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# The Like of Us Will Never Be Again" A Comparative Analysis of the Contributions of the Basket Authors: Peig Sayers, Tomás O Criomhthain, and Muiris O Suilleabhain

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“The Like of Us Will Never Be Again”

A Comparative Analysis of the Contributions of the Blasket Authors:

Peig Sayers, Tomás O Criomhthain, and Muiris O Suilleabhain

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Abstract:

This paper will discuss, compare, and contrast the three main works of the Blasket Island authors: *Peig*, by Peig Sayers, *The Islandman* by Tomas O'Crohan, and *Twenty Years A-Growing* by Maurice O'Sullivan. It will seek to identify unique elements of style, content, and purpose among the three authors, and in doing so will illuminate each piece's contributions to Blasket lore. Collectively, the paper should serve as a thorough introduction to Blasket literature and its overall place in Irish literature.

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*“The Blasket Islands are three miles off Ireland’s Dingle Peninsula. Until their evacuation just after the Second World War, the lives of the 150 or so Blasket Islanders had remained unchanged for centuries. A rich oral tradition of story-telling, poetry, and folktales kept alive the legends and history of the islands, and has made their literature famous throughout the world. The seven Blasket Island books published by Oxford University Press contain memoirs and reminiscences from within the literary tradition evoking a way of life which has now vanished.”*

*(This brief introduction to the Great Blasket Islands precedes Oxford editions of Blasket literature, including Muiris O’Sullivan and Tomás O’Crohan’s autobiographies.)*

The Great Blasket Islands consist of six rocky outcrops in Dingle Bay, some more habitable than others. Only the Great Blasket, and to a certain extent Inishvickillaun, boasted constant populations of farmers and fishermen scratching out a living at times, enjoying the rich spoils of shipwrecks at others. The Island community spoke exclusively Gaelic among themselves, with a few members having enough English to communicate with mainlanders from Dunquin, where mail was sent and where eventually many would relocate.

As Ireland began to reassert its traditional culture, scholars turned to these last few bastions of pure Gaelic and oral tradition. The Great Blasket Island produced three important autobiographies within seven years from 1929-1936. These were *Peig* (1936), by Peig Sayers, *The Islandman* (1929), by Tomás O’Crohan, and *Twenty Years A-Growing* (1933), by Muiris O’Sullivan. These autobiographies were prompted by visitors to the island community and a growing interest in the declining lifestyle. These books were successful and more people came to the islands on “pilgrimages to savor the old-time life which still continued there or to learn or perfect their knowledge of the Irish language” (Suilleabhain 88). The movement continued and tourism increased until the island communities ceased to exist.

The literary reclamation both captured and some might say destroyed the oral tradition of the Blasket authors. Critic Ciaran Ross argues that the mainland’s proliferation of these biographers had as its objective “the invention of a Blasket literary tradition founded on orality and vocality” (120). There is no doubt that the interest in the Blasket Islands, like that of the Aran Islands, was part of a larger nationalist movement. As Mark Quigley argues:

Like many national cultures emerging from the crucible of colonialism, Irish culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries frequently seeks to ground itself in a rugged soil as far removed from the colonial metropole and the inroads of colonialism as possible. In the Irish case, this involves a turn toward the western part of the country, especially those areas where the Gaelic language remains ascendant. (382)

The Blasket community was embraced for several reasons beyond its Gaelic linguist tradition; the nationalist movement encouraged the oral tradition as reminiscent of a pre-Anglo Irish sensibility, a “community that largely resists the imposition of colonial authority,” an awareness of Irish mythology, and a pre-capitalist community (Quigley 383). All of these together made the Blasket Islands part of the “creation myth of the Irish state” (Maher 263). Ireland clung to Blasket living as a capsule of pre-history, much like ancient Greece. In fact, scholar George Thomson found “a window into the poetry of Homeric Greece,” E.M. Forester found the Neolithic Age, and Robin Flower found medieval Europe (Eastlake 244).

These autobiographies also provide important anthropological information on the islanders’ ways of life and survival. In them we find detailed accounts of schooling, religious practices, marital perspectives, and anecdotal evidence of social practice that has since disappeared.

In particular, these three autobiographies provide not only the most well known accounts of the Blasket Islands but also an important variety in perspective. There is the religiosity of Peig, the practical terseness of Tomás O’Crohan, and the juvenile vivacity of Muiris O’Sullivan. These autobiographies come at a critical time in Blasket history: just as decline was setting in. The population of the Great Blasket community declined rapidly, from under two hundred to only 22 in 1953. Peig’s autobiography provided a moral benchmark for the nationalist movement, emphasizing a religious portrayal of the ideal Gaelic woman. O’Crohan’s style

emphasized the rustic and barren lifestyle that the islanders embraced instead of the increasing materialism of colonial Ireland. Finally, Muiris O'Sullivan presented the lighter side of the community, providing a portrait of island life that counters the somber tone found in Peig's and O'Crohan's texts.

This thesis seeks to provide an introduction to each text as a unique reading on Blasket literature. Each author provides his or her own style and focus in a specific temporal location in Blasket history. While they share many qualities, such as a foundation in the oral tradition and a common setting, they also differ in important ways. In the following three sections, the texts are analyzed from the most oral to the most literary, beginning with *Peig*, moving onto *The Islandman*, and concluding with *Twenty Years A-Growing*.

*PEIG: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF PEIG SAYERS OF THE GREAT BLASKET ISLAND*

**PEIG SAYERS (1873-1958)**

In 1936, Peig Sayers contributed to the flurry of academic excitement surrounding the Blasket Islands and its people with the publication of *Peig: The Autobiography of Peig Sayers of the Great Blasket Island*. As scholars came to the island to learn the purer spoken Irish, Peig became a recognized figure for her storytelling abilities. After encouragement by visitors and friends, Peig dictated her life story to her son, Michael, who then passed the manuscript along to Mary Kennedy for editing. It wasn't until 1973 that Peig's story was translated into English by Bryan MacMahon, a full century after Peig's first days in Vicarstown.

Peig was an ambitious child, beginning school in Dunquin around age four and already recognized by family and friends for her ability to memorize and recite verses. As an adolescent Peig goes into service in Dingle, escaping her sister-in-law and providing a slight income for her father. A few years later Peig begins work at a farm, a far less pleasant occupation. She escapes this when her beloved brother, Sean, arranges her marriage to Pdraig O'Guithin of the Blasket Islands, and she begins her married life a choppy curragh ride away. Although her life on the island is less than half of the book, she provides a good deal of insight into the unique lifestyle of the Blasket people. Peig's life, as she claims, is difficult and peppered with loss as she begins to grow old, widowed, and nearly childless.

Peig Sayer's autobiography is a "constant equation of personal tragedy with consoling poetry," chronicling her life from the earliest she remembers until the days of her narration (Ross 115). She frames the biography with an unapologetic disclaimer about the hardships she is about to dictate, and closes with an apology for the manuscript's inability to capture everything she could have provided. Her biography serves an important role in the library of Blasket literature: Peig provides the best known feminine account of life on the islands that has been translated into



English. She has also been revered as a bastion of traditional ethics and values—for better or worse. And, as every author has his or her own distinct style, Peig possesses a unique combination of humility and stoicism that echoes throughout her tale.

