with these slower societies were just those sweet, simple satisfactions and deep human relationships that modern life seemed to elbow out of the way. The Blasket story, I came to realize, wasn't only about one little corner of Ireland. In telling it, I could get at a bigger, more urgent story, as central to this century as to the last, about how we live now and what we've left behind, and at what cost.

Gifted as they were, the Blasket writers would not have reached the rest of the world without their life-tales and sagas were it not for the superbly educated men and women, so different from themselves, who visited their island. George Thomson and the others came from the great intellectual capitals of Europe, looking for something. But what they found, it turned out, meant more to them than what they had come to find. And it is this surprising, almost freakish collision between two worlds that lies at the center of my story. It is a story of friendship, fellowship, and love across a great cultural divide—between a bare speck of a village and the great world of literature and learning; between peasant fishermen and scholars mostly still in their impressionable twenties who, before coming to the island, led bookish lives cloistered in seminar room and library, caught up in a twentieth century that sometimes seemed too shallow and too fast.

The word "friendship" is not entirely unproblematic, or without irony. Money sometimes changed hands between visitor and villager. Favors were traded. But whatever they exacted were, these relationships forged in work, song, and talk around the fire blossomed again and again on this enchanted isle, and often proved lasting, deep, and loving. That's about how it was for a tall, imperious Norwegian who'd go on to become one of the world's leading linguists, Carl Marstrand, twenty-three when he visited the island in 1907; for a Yorkshireman more at home in the Middle Ages than in his home in London, Robin Flower, twenty-eight on his first visit in 1910; for a lonely Irishman with a wild heart from Killarney, Brian Kelly, twenty-eight; for a charming and brilliant Frenchwoman, product of Paris's elite academies, Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, twenty-three; for Synge, thirty-four; and, particularly, for George Thomson, twenty.

It would be hard to imagine a coterie of people more brilliant, more adventurous, more deeply interesting than these. Brian Kelly's short life is shrouded in mystery. Marie-Louise Sjoestedt's, too, ends prematurely, in tragedy, in German-occupied Paris. Each

unforgettable in his or her own way. But it would be useless to deny that Thomson holds a special place among them for me; his story touches every facet of the Blasket saga and ranges across this book from end to end.

His innocuous, overfamiliar name might suggest a white-bread sort of Englishman; he was anything but. He had enormous spirit and integrity. He was moved by the injustice he saw around him; he would become a Marxist, visit the Soviet Union, later serve on the Central Committee of the British Communist Party. Arriving in Ireland deficient in modern Irish, he would come to speak a Blasket Irish the equal of any of the islanders'. He was a passionate, caring, loving man, would write to his wife that Irish had thirty-nine ways to express "darling" and bestow on her a bountiful sampling of them.

Thomson's fascination with all things Irish was stirred and enriched in the Blaskets, but began earlier. His father was an Ulsterman. Both parents showed Irish republican leanings. While a student in prep school, he followed with revulsion accounts of the Black and Tan massacres, when British mercenaries, apparently picked for their brutality, laid waste to Irish homes. Come Monday afternoons, he'd tear off his school uniform and take the train into London for classes in Irish at the Gaelic League. And long before being rowed across to the Great Blasket that day in 1923, before even going up to King's, he gathered books of Irish verse and grammar and, at age seventeen, inscribed them with his name in Irish: Seoirse M. Tomás.

## The West

[1905]

Before George Thomson, of course, others had crossed the three miles of Blasket Sound that separated the Great Blasket from the mainland, or had explored the smaller rocky islands, mostly uninhabited, that were its neighbors, the so-called Lesser Blaskets. They recorded bird sightings. They took geological samples. Most never said much about their visits—or, less unaccountably unmoved by the awful splendor of the islands, perhaps had nothing much to say in the first place. Revenue agents of the English king occasionally appeared; at least once, the story goes, islanders pelted them from the overhanging cliffs with rocks, chasing them back to their boats. Protestant missionaries visited, too, determined to turn islanders away from dark Papist ignorance.

In 1843, Mrs. D. P. Thomson, wife of a Protestant cleric on the mainland (and unrelated to George Thomson), visited the Great Blasket. It was difficult even to get onto the island, she wrote in a book published a few years later, since one must “take advantage of the swell of the wave and leap on the rocks” from the shifting, unsteady platform of the boat. Once on land, she “was more affected than I have the power to describe, by witnessing human nature reduced to the savage state it is among these islanders, within almost ear-shot of religious light and civilization.” Mrs. Thomson told of local women and children crowded into the schoolroom, “chewing seaweed incessantly,” who pressed lengths of it “into their mouths with their thumbs in a most savage manner, and spat about unceremoniously at will; they touched my dress, turned me round and round to look at every separate article, laughed with admiration at my shoes and gloves, kissed and stroked my old silk gown.” After submitting to this inspection, she proceeded to speak to them of Jesus Christ.