### **Peig as a Gendered Author**

Peig is unique as the most renowned female Blasket Island author, “speak[ing] as from heart to heart, for she was the first woman writer of Irish-speaking Ireland to draw aside the curtain that cut them off from island and Gaeltacht life” (MacMahon 84). Throughout her life there were obviously some events that were more important to her than might be to men, and experiences that the other authors lack—such as childbirth.

In fact, Peig’s gender may have dictated certain aspects of her style. Traditionally, different stories were reserved for male and female storytellers, with long and complicated hero-tales reserved for the *sgealai*, usually a man, and the shorter, local stories, fairy tales, or family sagas allowed to the *seanchai*, who could be a woman (Fitz Gerald 285). It was a matter of tradition: “There were few women storytellers; indeed Peig was considered an exception to the rule that *Fiannaiocht* or storyteller was the proper concern of men only” (MacMahon 96). Peig was one of the few women who could tell both types of stories (and was very interested in hero tales<sup>1</sup>), and her biography reflects it. As Fitz Gerald argues,

It is thus inevitable that her autobiography reflects the narrative art she had learnt as a child and perfected as an adult: it is structured as a series of anecdotes or stories, usually involving other persons, sometimes told to her, at other times experienced by Peig herself, which are held together simply by the continuity of her own life. (285)

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<sup>1</sup> Peig asserts that she enjoys hero tales, learning them from her father and the men from Vicarstown first: “As for the old people they had their own kind of conversation by the fireside and I’d rather be listening to them than to the sweetest music ever played because I was keenly interested in their fine tales about the old heroes of legend” (113). These likely included tales of the *Fianna* and other druid legends.

While Peig is fully capable of narrating long and complex tales, she does so by breaking it into shorter scenes—telling her life story through the occasional moment in time as anecdotes might be linked together to form an epic. This style is most evident at the ends of chapters, where Peig relies on action for transition, much like stage directions between scenes. The book is only loosely bound by a progression of time, although dates are almost never mentioned. In order to transition from tale to tale, Peig ends the chapter most often with going to bed. Each new chapter is the beginning of a new story, sometimes starting in media res, days, months, or years later. This style presents Peig as more of a reciter of material rather than creator. As Bryan MacMahon says, “Peig was an actress. I say this in the very best meaning of the word” (86). Instead of describing the world to readers in a more traditional story fashion, Peig introduces the reader to her life through anecdotes, short story lines, and by relaying what others had told her about her world, creating the illusion that there is no intermediary author. The frequent dropping of the curtain between tales and chapters reminds the reader even more of a play being acted upon the pages.

Peig claims that her renewed storytelling commenced as a way to pass the time with her old brother-in-law, Micheal, after her children and husband had gone to America or died, leaving her all alone (189). It seems that this is when Peig came into her golden age of story and began to be recognized as a storyteller by the other islanders, though she had certainly been developing her skills for decades prior. She was used especially by the tourists that came to the island to learn the purest Irish they could find (194). Peig sits side by side with the other island elders—mostly men—and spouts tales for children and at gatherings, amazing her friends and family, as she reports Sean once saying, “You’re a wonderful storyteller. It’s extraordinary the number of fine tales you have” (200). There’s no evidence to suggest that the men resented the number of tales she was able to tell, or that she was any less revered of a *sgealai* due to her being a woman.

In fact, Peig seems to think that her stories were very well enjoyed by the islanders (even if they weren't enjoyed by decades of school children studying for their exit exams).

Peig truly began her trade as a child in her father's home, as her father was a local storyteller in Vicarstown, who once claimed, "that since I was seven years of age I never heard a thing I was interested in, that isn't inside in my head this day as clear as the first day I heard it" (47). This same night Peig claims to have memorized her "very first little tale... and it remained firmly embedded in my head until this very day" (47). Peig was a zealous listener at these hearthside exchanges, commenting about the "old people" that "[she]'d rather be listening to them than to the sweetest music every played because [she] was keenly interested in their fire tales about the old heroes of legend" (113). Although it may be an exaggeration, Peig appears to have had the ability to memorize and recite poetry from four years of age, reciting one of Dunlea's poems for Cáit Jim on her first day of school. Just as the reader might question this—as most children are barely learning their alphabet—Peig counters: "Young as I was at that time I had verses like that on the tip of my tongue, this because I was always listening to adults reciting. I was pert too and they had a habit of making me recite the verses for entertainment" (19). This skill gets used again and again as Peig peppers her biography with poems, prayers, and drinking songs, with her first employer Seamas even asking her to teach him "The Welcome of the Child Jesus" after she recites the lengthy verse on Christmas Eve (83).

Often, Peig told her stories while engaged in other housework such as preparing meals, but was at her best when she could turn her entire attention to it: "seated in front of the fire, sometime bent down looking into it, at other times leaning back relaxed in her chair, her closed eyes towards the ceiling, she was completely uninhibited in her narration" (Suilleabhain 89). Peig took storytelling seriously, requiring preparation: "I wet my lips, settled myself on the stool in the corner and braced myself for talking" (195). This dedication, along with her intelligence and proliferation, certainly factored into her eventual title as "Queen of the Storytellers" from

both islanders and outsiders, with hundreds of tales in her repertoire, recognized as “a woman whose mind was the vehicle of a very large repertoire of tales and traditions of many kinds” (Doan 84, Suilleabhain 87).

In her depiction of other women, Peig is varied. There are many honorable female characters: her mother, Nan, and Nell, for example. The story of Brighdin Kennedy exemplifies a woman that stood up for her country against expectations and received a hero’s welcome after her time in jail—much like Tomás O’Crohan’s tale of the women who threw rocks at the bailiffs and the tax collectors (100). In one tale, a woman named Cáit defends her husband and knocks a man flat on his back, presenting a tension between Cáit’s heroism in defending her husband and the emasculating effects of being beaten by a woman—or having one’s wife fight his battles (99). Peig treats this anecdote delicately, and with good reason. Cáit can be praised for her bravado but scorned for her emasculation of her husband. Her punch is solid and stunning: “[it] lifts [the big fellow] clear and clean off the ground” (99). Yet, this fellow is soon “quiet as a child” while Cáit’s husband is “only a simpleton,” and suddenly Cáit’s success is at the expense of every man in the room (99).

Peig doesn’t think highly of all women, however, and at one point even denounces her entire gender. When gossip exposes Peig’s escapade in which she nearly lost one of Seamas’ cows she mutters, “women can go beyond all bounds; they are the very devil himself for causing disturbance” (109). She’s also not too fond of Cáit, her brother’s controlling wife, who takes over the household in place of her father—a rather untraditional and unwelcome role reversal.

As a woman, however, there may have been more expectations of Peig; she may have been held to a higher standard concerning the tales of her own life as a good Catholic girl, woman, and wife. Peig may have felt pressure to be the ideal woman that the Irish state later touted her as in academia. In terms of uniquely womanly experiences, Peig doesn’t give the reader much. Her wedding is glossed over, given only a few paragraphs (although her reception

on the island is given a bit more credit). Her wedding was traumatic, doubling as an impromptu wake for her niece. Some women cry when it rains on their wedding day; Peig moves past the tragedy on her wedding day and describes it in abject remembrance—not the devastated sensitivity that some women might expect. The birth of her first child is given in a bit more detail, but still only a short paragraph (again her son’s reception on the island is given far more real estate on the page). Perhaps this trend is representative of the content of most storytelling of Peig’s time: as a masculine tradition there were no tales of labor or the terrors of spending a wedding night with a man whose hand was arranged for yours—but men would have been present and would have participated with the rest of the community in the reception and the tradition of passing the child around, thus, this would be included in the collective folklore whereas the actual childbirth would not. Or, perhaps Peig remembered the islander’s receptions better since she later grew attached and was proud of their hospitality.

### **Peig’s Traditional Values**

Peig’s autobiography (or, at least an edited version) held a prominent spot on the exit exams in Ireland for many years. Peig was marketed as a beacon for Irish girls: the ideal woman. Her religious fervor was a motivating factor, as “Peig’s tale of sorrow is interspersed with thanks to God and the Virgin who gave her the strength to bear it, which no doubt it partly due to the use of conventional religious phrases, but Peig’s religious sense seems very real” (Fitz Gerald 286). There is no question that *Peig* is full of religion, but is Peig necessarily a Catholic idol?

Peig always seems to be trusting God’s plan. After a restful night’s sleep when she wasn’t expecting any sort of respite Peig wakes to the sunshine and has a moment of affirmation, saying, “The High King of Creation be praised and thanked... Who ordained a livelihood for every creature according to nature! Whatever God has in store for me—that will come to pass!”

(65) This advice is repeated throughout, including by the all-wise Nan<sup>2</sup>, and some might argue Peig's traditional trust in God's plan materialized in her accepting an engagement to the Island, instead of pursuing her dream of joining Cáit-Jim in America.

The most oft-cited religious image is the scene of Tomás' death. Peig begins by describing Tomás' unusual death, how "No one except God alone" could understand how he managed to land so perfectly on a single rock in a peaceful fashion (183). In stark comparison is the dirty reality that Peig must now deal with: cleaning and preparing her son's body for burial all alone: "I was only a mother and the job on hands was beyond me" (183). This moving moment seems only too painful for Peig, "[who] hadn't a friend or relation beside [her] and needed a heart of stone to be able to stand it" (183). The day is saved when Peig prays to the Virgin Mary to give her strength, and her narrative changes: relocating the sense of self from one peering down at a gruesome, impossible task to one that is thankfully disconnected: "...and from that moment forward I confess that I was but an instrument in the hands of the Virgin and her only Son" (183). This powerful moment no doubt contributed to Peig's being chosen for inclusion on the exam, especially as it is compounded by an act of Irish nationalism with the blotting out of the English inscription on Tomás' coffin in favor of an Irish one. This moment literally encapsulates Ross' assertion that Peig's religious "ethos" is a romanticized focus on misery and tragedy that allowed the nationalist thrust to take particular interest in and make use of her work (139).

However, Peig's autobiography also contained plenty of unchristian antics, despite her claim that she is "not ashamed to lift up [her] hand because [her] hand never harmed a neighbor" (211). Peig's honesty is questioned over and over, and not just as a child. Peig stole, lied, and was vengeful on more than one occasion, breaking the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> commandments at least

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<sup>2</sup> "I recalled something Nan had once told me: 'The greatest trouble you're in, Mairead,' she said, 'call on God to help you and there will be no fear of you!'"

once. First, we see young Peig steal sweet bread from the disabled Ould Kitty—who was giving Peig money for schoolbooks in the first place! Peig and Cáit-Jim fear the wrath of God (a good Christian response to their sin), but seek to counteract it by treating the sign of the cross as a magical talisman that will protect them from Ould Kitty’s curses—a rather pagan and unchristian idea<sup>3</sup>. Cáit-Jim mimics this cry, insisting, “Cut the Sign of the Cross on yourself... and ask God to protect you from her” (35). Peig accepts this solution wholeheartedly, “Oho, isn’t it fine and easy you have the cure?” Years later, Peig calls upon the power of God to save her from her own carelessness with her master’s cows and even attributes her pulling the staple loose from the cross beam to His work, which “is even stronger than all expectations” (136). It is not proper Catholic tradition to pray to get out of trouble for which one rightfully deserves a penance. Peig’s character is questioned again only two pages later when she hits the servant boy on the head with a rotten turnip, upsetting him so much that he leaves without notice, all because she had a toothache. Old Peig is conniving as well, tricking a fellow islander into killing his own dog because it bit her (208). All these are only a small representation of what Peig must have done in her life—and one can’t help but wonder what else might have come out of her mouth had it not been her son she was dictating to.

Beyond behaving less than Christian, Peig’s stories sometimes glamorize the trickster that takes advantage of others. Pleasc seems to be a favorite character of hers, and he gets away with near-murder before he is run out of town. Peig doesn’t use this tale as a warning to her listeners to behave, but rather as amusing and as a presentation of a talented individual. Of course, the Robin Hood motif resounded with the islanders and the poor Irish farmers, which Pleasc also represents.

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<sup>3</sup> Irish Catholicism retained some hints of pagan tradition, especially among the peasant class. Peig’s belief in the pagan-influenced practices can be seen in her use of the Charm of the Stitch (206).

Peig does represent traditional values, as well. Particularly in terms of marriage, Peig exhibits obedience and bravery in the face of an arranged match.<sup>4</sup> Peig saw marriage as purposeful and only hoped to marry a practical man who will “have my back and...protect me;” and enable her to claim a house of her own (151). As Peig warns, “There’s an old saying that ‘Pounds vanish but pouts remain!’... it doesn’t take long to spend a dowry” (91). Peig’s point is that a hefty dowry may seem like enough compensation for a man to marry a sour bride, but after the years pass he’ll have spent the money and all he’ll have left is the frowning wife. Peig followed in her sibling’s footsteps, obediently. She only dedicates two sentences to the marriages of each of her siblings—indicating that marriage was not necessarily a momentous event but a simple movement into the next natural stage of life, like a graduation (24-5). Marriage for love wasn’t recommended. When Padraig’s wife died unexpectedly, he was a wreck. Undoubtedly he was very fond of his wife, but Peig mentions specifically his “hard circumstance,” as now a man without a wife and “a fleet of poor orphans around him,” with the emphasis on the impracticality of his situation (148). His second wife, Big Cáit, is only mentioned by name once, to the effect that she is a depersonalized mother, wife, raiser of children, cook, and maid—performing all of the duties that a woman of the household might be expected to. Modern romance is given a bit of credit, however, even if only in the abstract sense:

May plague and colic love devour  
 For woe to him who’s in its power,  
 Love has left me sick and sore  
 And healing I shall know no more. (93)

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<sup>4</sup> This is, however, exaggerated. It appears that Peig did know her husband and had met him before he arrived at her home on the night of their pairing.



To which Nan replies, “you can’t beat love” (92). Still, in the context of the hard lifestyles of Irish farmers, this sentiment seems incredibly frivolous and doesn’t fit with the rest of Peig’s text.

Marriage and family are of the utmost importance for Peig, and she refuses to utter a word against her blood relatives throughout the entire book. She would follow her brother off a cliff and even rationalizes her father’s decision to send her away to service, which she certainly wasn’t happy about. She claims he had to send her away to stop the arguing with Cáit, who took over the household when her mother became ill:

My father, however, was a quiet, sensible man with no mind whatsoever for trouble or wrangling and because of this he often turned a deaf ear to his daughter-in-law when she was in a tantrum. I often listened to them and I had pity for my father when I heard the tongue-lashing she gave him. What I’ve come to understand now and I think it true, is that it was for my sake and for the sake of my mother who hadn’t her health that he put up with so much of this lacerating.