In 1892, Jeremiah Curtin arrived on the island. An American from Milwaukee, Harvard-trained, Curtin was a linguist visiting West Kerry in search of folklore. New Year’s Day found him in Tralee. He took the train to Dingle, came around through Ventry and the neighboring villages, visited Ballyferriter, and finally was rowed out to the Great Blasket. There he found “perhaps 20 straw-thatched cabins, the thatch held in place by a network of straw ropes fastened down with stones.” Piles of manure stood in front of each, cattle being kept in the pens at night. Curtin was in search of Gaelic myths he’d been assured he’d be able to gather like flowers from a field. But the pickings were slim: “I care more about getting the price of a bottle of whiskey than about old stories,” one man told him. Curtin soon left, gleaning for his trouble only a photo or two of the thatched-roof village he had too briefly visited.

The first to see the island with new eyes and tell the world about it was John Millington Synge. This preternaturally gifted playwright, this quiet brooding literary force, discovered on the island in 1905 something of the luminous spirit later visitors would find as well. He was thirty-four at the time and had less than four years to live. But in his short life, he had already gained stature as a notable figure of the literary revival then washing over Ireland. Three of his plays had been produced by the Abbey Theatre in Dublin or its predecessor

companies. In the time he had left he would write another, *The Playboy of the Western World*, swollen with such luscious language that, by one estimation, it added up to “the most fertile and vigorous poetic dialogue written for the stage since Shakespeare.” Its incidents, characters, and speech were rooted in the spoken Irish Synge heard on his visits to Ireland west, including the Blasket. Gone, from his rendering of the island, was the ugly primitivism marking earlier accounts. He found instead among the peasants there an abiding grace and dignity.

Those earlier visitors had come to the island lugging heavy loads of cultural baggage ... and so did Synge. For, by the time of his visit in 1905, the Blaskets weren't just islands in the farthest western reaches of Ireland. They were The West, which had come to stand for the deepest, purest wells of Irish nationhood.

In those days Ireland, or Eire, didn't exist as an independent state; Ireland was British. To any self-respecting Irishman of republican sympathies, of course, Ireland was *never* British, merely occupied by them. Still, for seven hundred years Ireland had been variously invaded, conquered, and colonized by England, and for centuries England's reigning monarch reigned over Ireland as well. Since the capitulation following the Battles of the Boyne and Aughrim in 1690 and 1691, feeling against the English ran deep. The Catholic-Protestant divide that had split Europe since the Reformation played out in Ireland, too. Catholics were barred from voting, serving in the Irish parliament, or sometimes even practicing their religion. Protestant landlords owned most of the land, evicting impoverished Catholic tenants at their whim. The murderous Famine of the 1840s, though set off by crop failure, had been exacerbated by English indifference. Periodically, resistance to British rule took violent form, but more often it was purely political, as in the nineteenth-century struggle for “home rule,” Charles Stewart Parnell's Irish Parliamentary Party, and various republican brotherhoods and kindred nationalist groups.

In the closing years of the nineteenth century, fresh interest in the Irish language further confounded Ireland's tortured relationship with England. Late in the same year as Jeremiah Curtin's visit to the Blaskets, on November 25, 1892, Douglas Hyde went before the newly formed Irish National Literary Society in Dublin and delivered a lecture that one critic, Declan Kiberd, would call “Ireland's declaration of cultural independence.” It bore the title “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland.”

A thirty-two-year-old linguist, son of a Church of Ireland rector, Hyde had grown up hearing old people in his native County Roscommon speaking Irish, and through their glimpsed a rich Gaelic culture he'd never encountered among his own family and the friends. *That* Ireland, he declared now, was dying. Ireland's problems lay in its rejection of all things Gaelic, and its embrace—sometimes willing, sometimes forced—of everything English. In Anglicizing themselves, he declared, the Irish “have thrown away with a light heart the best claim which we have upon the world's recognition of us as a separate nationality.” It was, he asserted, “our Gaelic past which, though the Irish race does not recognize it just now, is really at the bottom of the Irish heart.”

The Ireland of the seventh century, he reminded his listeners, was “then the school of Europe and the torch of learning”; the Dark Ages had been brightened by the wit and intellect of Irish monks, bards, and scholars. But over the past century, Ireland had become cut off

from its roots. Irish had fallen into disuse. O'Mulligans had taken English names like Baldwin. O'Hennesys were now Harringtons, Eibhlins were Ellens. Pipers and fiddlers were disappearing. The harp, long a symbol of Ireland, was becoming extinct. Irish jerseys had given way to shoddy cast-off clothes from Manchester and London.

Needed was, for example, to "set our faces against this aping of English dress, and encourage our women to spin and our men to wear comfortable frieze suits of their own wool, free from shoddy and humbug." Irish autonomy demanded sweeping de-Anglicization. "We must strive to cultivate," declared Hyde, "everything that is most racial, most smackin' of the soil, most Gaelic, most Irish, because ... this island is and will ever remain Celtic at the core."

The following year, Hyde helped establish the Gaelic League, which for the next two decades would champion a revival of Irish culture and language. Forget politics, Hyde had said; the core of Irish identity lay in the Irish language. "My own ambition," he would write later, was "language as a neutral ground upon which all Irishmen might meet." Through the last years of the nineteenth century and first decade of the twentieth, the League's influence spread. "Whatever it was ten years ago," a Dublin professor wrote in 1900 of Gaelic, "it is very much alive now.... You see Gaelic inscriptions over the shops, Gaelic on the street labels, Gaelic in advertisements, a Gaelic column in newspapers.... The Gaelic League is everywhere." Irish youth might not much care for French or German, but during these years they did for Gaelic, for Irish: "They want to learn Irish, as they want no other language on earth." And when leaders of the language movement looked around Ireland for exemplars of all that was Irish at its purest and best, they looked fixedly west.

Think of Ireland as two hundred miles across and three hundred miles north-to-south and you won't be far wrong. Across this breadth, however, its population is, and was, distributed unequally. Its two largest cities, Belfast and Dublin, both lay off inlets to the Irish Sea and faced east, to Scotland and England. The weight of its bigger, stronger English neighbor was felt unevenly across the country, too. The English first invaded in the twelfth century, expanding and colonizing from east to west, bringing with them English place-names, English families, English castles. After the Reformation, Protestantism made its strongest inroads in the east, encroaching but feebly in the west. The English language, meanwhile, squeezed out Irish until, by the 1850s, little of the native language could be heard outside parts of Counties Donegal, Mayo, Galway, and Kerry, all in the west.

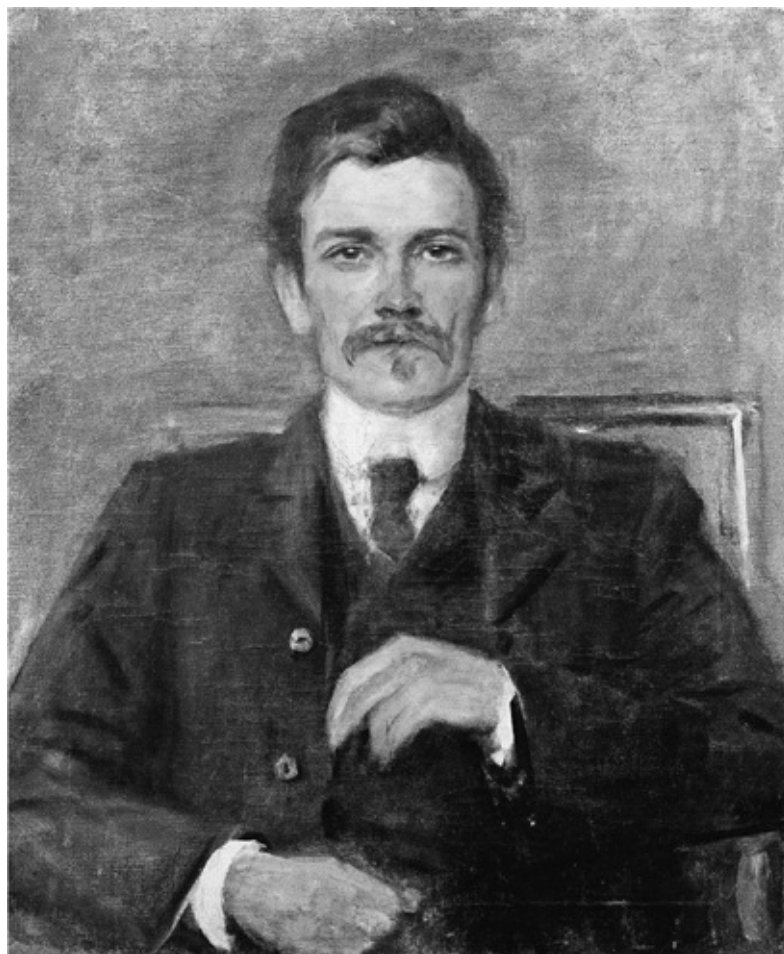
So by the time our story begins in the early years of the twentieth century, "Ireland" meant, roughly speaking, two Irelands—split not along the familiar divide of Northern Ireland and the south of recent political history, but along an east-west axis. The east was overwhelmingly English-speaking, included substantial Protestant minorities, and boasted big cities that looked like those of England and Scotland, with all their coal dust, clamor, and corruption. The poor, rural, mostly Roman Catholic west, with its Irish-speaking enclaves, was typically seen as a throwback to a simpler, purer past that elsewhere in Ireland had been overrun by the noisy and the new.

Here, though, could be found the precious seed that one day might be planted in an Irish political soil more hospitable to its growth. To Irish nationalists, historian Kevin Whelan would observe, the rural west was "the authentic Ireland, a materialization of an unsullied primordial past," the Irish-speaking Aran or Blasket islander its exemplar. To another scholar

Kevin Martin, the western islands were “part of the creation myth” of a new Ireland aborning.

And this was The West that, with its distinctive dialects, drew John Millington Synge.

Born in 1871, Synge had come out of the Dublin Ascendancy; that is, his family was long and deeply Irish, but Protestant—landed gentry from Wicklow on his father’s side. The son of a barrister, he’d studied languages at Trinity College, Dublin, at the time virtually reserved for Protestants. Settling on becoming a musician, he lived in Germany, Italy, and France. In Paris, at the Sorbonne, he came under the influence of one of Europe’s foremost Celtic scholars, H. d’Arbois de Jubainville, who nurtured in him a love of Irish. Also in Paris, he met William Butler Yeats, already a major literary figure, who recognized his talents and, in the familiar story, bestowed on him among the most famous hard nubs of literary advice ever offered and accepted. “Go to the Aran Islands,” he told Synge. “Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression.”