(26)

In this one example, Peig calls her father “quiet and sensible” instead of weak and feeble—which he might be called for failing to stand up to his daughter-in-law. She admits to feeling “pity” for her father when she might rightly have been embarrassed. Finally, Peig rationalizes that her father was only acting this way for her and her mother, a protective paternal trait. Peig is consciously rewriting her autobiography as the narrative progresses, realizing that she was betrayed and finally letting the reader in on her realization when she describes her return to her home to have her first child. Peig admits that her father had lost a power contest with her sister in law, saying, “Thank God... the dispute is over. The sallow lass has won the race and she’s boss at last. I’ll get no rasp of her tongue now—as I often got of old!” (166) This is a different

interpretation than Peig gives when she is first sent away, just as she may not have understood her father's true motivations as a child.

Peig is very protective of her family, but doesn't count her sister-in-law Cáit Boland as family, exactly. Cáit is the wife of her brother, Sean, who unfortunately "wore only one leg of the britches" (64). Peig has few good words to say about Cáit, whom she presents as an antagonistic force against her father, proclaiming finally, "...it wasn't the same house at all!... I knew at once what had happened. 'Thank God, the dispute is over. The sallow lass has won the race and she's boss at last'" (165-6). Here, Peig's emphasis is on Cáit's winning, rather than her father's losing, thereby preserving her father's reputation. However, Peig emphasizes her mother's illness in a way that presents her as fragile, though her exact ailment is never revealed. Peig is occasionally bringing home liquor for her mother, as are other townsfolk. Peig's mother is a victim of her circumstance needing protection, probably by default of her gender.

The Irish tradition is held in esteem above the English, another reason Peig's biography was a government-selected text. As an Irish-speaking child, Peig refers to the English speaking teacher as having a "cramped tongue" that made him difficult to understand (30). English speakers were the outsiders; the Irish represented the original nationals apart from their colonial overlords. The "Land Question" is not directly addressed in Peig's narrative but it is certainly not ignored, with people rising up against the landlords in defense of their helpless neighbors:

Here and there the people were up in arms against them but the landlords and their followers were too powerful. Alas! it's many the poor widow and orphan they flung out on the side of the road without pity, mercy or compassion. (31)

Peig describes the people fighting the landlords as standing up for their rights. School is even let out early so the children can go watch the crowds defend their neighbor, Muiris Ferriter, from getting his homestead repossessed. The anti-establishment atmosphere is hard to miss in Peig's narrative, and her presentation of the characters within it is consistent. The anti-Peeler sentiment

is part of this, as they are treated humorously throughout.<sup>5</sup> Even when a man is arrested and thrown in jail, he brags that “[he] was taken to the barracks without any charge being laid against [him] except that [he] was singing” (75). The peelers are paralleled with the landlords for their crimes against the Irish peasants, such as having “pitched a poor penniless woman and her five orphans out of her home” giving cause for a riot (105). Any man that takes from the poor is a criminal, but the man who “whipped a great lump of loot from the ill-bred upstarts that could well afford it” is a hero (51).

Even as a child Peig encountered the elite English-speaking Anglo-Irish, but didn’t consider them any better off except for their money. When a carriage stops to ask Peig and Cáit-Jim for directions to the House of Mor the girls are amazed that the aristocrats believe the house might still be standing. When they take pictures of the girls they are confused—Peig doesn’t realize they are being objectified as a tourist attraction, they’re just excited to get paid for their troubles.

The Irish Catholic tradition continues in the presentation of Father Owen, who had a “great reputation” and was very involved with tenant-landlord abuse situation (43). Although he was a priest he was “an active reckless young man and whenever he went riding on his saddle-horse you’d love to see the furious speed at which he traveled” (44). In one chapter, Father Owen overtakes the local parson and throws him to the ground, where he is the laughing stock of the Catholics. Despite this blatant misdeed, Father Owen is still esteemed and when he turns himself in to the police the local parishes compete to raise enough money to get him out—and then some, despite being rather poor all around, but as Peig’s father says, “They’d pledge their immortal souls before they’d let their own enemies and the enemies of their religion have that much satisfaction!” (46) Peig thought very highly of Father Owen, a hero for the Irish Catholic tradition, but antagonist to others. Father Owen was not the typical upstanding priest, but he

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<sup>5</sup> With the exception of Baby Grey, who seems to be a formidable opponent.

represented a locus of power for the poor countryside in the face of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy—which was not typically Catholic. Even though Father Owen might rightly be chastised for his abuse of the parson he can do no wrong in Peig’s eyes.

### **Peig’s Narrative Style**

Peig’s style is the result of several influences. The primary influence is, of course, the oral tradition. As her autobiography was dictated to her son, it is arguably the most oral of the three texts. Peig is an entertainer first, educator second. In analyzing Peig’s autobiography, there is a fair amount of quoted dialogue—which Peig surely could not have remembered verbatim from her childhood. Peig routinely invents, dialogue, as well as withholds information to create a better story. When she introduces her listener (or reader) to her husband, she doesn’t mention that she knew him beforehand, creating the illusion that she is simply told to marry him and does so obediently (MacMahon 84). This not only perpetuates her image as the ideal Catholic woman, but makes their match much more exciting. Peig addresses the readers directly, on occasion, as one might if they were speaking directly to an audience, with “Indeed, dear reader,” “I assure you, dear reader,” and “Reader dear, I assure you,” among other exclamations such as, “Erra, man alive” (59, 69, 70, 165). As a storyteller Peig is constantly engaging her reader, begging credibility, and exaggerating emotion, which might seem unusual in print at first but would be completely natural in conversation or around the hearth.

Another effect of the oral tradition is Peig’s tendency to use events to lend larger, more abstract meanings or morals—a technique similar to that found in fables. In one instance, Peig describes having to ask her sister-in-law for eggs, which quickly introduces the turmoil in her home. “My father has no security in the house, you understand,” she explains, having bridged to the topic of Cáit’s ferocity using the morning’s eggs (33). Also in an oral vein, Peig relates places to the people and events associated with them, such as “Kilquane Lake where the holy

saint covered the monster with the cauldron” (143). These stories about places and their names are referred to as Dinnsheanachas, such as the story about the poet Muiris O’Shea swimming across the bay that Peig uses directionally to describe her view across the bay. Similar techniques are common in such oral epics as *The Odyssey* and *Beowulf*.

*Peig* also seems quite humble at times, although other accounts might call this into question. She introduces herself as an old woman “with one foot in the grave and the other on its edge,” which contrasts with the lively tales she’ll tell in later pages (13). Other biographers argue that Peig was unwilling to tell her story at first, that “Peig thought that what she had to say was unimportant until... visitors who came to the Island to learn Irish convinced her of the opposite” (MacMahon 83). However, by the end of her life “she complained that she was unrecognized,” asserting that she’d “be talking after [her] death” (MacMahon 84). The Peig of the biography seems to be the obedient daughter, embarrassed when she can’t fulfill her duties and quick to follow her family’s instruction, but is also proud of her tricks and thinks herself a hero for such acts as chasing off the servant boy she didn’t get along with. It’s certainly a mixed presentation.