*Playwright John Millington Synge, around the time he visited the Great Blasket in 1905 (Illustration Credit ill.1)*

Before Synge went to the Blaskets, then, he went to Aran, three remote islands in Galway Bay, across from the mainland wilderness of Connemara. He made his first trip there in 1891, being rowed out the first time in a curragh. “It gave me a moment of exquisite satisfaction,” he wrote later, “to find myself moving away from civilisation in this rude canvas canoe of a model that has served primitive races since men first went to sea.” Between then and 1904, he returned to Aran four times, for four and a half months all told, his mastery of Irish

improving with each visit.

Synge was a swarthy, thick-necked man with a great shock of dark hair and a bushy mustache, and had all the hallmarks of healthy, virile manhood to him. But in fact he was sick much of his life—with asthma in his youth and then Hodgkin's disease, which began to afflict him in his late twenties and would kill him before he turned forty. He was, though, an energetic walker, tramping across the hills and down the dusty roads. He'd go up and talk to anybody he happened to meet. Yet he was essentially shy, his seeming gregariousness more a spur to the stories and speech of others than sign of any great need to speak himself. As every portrait of him somehow suggests, his was a silent absorbing presence. To the Aran Islanders one critic noted, Synge was "so strange and silent that no one actually knew him." His gift was to listen through those deep moody eyes, and transmute the language of fisherman and peasant, weaver and tramp, into art. First, in 1903, came *In the Shadow of the Glen*, a grim one-act comedy in which an old peasant feigns death to test his wife's fidelity. Then *Riders to the Sea*, a one-act tragedy exhibiting, by one estimation, "an almost Aeschylean starkness and grandeur."

Synge's accounts of his Aran visits had not yet been published when, early in the new century, he was drawn to another Irish-speaking enclave in the west. Separated from one another by broad ranges of English-speaking Ireland, the last remaining Irish-speaking areas, each more and more unto itself, had split into distinctive dialects. There was Donegal Irish in the north. And Connemara Irish, which is what the Aran Islanders spoke, down the coast. And Munster Irish in the southwest, which included County Kerry. The differences were notable. Most spoken Irish, for example, stressed first syllables; Munster sometimes shifted emphasis to the last. Words known in Ulster were unknown elsewhere. The country's zealous language enthusiasts exhorted Irish-learners to explore them all.

Synge felt the tug. His brother Robert had recommended a Kerry family with whom he could stay, with whom he might unearth a new bounty of Irish stories and Irish expressions. During parts of four summers Synge would visit Kerry; these yielded dialogue, plot material, and idiosyncrasies of language that would inform his later work. And on one of these trips, in July 1905, he wrote to Willie Long of Ballyferriter, County Kerry, at the western tip of the Dingle Peninsula, seeking a place more pristinely Irish yet.

If there was anything like a local aristocracy in this far-off, underpopulated little town, Willie Long—well off, loquacious, a bit of bluster to him—was it. He was a forty-six-year-old father of four sons and two daughters, a well-connected merchant, innkeeper, and schoolteacher. Local ordinance apparently barred teachers from keeping inns. So, to get around it, the lovely, ceilinged, two-story little place on the main street of Ballyferriter over which he presided bore the name of his brother instead.

Three shillings sixpence per night, or twenty-four shillings a week—that's what Synge's stay would cost, Long wrote him on stationery bearing his name and address in a riot of different typefaces. "Of course my place is not an out-and-out Hotel but I guarantee you quiet, clean, good accommodation... The worth of your money you'll have." As to Synge's abiding concern, Long reassured him: "Myself & household all speak Paddy's language still, so there's no need of any cottage for getting it." In other words, Synge could get his fill of Irish right there in Willie Long's parlor.

The gateway to the Dingle Peninsula was Tralee, a town of about ten thousand lying mo



of the way southwest across the country from Dublin. Forty miles of formidable mountains stood between it and Ballyferriter, but by 1891, a little narrow-gauge steam railroad had been slipped in among the mountains. It boasted the steepest track of any line in Ireland or England. The train never scuttled along faster than about twelve miles an hour, and often broke down. But for the first time it linked Dingle and its nearby villages, including Ballyferriter, Dún Chaoin, and the Blaskets themselves, to the rest of Ireland.

In Tralee, Synge found a boy to carry his bag across town to the depot, scene of a confused mass of peasants struggling on the platform with all sorts of baggage." Synge's narrow car was soon "filled with sacks of flour, cases of porter, chairs rolled in straw and other household goods." Under way, he overheard a woman in a shawl tell of a son who had left for England, leaving his elderly father bereft in loneliness. " 'Ah, poor fellow!' she said. 'I suppose he will get used to it like another; and wouldn't he be worse off if he was beyond the seas in Saint Louis, or the towns of America.' "

Long had written Synge that he'd arrange to pick him up where the chugging little train dropped him off in Dingle. Sure enough, when Synge arrived he found a cart, pulled by a tame mare, to take him the ten miles or so to Ballyferriter. The driver needed a little while to hoist his bags aboard and fasten them, but finally they were on their way, over and through the hills rising behind Dingle. "As the night fell the sea became like a piece of white silver on our right; and the mountains got black on our left, and heavy night smells began to come up out of the bogs."