There are also the inherent trademarks of an autobiography. For example, Peig’s use of hindsight is inconsistent: at times used to better her self-projection and at times avoided in order to make for a better story. In one chapter, Peig reflects on old age as she sees Nan for the last time (110). This is profound as she is now nearing Nan’s age as she dictates this. Yet, when she gives a beautiful description of the view from a hilltop just a few breaths and two pages later, she doesn’t mention the Blasket Islands, which she would have been able to see from there—especially important now knowing that she would spend decades of her life there (112). On page 132 as Cáit-Jim prepares to leave, Peig ruins the surprise by admitting that when Cáit-Jim went to America it was the last time she would ever see her, but still gets excited when letters from Cáit-Jim arrive about her going to America when in retrospect this would be a painful memory of

a long-lost friend. It's also possible that Peig invented some moments in order to perfect her hindsight, such as when her mother says a final farewell, with "I shall never see you again," correctly predicting her own death after years of sustained illness (168). Did her mother really say this? Or was this simply Peig's addition?

Still, parts of Peig's autobiography are incredibly literate. She doesn't have as many beautiful passages as O'Sullivan, but she certainly has her share. In one, a silent spider caught in a sunbeam precedes a religious epiphany as Peig prepares to leave home:

I lifted the bedclothes from my head and looked directly in front of me. A sunbeam was coming through the window and a thousand midges were flitting here and there. I kept watching them and before long I saw a spider spinning a thread of slender silk out of his own body and lowering himself from the tie-beam of the rafters. On the bushes outside the little birds were singing sweetly. (64)

Peig is reminded of a story her mother used to tell her about Christ rising from the dead, and cries out, "Whatever God has in store for me—that will come to pass!" (65) The passage includes light in the form of a sunbeam, sound in the birds, and an intense focus on the tiny spider. There may be religious imagery in the ray of light and the lone spider giving up thread from his body (as Jesus gave of his own body in his crucifixion), and Peig makes the connection explicit by relating it to her mother's religious fable.

Peig frequently connects her descriptions of nature to emotion, for example, as she sits on a hill after leaving the service:

I sat down on a level place where white bog-grass and heather were growing. It was a delightful spell of good weather and a pleasant cool puff of breeze was blowing; I gave the breeze full, free permission to caress me for I always loved the wind that blows from the sea and at that moment I welcomed it. It reminded me of the lovely gay days when Cáit-Jim and myself were going off with food to

the men cutting turf on the hill... If it were God's will and my destiny to find some little home in Ireland I'd never leave it as long as I lived. (142-143)

Again, Peig's descriptive abilities focus on the sensual: the white grass and cool breeze. She connects this to Cáit-Jim, on the other side of the ocean that the breeze has been carried over. Peig puts herself in the breeze's control, just as she later proclaims she puts her trust in God and His plan for her. These descriptive passages are a testament to Peig's literary powers, and shows that Peig was more than just a re-teller of stories but could in fact create her own beauty and then use it as a verification of her faith.

The islands and island life must have had a profound effect on Peig. Life in Vicarstown and Dunquin was certainly not easy, but island living and the mindset it required was even more demanding. Most of Peig's tale takes place on the mainland—she doesn't even arrive on the Great Blasket until she's married. Still, she came to embody and project the island personality, perhaps against her wishes:

...and even though she became an iconic Island figure, she in fact remained a reluctant 'Island Woman' throughout her life there. This was especially evident in her relationship to the sea, on which her own and island's economy was so largely based. (Lysaght 156)

As Lysaght claims, the sea was a provider and prison, often dividing Peig from her children in America and family on the mainland (157). Peig seems to have had a great respect for the ocean even before her move to the island, remarking as a child that, "The ocean is truly powerful when one considers that it can carry a load as mighty as that immense ship on its surface," a very insightful comment that at once reveals her amazement and trepidation (114).

If the Great Blasket Island was a bleak and frightful place, its people were the opposite. Peig holds the islanders in high regard, stating upon her arrival that, "The people in this Island are pleasant, honest, generous and hospitable and the stranger can experience friendship and

kindness among them. And if he doesn't, it's his own fault!" (158) The islanders withstand incredible blows to their faith without losing hope—dangerous fishing trips, children falling from cliffs, drownings. Death was no stranger to the Blaskets, and moving on in the face of loss was a necessary skill. Peig's portrayal of her mother's reaction to the death of a child and the contrasting portrayal of Peig's stoicism signifies that Peig has truly become an islander. Peig describes her mother in her first chapter as: "My poor mother... troubled and distracted as a result of the death of her children. Day after day her health and courage ebbed away until in the heel of the hunt the poor woman hadn't even the desire to live" (14). Even her father tells of a traumatizing experience seeing the feet of a dead man. However, when Peig cleans and prepares her own son for burial she is strong and saintly. Another mainland tragedy occurred in the burning down of a family's home after an accident with spilled oil, after which the widow Cáit Mitchel could barely speak and was tearing her hair out—but the horror of unexpected loss was commonplace on the Blaskets (115). The islanders had to learn to cope and move on, which they did in the best spirits possible.

Peig's background steeped in the oral tradition, humility, morality, and the isolation of island life are all translated into her biography, albeit with these trademarks of a retrospective text. These influences work to make *Peig* a unique and important text.

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It's also important to mention Peig's incredible sensitivity to her audience. At a time when Ireland was clinging to any remnants of a national culture and pride, Peig filled the void with a matron saint self-portrait: the self-sacrificing and honorable peasant woman who spoke the purest Irish of the western islands, but was skilled enough to shed a favorable light on her circumstances. Just as Peig manipulated the servant boy or the dog owner, Peig manipulates her readers: from the self-deprecating introduction to the poignant closing, Peig begs trust, pity,



respect, and awe from her audience, while appealing to the anti-British sentiment and enhancing a religious atmosphere and still maintaining interest.

All of these elements, Peig's particular position as a female Blasket author, her traditional self-portrait, and her oral style combine to create a many-layered text with a permanent place in not only Island literature but also in Irish history. Peig, as well as O'Crohan and O'Sullivan, have been studied by scholars of Gaelic, literature, political science, history, and economics for their providing a window into a disappearing society just as the shadow began to descend on that way of life. Peig in particular gained popularity as it followed O'Crohan and O'Sullivan's recently published texts, setting the stage for a pattern of interest in the islands instead of a singular phenomenon.

And, of course, in her own fashion, Peig closes with a blessing on the manuscript, its readers, and, finally, Ireland. It is only fitting that Peig lived another 23 years after her self-eulogizing in her final chapter of *Peig*.

***THE ISLANDMAN***

**TOMÁS O’CROHAN (1856-1937)**

Tomás O’Crohan was the first of these three authors to publish out of the Blasket Islands. First, *Island Cross-Talk* (1928) was composed of journal entries sent at the request of Brian O’Ceallaigh, a linguist studying the Irish language, and then *The Islandman* (1929) was composed with the intention of documenting Tomás’ life. O’Crohan predates Peig, and his timing is particularly important. As Alan Harrison observes, “The real value of *The Islandman* and *Island Cross Talk* is that they give us an insider’s account of life on the islands, written when that life was beginning to decline and dealing with the time when the community was at its strongest” (490).

If the motives of Peig and O’Sullivan are unclear, Tomás O’Crohan gives explicit reasons for composing *The Islandman*. His translator, Robin Flower, in the Foreword of the Oxford University Press English edition, furthers this image. Flower introduces the work as “the first attempt by a peasant of the old school, practically uneducated in the modern sense, though highly trained in the tradition of an ancient folk culture,” who was “peculiarly adapted by the whole bent of his mind to act as an observer as well as a vigorous participant in all the events of his isolated world” (v). Tomás himself explains that he has taken this upon as an occupation in order to preserve his people and the history of the Blasket Islands. He directly addresses his audience in his final chapter: “What you’re reading now, reader, is the fruit of my labours,” claiming (of the Gaelic League in particular), “I’ve been working harder year by year, and to-day I go harder at it than ever for the sake of the language of our country and of our ancestors” (240).

**The Manifestations of Colonialism**

“Kings weren’t as hard to satisfy in those days as they are to-day” (63). This is one of the many astute judgments that mark Tomás O’Crohan’s work, *The Islandman*. While Peig’s text does mention the political atmosphere of the Blaskets and Ireland, O’Crohan seems very much in tune with it. Mark Quigley refers to this as O’Crohan’s “transitional character,” allowing him to “shed light on the processes and politics attending the installation of the autobiographical self in the formerly deterritorialized zone of the Blaskets” (388). Colonialism and the changes occurring in the Blasket Islands are the time of Tomás’ life and composition are critical in the ways they influence his writing and oftentimes become the subject of it.

Tomás is very anti-state and hostile to what Quigley calls the “representative mechanisms of the liberal state” (390). This is not difficult to understand given the islanders’ unfortunate experiences with the bluecoats, bailiffs, and other authority figures. One of the first anecdotes O’Crohan includes is the stand an islandwoman takes against the bluecoats for confiscating the palm-oil the islanders had collected, effectively scaring the King’s men off for the rest of the season (5). The bluecoats are defined as those who “did their very best” to make living more difficult for the islanders in the name of uncollected rent (4).

The islanders could afford to be as defiant as they were because they were so far away and difficult to reach that the authorities might never be able to get them under effective control. This is exposed when they come to take compensation for late rent and must leave empty handed because they can’t get anything of worth across the water back to Dingle, despite the islanders giving them rope to tie the cattle with. Quigley argues, “The rope thus comes to signify the authorities’ inability to control by sheer physical force... and exposes their reliance on representation” (394). The islanders were a special breed of talented men and women to live the way they did, and from where they were standing they always had the higher ground, literally and metaphorically, on any invaders.

Even when they lost a battle the islanders won a war: when rent collectors took the islanders' large boats, leaving them with only canoes, no one would buy the boats and they went to waste, "till the moths ate them... That broke the courage of the bailiffs and the rent collectors from that time on, as far as the Island went" (165). The islanders were so self-sufficient that there was little that might deter them beyond physically removing them from their homes, at least in Tomás' early years.

How much of this is Tomás' true sentiment and how much is exaggerated is difficult to determine. Robin Flower, who translated *The Islandman* into English, casts O'Crohan as "an earnest chronicler who straightforwardly represents himself and the life he has known on the island... [however] he does not allow O'Crohan much capacity for irony or restraint, or indeed much complexity at all" (Quigley 388). Flower had stumbled upon the perfect piece of literature for Ireland as it struggled to embrace its own nationalism in the wake of colonial dominance from England: the most Irish of the Irish, typified by perfect Gaelic and a struggle through poverty while resisting the intrusion of outside authorities. In order to cast O'Crohan as such he must be a simple, natural man, as "destitution and hardship certainly increase his value as a literary and cultural commodity" (Quigley 400).

Flower's introduction is regarded by most as an outsider's perspective and incomplete in its analysis. Flower insists that O'Crohan is "a peasant of the old school, practically uneducated" (v). Flower's representation of O'Crohan might be read as scathing, as he disqualifies any of O'Crohan's passages of being purposeful art: "The great value of this book is that it is a description of this vanishing mode 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" (vii). While this interpretation may have encouraged O'Crohan's text to be embraced by the traditional Irish revival, it certainly doesn't give him enough credit.

As a result, *The Islandman* appears, to some critics, as “a finely tuned and poetic language bereft of emotion” that describes the deaths of family and friends economically and resists self-pity (Maher 266). The emphasis on work and contribution is obvious, especially in comparison with the poet Dunlevy and how he turned a productive afternoon into an idle day. O’Crohan paints his line of work as in direct opposition with that of Shane Dunlevy, musing when he is interrupted on the hill cutting turf: “I fancy that no poet has ever been much good as carrying through any job that had any work in it except only poetry, and that was the way with Shane, too” (86). Dunlevy is not portrayed as enlightening Tomás in this instance, but rather as “keeping [him] back from the profitable work that [he] had promised [himself] that morning should be done” (86).

Even the unfortunate aspects of poverty and island living are praised, such as the diet. In fact, it seems that in almost all ways “the island way of life is superior” both morally and physically (Maher 266). Tomás lived on only two meals a day in a home that wasn’t worried about making a “fine show” with fancy cups and saucers (31). He even praises the food of his youth, which most would barely consider nourishment:

People don’t know what is best for them to eat, for the men that ate that kind of food were twice as good as the men of to-day. The poor people of the countryside were accustomed to say that they fancied they would live as long as the eagle if they but had the food of the Dingle people. But the fact is that the eaters of good meat are in the grave this long time, while those who lived on starvation diet are still alive and kicking. (101)

There is no doubt that Tomás finds island life, the ideal Gaelic life, better than that of the western mainlanders in Gaelic, who in turn the nationalists find superior to the Anglo-Irish and the colonizing British. The presentation of the Great Blasket as “the healthiest island in Ireland” was only part of the portrait constructed by O’Crohan and others (187).

The islanders are presented in a struggle against nature for survival, the most basic human battle. Battles against nature typify Celtic literature since the medieval times when Sir Gowan battled the Green Knight and earlier when the Fianna, with whom Tomás is very interested, struggled to conquer the wild lands of Ireland. The ultimate accomplishment for the islander was “occasionally bending [nature] to his will” (Maher 269). These moments of victory are typified not only by the ability of the islanders to survive and thrive in the most hostile of environments but also in such victories as the killing of the seal that almost spelled the end of Tomás’ life. The importance of seals throughout Irish hero tales and then to the livelihood of Blasket Islanders could be examined at length. The islanders both feared and admired the seals, some of whom were “impossible to kill” but could provide much of the island with light and food—and indeed the islanders thought better of a seal than of the finest pigs (99, 74).

Tomás becomes a hero when he battles a seal to the death early one morning, all by himself, and arguably against better judgment. The battle is described in epic proportions, the young boy against the cow seal he dangerously underestimates. The incident begins with a “hideous snore” on behalf of the seal, and then a furious struggle for one to escape and the other to prevent his loss (74). In traditional Celtic storytelling, the hero often underestimates nature and must pay for his error. Likewise, Tomás gets too close after thinking he had won the battle and loses a sizeable chunk of his leg for doing so. Ultimately, he wins the battle and subjugates nature to his human will, and in doing so draws parallels between himself and the heroes of old—subsequently bringing honor to all of the island people. This theme of reigning over nature was commonly repeated in the Fenian and Ulster cycles of Irish mythology.

Eamon Maher describes this urge to dominate nature as the perception of the land as something to be “reclaimed and cultivated—a strand was there to be crossed, a sea to be fished, a town to be reached, a shore to be gained, walked upon, lived upon...” (271). Maher feels that, “O Criomhthain, because of his struggle to dominate his natural environment in order to secure

food and shelter for himself and his family, never really had the luxury of ‘seeing’ the beauty that surrounded him” (271). Flower would prefer to attribute this to his lack of training and exposure to fine cultures—painting him the ideal Gael. Realistically, O’Crohan would probably only see the practical aspects of nature: the dangerous cliffs, the sharks, the currents, the turf, and dinner. Whereas Peig was brought to the island later in life, Tomás grew up in stunning surroundings. Beauty is always relative.