From Long's on August 4, 1905, Synge wrote Lady Augusta Gregory, his aristocratic patroness in Dublin. Like Douglas Hyde and Synge himself an upper-class Protestant, Lady Gregory had grown up in a great house outside Dublin, where her playmates among the Irish Catholic hermits piqued her fascination with their world. Later, she would collect folklore and write plays, most of them serviceable if not inspired. But it was in funding and nurturing the Abbey Theatre, dedicated to making a national theater shot through with Irish sensibility, that she became best known. And Synge was one of her eternal triumphs. It was largely through her energies that his first two plays were produced, garnering much acclaim. Now, from Ballyferriter, her protégé wrote to her. He was "in the centre of the most Gaelic part of Munster," making progress with a dialect that, after Aran, seemed almost foreign. "I have realized that I must resuscitate my Irish this year or lose it altogether, so I am hard at work." Near Ballyferriter, lined up along the northeastern flank of a wide-necked peninsula, rose three companionable little prominences known as the Three Sisters. Jutting into the Atlantic just to the west stood spectacular Sibyl Head. One day, Synge climbed it, arriving "suddenly on the brow of a cliff, with a straight fall at one's feet of many hundred feet into the sea. It is a place of indescribable grandeur." Why did anyone remain in Dublin, London, or Paris, he mused, when it would be better "to live in a tent or hut with this magnificent sea and sky and to breathe this wonderful air."

But it wasn't for the sake of the scenery that Synge had written Willie Long in the first place; he needed someplace cut off from English, thick with Kerry Irish. And, it turned out, he wasn't getting his fill of "Paddy's language" after all; even this far west, English was too strong. So he was setting out for a more purely Irish-speaking milieu yet. As he wrote Lady Gregory, he expected it to be "even more primitive than Aran and I am wild with joy at the prospect."

On August 14, he recorded in his notebook, “I came off yesterday to the Great Blasket Island.”

That first day, a local holiday, he had gone out to the island with Long and a couple of other locals, three oarsmen powering them over the tricky swells in a *naomhóg*, pronounced “na vog,” a craft of wood lathing covered in canvas painted with black tar. The day was clear, the sea and sky blue.

As we came nearer the island, which seemed to rise like a mountain straight out of the sea, we could make out a crowd of people in their holiday clothes standing or sitting along the brow of the cliff watching our approach, and just beyond them a patch of cottages with roofs of tarred felt. A little later we doubled into a cove among the rocks, where I landed at a boat slip, and then scrambled up a steep zig-zag pathway to the head of the cliff, where the people crowded round us.



*The lower village of the Great Blasket, the fields beyond it, the White Strand below and to the right (Illustration Credit ill.2)*

It was a reception virtually identical to those other visitors would receive over the next forty years.

He stayed in the house of *an rí*, the king, who was no hereditary ruler at all but simply acknowledged for his strength and personal stature, much as tribal chieftains were in times past. His name was Pádraig Ó Catháin—Anglicized, it would be Patrick Keane—and he spoke a little English, being among the few on the island who did. Synge was given a small room just off the stone house’s main room, known simply as the kitchen. The house stood midway up the hill to which the village clung. Synge could look out his window and see the mountain before him, green with grass but barren of trees, its steep slope silhouetted against the sky.

“I have been here for a week today,” he wrote Lady Gregory on August 20, “and in some ways I find it the most interesting place I have ever been in. I sleep in a corner of the King’s room and in the morning—on state occasions—the princess” (he meant the king’s young

daughter, Cáit; he never grew tired of such winking references to island “royalty”) “comes when we awake and gives us each a dram of whiskey and lights our pipes and then leaves to talk.” They talked mostly in Irish—his being better than the king’s English. In the evening, the house filled up with sometimes twenty or thirty people, talking, drinking, and dancing.

All during his island stay, he kept up his correspondence. He wrote to Max Meyerfeld, his German translator, helping him with Irish-tinged obscurities in his stage dialogue; “reeks were mountains, “creels” were wicker baskets for fish or turf. He wrote to Lady Gregory eating, reading, and writing in the ever-busy kitchen, he explained, he’d not yet been able to read her latest play, but on a jaunt out on the cliffs he’d dipped into it and liked it. He wrote to Yeats, commenting on Lady Gregory’s play and other matters of the big world. And each day he spent among the islanders, hiking around the island, playing music, happy in the company of his host and hostesses.

He kept a notebook—“Notes in Ballyferriter and the Great Blasket Island, August 1905”—but also took pictures. And both tell of a place far better off than others, like Jeremiah Curtin or Mrs. Thomson, had intimated a generation before. The villagers were poor, certainly. But the period right after the turn of the century was a relatively prosperous one, and you can see it in Synge’s photos. In one, taken in front of the king’s house, the sun streams in from high overhead. The men, in sweaters and caps, don’t look ragged. They don’t look forlorn. The king himself, head amiably cocked, a little welcome smile on his face, a picture of confidence and composure, wears a jaunty flared hat. His daughter Cáit could pass fashion muster even today. She wears a long skirt, perhaps from America, with a cinched waist, decorated with fabric strips at the hem; a belt with a metal buckle that looks like the Celtic pewter you find today in Irish handicrafts stores; a string of beads down the front of her long-sleeved blouse with little flounces at the wrists.

Not present in the photo is Cáit’s elder sister, the king’s other daughter. Synge would refer to her in his notebook as “the little queen,” and in the published account of his visit as “the little hostess.” Her proper name was Máire Ní Chatháin, or Mary Keane. On the island she was Máire Pheats Mhicí—Mary, daughter of Pádraig, granddaughter of Mike. Born in 1888, she’d lost her mother when she was about eight, soon after the birth of her youngest brother, Seán. When Synge arrived on the island that August, she had been married since the previous February to an island man, Mícheál, but was still tending her father’s house, where Synge was staying. “She is a small, beautifully-formed woman,” Synge wrote, “with brown hair and eyes—instead of the black hair and blue eyes that are usually found with this type in Ireland—and delicate feet and ankles that are not common in these parts.”

It is this beautiful woman of twenty-three who, it’s been said, was Synge’s inspiration for one of the immortal figures of stage history, a character named Pegeen Mike.

On his first visit to the Aran Islands, in 1899, Synge wrote, he’d “heard a story of a Connaught man who killed his father with the blow of a spade when he was in passion, and then fled to this island and threw himself on the mercy of some of the natives with whom he was said to be related.” The story lingered with him because, in September 1904, about a year before his visit to the Blaskets, he began work on a new play built on such a premise: *The Playboy of the Western World*. The words of the title carry different currency to modern readers; Synge’s “playboy” was a kind of trickster or rogue.

Into a “country public house or shebeen, very rough and untidy,” according to Synge’s stage directions, stumbles Christy Mahon, ragged, dirty, and frightened. Pub denizens crowd around him. What has he done? An ordinary thief, is he? No, nothing so small, he says; he killed his father. With each new horrific detail, admiration for Christy unaccountably grows, which spurs him to ever more articulate, even poetic descriptions of his crime. Soon, there he is, fairly standing taller on the page, rogue and hero, recruited for organized sport on the beach, and winning, sought by all the women and girls.

A play that makes its protagonist the killer of his father, and shows the local peasantry sympathetic to him and the women among them fawning over him, might be expected to encounter a hostile notice here and there. And, indeed, when, in early 1907, it was produced at the Abbey, *The Playboy of the Western World* raised a fury. Many in the audience hooted it down. Police had to be called in to contain the crowd. Night after night the protests went on. Editorials lambasted the play for unpatriotic heresies and as an affront to Irish womanhood. The Playboy Riots, they’ve been called since.

But *The Playboy* is no trifling asterisk of theatrical history. It is unforgettable, wondrous and strange, clothed in exotically heightened language far removed from any English we can recognize, its dialogue stocked with peculiar constructions, unfamiliar turns of phrase. Sometimes its words are not English at all but borrowed from Irish—like *streeleen* for “idle conversation”—that Synge took down from Blasket Islanders and recorded in his notebook.

When his boasts of a wicked crime are first doubted, Christy replies, “That’s an unkind thing to be saying to a poor orphaned traveller, has a prison behind him, and hanging before and hell’s gap gaping below.” But while some of the best lines go to Christy, many others go to the daughter of the pub owner, Margaret Flaherty, or Pegeen Mike—roughly, “Little Pegeen daughter of Michael.” She’s “a wild-looking girl,” as Synge describes her, about twenty. At the play opens, she’s supposed to be marrying an oafish, inconsiderable local boy, Shawn Keogh, toward whom her attitude veers between teasing and contempt.

Enter Christy. When Pegeen Mike first hears his father-killing story, she believes not a word of it. “You’re only saying it,” she says. “You did nothing at all. A soft lad the like of you wouldn’t slit the wind pipe of a screeching sow.” But soon she’s won over by an eloquence that, stirred by his strangely welcoming reception from the others, fairly leaps up from him. Pretty soon she’s addressing Christy with what Synge describes as “a honeyed voice.” She falls for him, hard. “And to think it’s me is talking sweetly, Christy Mahon, and I the fright of seven townlands for my biting tongue. Well, the heart’s a wonder.”

An early critic, Percival Presland Howe, called Pegeen “one of the most beautiful and living figures in all drama.” Who in Synge’s life might have inspired her? Maybe, from a literary imagination as fertile as Synge’s, we have no business asking for any such too-easy correspondence between life and art. And yet the question beckons. Distinguished Synge scholar Ann Saddlemyer, an editor of Synge’s plays and correspondence, favors actress Moll Allgood, Synge’s love during the final years of his life; Allgood would herself play Pegeen when *The Playboy* premiered in Dublin. Synge’s biographers David H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens, on the other hand, assert without qualification that the “prototype” for Pegeen Mike was his “little hostess” on the Blasket.

But if Máire Ní Chatháin somehow inspired the immortal Pegeen, one wonders just how. Did she make a physical impression on Synge? Something in her personality? In how she

spoke? Certainly Synge's seemingly domestic Blasket "hostess" does not at first blush suggest fiery Pegeen.

Just as certainly, though, she is the most memorable figure in Synge's Blasket account—just as Pegeen is in *The Playboy*. Synge devotes to her a closely observed poem, "On an Island" warmly appreciative of their time together:

You've stuffed my pillow, stretched my sheet,  
And filled the pan to wash your feet,  
You've cooped the pullets, wound the clock,  
And rinsed the young men's drinking crock;  
And now we'll dance to jigs and reels,  
Nailed boots chasing girls' naked heels....