O’Crohan chooses rather to focus on the political and economic circumstances, especially in hindsight as he reflects on the increasing poverty that has stricken the island, commenting as he describes the wealth gleaned from the fishing industry decades earlier: “If we had been as careful of the pounds in those days as we have been for some years past, it is my belief that poverty wouldn’t have come upon us so soon” (166). He laments that they didn’t take care of their fortune, and “easy come, easy go” applied (167).

### **A Minimalist Style?**

The style of *The Islandman* is no doubt impacted by O’Crohan’s awareness of his political place and Flower’s purposes when translating it. Of course, the unique creation of the autobiography also has a significant hand in the style of the narrative. The book was written as a series of journals mailed at intervals to Brian O’Ceallaigh at his urging; these journals may account for the episodic nature between and within the chapters. Like *Peig*, “the chapters are self-contained, and are only loosely connected with each other” (Harrison 490). With *Peig*, this credited to her background in the oral tradition. While O’Crohan certainly has experience in the oral tradition<sup>6</sup>—as most islanders would—the letter-writing is more applicable to this particular

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<sup>6</sup> One particular element of the oral tradition that can be found in O’Crohan’s narrative is the direct address of the reader with a consciousness of purpose and direction in the story, such as his transitional interjection as he moves from describing his sister Kate to his brother Pats: “I must leave them now to rub along together till my story brings me back to them again” (64).

document. O’Crohan’s concise style is also a result of the letter-writing habit, and some might argue that Tomás saw embellishment as wasteful and untrue. In one circumstance embellishment got Tomás and several other men in trouble with their wives when they came back from a trip to Cahirsiveen, leading Tomás to comment on the “improved” tale that “idle talk sometimes causes great scandal” (158). Tomás was dedicated to transmitting the truth and nothing more than what he can detect with his own five senses.

The most consistent critique of O’Crohan’s style is this brevity. Quigley argues, “O Criomthain frustrates the project of autobiographical representations throughout the book by generally refraining from giving voice to deep emotion or any sort of extended romantic mediation” (395-6). There are two opinions on the cause of this: either indicative of a strong sense of island pride or a reflective hindsight as age is steadily increasing.

Harrison is a member of the former camp, arguing: “[O’Crohan’s style] is indicative of the proud fortitude with which the islanders faced their difficult life. The very bareness of the account speaks volumes. Tomás is conspicuously loyal to his fellow islanders and exonerates their peccadilloes” (490-1). This portrayal is consistent with O’Crohan’s mistrust of his project. O’Crohan does not describe relations with the mainlanders as all that friendly, and here he is urged to write an account of island life by those people that he doesn’t trust. Quigley describes this as “a concern about writing as much as a skepticism about autobiography in particular” (396). At this time books hadn’t made their way to the island in large numbers, and the previous experience Tomás had with the literary tradition consisted of satirical poems written by Dunlevy—which he greatly fears becoming the subject of.

Tomás also had a different approach to the project. He felt he had a duty to teach and preserve the language of the island (Quigley 398). He also writes with a purpose other than a literary demonstration of skill, “Tomás, unlike Peig, aspires to history—to writing the history of the Island insofar as he knows it... He thus writes for a third person: the reader who knows



nothing of Island life and whom Tomás informs” (Fitz Gerald 288). This explains Tomás’ lack of personal emotion depth. It’s not that Tomás doesn’t have beautiful passages, but he refrains from the same depth that Peig takes in describing emotional moments (often with religious flair). O’Crohan even asserts in his conclusion that the only reason there are characters in his book is, “if I hadn’t it would be neither interesting nor complete” (242). O’Crohan also uses dates more frequently than does Peig, so that his story can be more accurately placed in the Blasket timeline.

O’Crohan’s acute awareness of his purpose and audience is most visible in his concluding chapter<sup>7</sup>, writing,

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

Several of these lines have become the standard phrases surrounding the Blasket Islands. It makes quite clear not only that it is important to preserve the passing tradition, which is already changing as O’Crohan writes but also centers the book around the people rather than around Tomás. The impersonal approach makes the autobiography a text of the island people rather

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that his purpose is not apparent elsewhere in the text, as it is on page 26 to open the third chapter: “I may as well give some brief account here of the way we managed things in this Island when I was young, more particularly since the fashion of that world has passed away and nobody now living remembers it except a few old people.”

than of one man, resulting in a fantastic opportunity for nationalist movement to frame the ideal Gael for the rest of Ireland, distant from colonialism and Anglo influences.

The “twilight mentality” is one of elegiac retrospective. In the words of Quigley, “absence haunts the text” and it is “infused with elegy” (403-4). Maher reasons that this is “largely a result of its being written at a stage when its author was already well into his twilight years” (265). In hindsight, Tomás seems to be wondering whether it was all worth it. This sense of pointlessness seems to come across most clearly when his cousin has fallen ill. O’Crohan describes the arduous day spent fetching the doctor and priest as just like any other: “That was no idle day for us, and that’s how it always is in an island like this—grinding toil always when the time of trouble comes” (200). He then reveals that the boy survived, but “the lad never did a profitable day’s work from that till he went to the churchyard,” begging the question of whether all the trouble really paid off (200).

The hardships of life are certainly not ignored by Tomás, who frequently embraces death as a practical matter rather than a tumultuous occasion. Life seems to be a race before death, as wives are often described in terms of how many children they can give birth to before they pass. Death didn’t pass over Tomás’ family, either, as Tomás comments after the death of one daughter, “Whatever sorrow else befell me, that sorrow of the grave was the crown of them all” (239). Chapter 20 is even titled “The Troubles of Life”. Sorrow and difficulties are hard to miss in Tomás’ life, very much like Peig’s.

The way that O’Crohan describes death is significant. From page 1, death is personified, as Tomás explains that he lives only because “[Death] didn’t think it worth his while to shift me”. Quigley argues that the deaths of Tomás’ family are presented “dispassionately” and “fatalistically” (396). Indeed, O’Crohan’s telling of his children’s passings is more like a “roll call” than not (Maher 268). His approach is again economical and practical, taking only one paragraph:

Ten children were born to us, but they had no good fortune, God help us! The very first of them that we christened was only seven or eight years old when he fell over the cliff and was killed. From that time on they went as quickly as they came. Two died of measles, and every epidemic that came carried off one or other of them. Donal was drowned trying to save the lady off the White Strand. I had another fine lad helping me. Before long I lost him, too. (147)

Only the name of one child is mentioned. The tone might be compared to parents listing off where their children are at college, today. Tomás expresses slightly more despair at the death of his wife, saying, “I was never blinded altogether till then. May God spare us the light of our eyes!” (147) Still, there is no prolonged mourning. John McGahern observes this, explaining, “There is nothing for it but to endure and go on... Sorrow, because it blinds and weakens us, is an impairment, and the action required by the new day will require all our faculties and strength” (8). Tomás leaves no room for self-pity, transitioning immediately from, “Something would always be coming across me to wake my trouble again” to “The coming season was the time for taking mackerel” (218). Indeed, there was no time for mourning, as Tomás says when his son falls from a cliff<sup>8</sup>, “those that pass cannot feed those that remain, and we, too, had to put out our oars again and drive on” (186).