The real Máire and the fictional Pegeen are about the same age. Both tend to their fatherly affairs, presiding over the place where most of the action takes place. Both do so ably; and their actions suggest competence and lively intelligence; Máire, like Pegeen, is a "big" figure, no mere drudge supplying a servant's labor in exchange for the ten pence a week Synge paid for room and board. And just as Pegeen showers Christy with attention once she falls under his spell, so Máire does Synge.

On several occasions, they are alone together. On his first night on the island she actually puts him to bed, just as Pegeen Mike does Christy at a gentle moment in the play—chastely, to be sure, yet with a warming intimacy. She lights a candle, carries it into his room beyond the kitchen, removes her apron, fastens it to the window in lieu of a blind, only then leaving him to himself.

Once, when returning in the evening from a walk along the island ridge, Synge is joined by two young women, with whom he walks back to the village. An old woman laughs at the sight of them. "Well, aren't you in good fortune this night, stranger," she says, in Synge's telling, "to be walking up and down in the company of women?" "I am, surely," he answered. "Isn't that the best thing to be doing in the whole world?"

Indeed, Synge was always more at ease with women than with men. "He was shy and inclined to silence with men," his biographers write of him, "but all too willing to lay bare his troubles and his dreams to a sympathetic and sensitive woman." Women drew him out, much as Pegeen and the other island women do Christy. He'd observed of Aran that "the direct sexual instincts are not weak on the island," the women apparently less troubled by Victorian fastidiousness than in Dublin or London; as he put it, they were "before conventionality." Something similarly free applied to the Blaskets; both in his notebooks and his published account, Synge pictures an unexpectedly easy and porous border country between the sexes.

So it is, certainly, between him and Máire, the little hostess. She seems so *interested* in him, so frankly curious about all he does and says. After a hike around the island, he returns to the house to write letters. She finishes up the breakfast chores, comes over, sits by him on the floor, pulls out her hairpins, and begins combing her hair, idly questioning him about his correspondents: Who is this that you're writing to? Where do they live? Are they married or single? How many children have they? Later, Synge takes out some photos from his travel album which Máire, and some other women, examine closely. She is especially taken with those showing babies or children. "As she put her hands on my shoulders, and leaned over to look

at them, with the confidence that is so usual in these places, I could see that she had her full share of the passion for children which is powerful in all women who are permanently and profoundly attractive.”

Máire may or may not have directly inspired Pegeen. But something in Synge’s island flirtation with her—for that, surely, is what it was—recalls Christy and Pegeen; the situation, I think, as much as the person, left the lasting imprint. Like Christy Mahon in the glow of Pegeen’s attentions, we can almost see Synge puff up with masculine pride in the warmth of Máire’s closeness and the fullness of her attentions.

When an editor asked him for a series of articles devoted to the Blaskets like those he had done about the Arans, Synge wrote back to say he hadn’t enough material. But his trip to the Great Blasket had touched him deeply, in some ways more even than his Aran visits; in his introduction to a collection of Synge’s travel essays, Nicholas Grene calls it “the most intimate experience Synge had of the lives of the people.” And of course he *did* write about it. Much of what the world first learned of the Blaskets owes to Synge’s account of his West Kerry travels, first published in 1907 in the journal *The Shanachie* and later appearing in book form along with some of his other travel writings.

His West Kerry account, spanning some seventy pages, was studded with song lyrics and conversations with men and women he met along the way. He told of a man lamenting the death of the Irish language, of the circus in Dingle, of hikes among the sea-facing cliffs, of Kerry’s “wonderful air, which is like wine in one’s teeth.” He wrote of the Great Blasket cottages, its rabbit-riddled mounds, its children, its dancing, his tramps across the island. One time, he

walked through a boreen towards the north-west, between a few plots of potatoes and little fields of weeds that seem to have gone out of cultivation not long ago. Beyond these I turned up a sharp, green hill, and came out suddenly on the broken edge of a cliff. The effect was wonderful. The Atlantic was right underneath; then I could see the sharp rocks of several uninhabited islands, a mile or two off ... the lesser Blaskets. The whole sight of wild islands and sea was as clear and cold and brilliant as what one sees in a dream, and alive with the singularly severe glory that is in the character of this place.

Despite its seeming warmth and sympathy, its interest in the islanders and delight in the surroundings, Synge’s published account did not exempt him from criticism. Some islanders saw some of his descriptions as slights: Did the apron-on-the-window story suggest Máire’s care and hospitality ... or a lack of proper curtains? At least one scholar, Irene Lucchitelli, would write him off as a “cultural tourist.” To her, Synge’s “emphasis on wildness suggests a primitive simplicity that denies the social complexities of living in such a tightly structured society.” His social reticence, his tendency to *take in* rather than volubly express himself “shows him to be a silent observer who took what he needed yet gave little of himself.”

This, I think, is harsh. Synge’s account was probably the first to imbue with sympathy and dramatic force a place that in the past, when it had come to the attention of the world at all, had typically been treated badly. It is a commonplace, of course, to say that anything a writer writes says as much about him as it does about his subject. Synge *was* selective; he saw what

he saw and not what he didn't see, extracting from his time on the island those elements he wished, or needed, to express, and not others. He wrote much about what he had seen on the island, but, inevitably, left out much as well—including a number of insights and observations, excluded from the published account, that he recorded in his journal.

It is late August. After sixteen days, Synge is leaving the island. His host heads down to the slip to prepare the boat. Máire offers to slice some bread and wrap it in a clean handkerchief to take with him. But he might never be able to return it to her, he says. Don't worry, he tells her telling him, surely her handkerchief is "a nicer thing to have round my bread than a piece of paper." Finally, the king rows him across the sound and arranges with a local farmer to take him and his bags to Ballyferriter. The king kisses his hand in farewell, he's loaded on a cart with an old woman and a little girl, and he's off, the island consigned to memory.

At Willie Long's in Ballyferriter, Synge sits down to dinner in the parlor, caught up in a bout of longing. "I am sitting within the four whitewashed walls of this little hotel," he writes, "with a book and a lamp and paper and ink and a pen. That is my world, instead of the living world I have come from, where there is the princess, and the little queen, and the old king, and all their company." He imagines them on his departure wandering back from the head of the cliff in twos and threes and gathering again in the kitchen of the king. "The two worlds, their world and mine, are very different."

But then he crosses out this last sentence. "They have an island," he writes instead, "and I have an ink-pot."

A few months later, in January 1906, Synge got a brief note from the island king in awkward English, thanking him for a letter and pictures Synge had sent. The king forwarded the best wishes of Máire and her younger sister, wrote of the lovely weather, of boats coming back each day stuffed with fish. Reaching Synge at almost the same time was a letter from Berlin, advising him of harsh business realities, of German theater managers disdainful of English plays. "Do let me have the Ms. [manuscript] soon," he was implored.

Synge was a man of Dublin, Paris, and Berlin, and of the Aran Islands and the Blaskets, too. He was thirty-four when he came to the island. In his short life, he'd been raised a Protestant by a pious mother, but rejected religion. He had once seriously weighed becoming a musician. He'd led the bohemian life in Paris, with early loves there and in Germany. He studied languages in the Sorbonne; written plays performed in Dublin and elsewhere in Europe; formed attachments with Yeats and Lady Gregory—but also with an Araner he gave the name Michael, and with Máire on the Blasket. He was an inveterate student of human personality, an artist of consummate genius who created a whole new language of mixed Irish and English that was entirely his own. He was a complex man, who led a complex life with brain, body, and heart, a friend of fishermen, a creator of immortal art.

René Agostini, a scholar who wrote of Synge's relationship to the peasants he met in the Arans and Blaskets, described him as "aspiring to simplicity but incapable of it"—which could just as well describe most of those who would follow Synge to the Blaskets.

## The Fine Flower of Their Speech

[1907]

The islanders whom Synge met in 1905 could trace their roots on the Great Blasket not to the immemorial past, or even to the Middle Ages, but only to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the arrival from the mainland of fewer than a dozen families. To give them, for the time being, their more familiar English names, they were Kearneys, Guiheens, Dunlevy, Crohans, Sheas, and Keanes, and a little later O'Connors, O'Sullivan, Dalys, and a few others. Island lore and archeological evidence tell of people who lived earlier on the Great Blasket and its smaller neighbors. One was poet and warrior Pierce Ferriter, who gave the town of Ballyferriter its name, and who reputedly stood fast against the English from a protected cove along the northern flank of the island where he could slay them with impunity; he was executed by them in 1653. The vestiges of a small fort halfway back along the ridge of the island attest to still earlier inhabitants, as do the remains of some stone huts perhaps associated with an early Christian monastic settlement. But it was only with the Kearneys, Guiheens, and the others that the first permanent community emerged on the tip of the island that faced the mainland.

Shards of island history tell of rents paid to distant landlords, of a ship from the Spanish Armada flung on the rocks of Blasket Sound, of other shipwrecks and their cargoes helping islanders get through the Famine. But Synge and subsequent visitors saw little by way of historical remnant. What struck them as they trudged up the zigzag path from the break in the rocks that served as pier was bustling life—children, women, and men setting out in their boats, hunting rabbits, cooking, cutting peat, tending to animals, talking a stream of Irish among themselves. After three miles of open water in a little boat, the visitor was abruptly *there*, in a stone village dug into the side of the hill that shot up from the sea's edge, the mainland now seeming inconsiderable and remote.

The island itself was about three miles long and half a mile wide, shaped like an ineptly cast arrowhead aimed southwest. On its northeast flank (farthest from the point, where it might be affixed to the arrow shaft) stood the village itself, with its twenty-eight houses. That, anyway, is the figure normally given. The roofless ruins today, plaited with outbuildings and low stone walls, don't make for easy counting.

But the houses were mere backdrop for the animal strivings of 150 humans, as well as the donkeys, chickens, and sheep that were as much a part of village life. Typically of one or two rooms, the houses were tied together by interlaced paths gradually worn into, or cut into, the sloping ground. From their chimneys issued smoke from fires built from peat gathered on the back side of the island, dried in little stone structures there, then borne across the island on the backs of donkeys laden with wicker panniers. There were no trees, none. There was plenty of living green, but it was all pasturage, over wide stretches of the island, and some and a few low bushes.

It was a place of sheer rock faces, eroding gullies, sharp projections into the sea, seabirds



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