Tomás’ approach to death and tragedy is a relaxed acceptance, making frequent comments such as, “How many things happen to people and they shake them off!” and, “Death is a fine thing compared with some troubles that hang over a poor sinner” (216, 217). When Uncle Diarmuid’s son disappears one night, never to return, Tomás discusses his strange, undiagnosed ailment as a matter of chance, that, “sometimes people guess wrong” about whether someone is right in the head (221). It was this “wrong guess” that led to tragedy. All of these deaths and

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Tomás’ son falls from a cliff and is found below on the rocks without a single blemish on his body, much like Peig’s son.

horrors are natural and inevitable. In the words of Tomás, “The truth itself is sometimes bitter” (69). As Harrison notes, “[Island] life gave plenty of opportunities for sorrow... but to survive islanders had to get on with their lives which depended more than most on the effectiveness of their own daily efforts” (491). Steeled emotions were a necessary sort of evolutionary adaptation.

But, while the life may be hard the islanders are able to rise to the occasion and prevail, and Tomás doesn’t let the reader forget how well intentioned each and every one of them is. Any character that may have transgressed against Tomás is forgiven, especially in the closing chapter. The Old Woman next door is a good example of this. At first, she is:

...a little, undersized, untidy-haired babbler with a sallow face, not much to look at—a gossip, always hither and thither. She was always saying to my mother that all Ireland couldn’t rear an old cow’s calf, and I don’t think any cow, old or young, ever had a more wretched-looking calf than herself. (2)

The next sentence? “But all the same, she had a good heart.” This attitude is taken towards the King as a boy, as well. Tomás claims that his “chief fault” was that he was always a distraction when Tomás was just beginning to make progress in school, but this too is negated by later praise (35). Tomás is not only proud of the islanders’ diet but their morality. He explicitly states that nothing unchaste ever happened among the teenagers on the island when they got together for their late-night festivities, and he is very proud of this (141)<sup>9</sup>.

The final chapter reads like a mass eulogy for all the islanders and their lifestyle. The only blame that can be placed on them is perhaps their fondness for drinking, but even then “the drink went to our heads the easier because we were always worn and weary, as I have described,

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<sup>9</sup> However, this might be contrasted by his remarks on page 93 that any of the girls would have gone off with him one day on the hill had he only asked, “ready and willing for the knot there’s no untying,” but perhaps he is referencing marriage and not immoral activity. Also, as a new version of O’Crohan’s novel restores scenes that may have been edited out for their questionable morals, this general opinion may change.

like a tired horse, with never any rest or intermission” (243). The islanders contrast with the mainlanders in Dunquin and Ballyferriter, who routinely try to take advantage of the islanders. Not only do they try to capitalize on the islanders’ hard work killing seals, but they are painted as barbarians in the lengthy description of a family feud, prompting the label of “a merciless, savage lot” (51). The feud only barely ends when a match is made between the two families<sup>10</sup>.

### **O’Crohan’s Island Perspective**

Beyond the superficial elements of the text, Tomás’ autobiography also provides insight into island life through the eyes of a typical islandman. Tomás’ views on marriage, outsiders, religion, and myth may give both a personal and general insight to life on the Blaskets.

Just as Peig portrays marriage as a natural progression in growing older, Tomás sees marriage as matter of practicality rather than emotionality. In fact, Tomás leaves the girl he has feelings for behind, saying as he must leave Inishvickillaun where she lives, “I wasn’t too cheerful, and no wonder, for I was leaving behind me the merriest days I had ever known, and, into the bargain, I was turning my back on the girl I liked best in the whole blessed world right then” (113). This may be a matter of translation, but the final clause could be interpreted in two ways: Tomás is leaving behind the girl who he loves at that particular point in time (allowing for a greater love later on, which we might hope applied to his wife); or: Tomás is leaving, at that moment, the girl that he loved the best out of anyone he had ever known. The difference between the two is significant. Either way, it was a difficult time for Tomás, who later married in the name of practicality and right timing. In fact, wives and women (other than his first love) seem interchangeable throughout. Tomás comforts his friend who has just broken off an

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<sup>10</sup> The peaceweaver tradition dates back to Medieval literature, and is usually only resorted to in extreme cases between feuding families when the death toll is too much to bear; for example, the marriage of Freawaru to end the feud between the Danes and the Saxon. Often these arrangements were unsuccessful.

engagement by saying, “What’s that to you so long as you get another wife?” (143) It’s almost as if the two men are discussing cars.

Matches are made of practicality. When his sister, Maura, is to be married to Martin, their match is not for desire but rather for reason, as Martin wanted “a woman who knew what work was and was able to do it,” and “Maura was a woman of that kind” (21). Tomás even admires this about her: his sister is going to make a great wife not because of her sensitivity and devotion but because she can cook and clean and do it well. There was no place for love on the island where everyone had to fight to survive. When Maura gets remarried Tomás is jealous that she was matched with a man that she also desired, as “the bee stung her” (65). Maura’s experience, however, doesn’t prevent her from encouraging the marriage of Tomás to a woman that he didn’t seem enchanted by.

When the daughter of the old woman across the way returns from America a match is discussed between her and Tomás. Tomás seems torn, since “she was never much of a figure, and, after she as spent five years in the land of swear, she was uglier than ever” (80). Yet, “she was a girl with gold, and girls of that kind were few and far between in those days” (81). In the end, Tomás is too young to marry just yet and so he’s off the hook. It doesn’t take long for the girl’s parents to find her a nice farmer on the mainland to send their daughter too wed.

When it does come time for Tomás to find a wife, his sister, Maura, is the one who makes the match. She has two reasons in particular for picking this girl: she was smart, her family lived nearby “so that they could lend us a hand when we needed it” (145). All Tomás has to say about his wife is that she deserved the high praise his sister gave her—we might expect more from the man who seemed to love his wife so dearly. Another implied factor is that on that particular Shrovetide just about everyone on the island was getting married and Tomás couldn’t be left behind. The space dedicated to the wedding itself rivals Peig’s in brevity. Marriage is not such much a celebration but a natural graduation into adulthood.

But does Tomás regret not wedding his first love from Inishvickillaun? She returns to his narrative in his chapter on “The Troubles of Life,” where Tomás spends more time describing her funeral than he does describing his wife. He claims that it was an important funeral because so many people cared for the O’Dailaigh family and was the best-attended funeral in Tomás’ experience, but I would argue that its inclusion is a sign of remorse; that if nothing else he missed her, even if he didn’t completely regret marrying another woman. We’re never told of the reason that Tomás didn’t marry his first love, as it seems his uncle was trying to make them a match, which also might be significant.

This isn’t to say that Tomás wasn’t appreciative of his wife or women in general. Tomás’ greatest apparent sorrow was at his wife’s death, and he greatly respected his sisters and mother. Tomás thinks his mother is a beautiful woman and is not ashamed when she gathers her skirts, exposing her legs, “for there was nothing stunted or lumpy about her: she was a fine well-grown woman, fair-skinned and bright from crown to heel” (23). He is thankful for the traits his mother and father passed on to him, “admiring especially the traits he has inherited—industry and skill in providing for others” (Harrison 491). He describes his father as “a very handy man” and his mother as “never [knowing] what it was to be idle” (29). The only gift his parents couldn’t give him was the gift of storytelling: in comparison with Bald Tom, Tomás’ father “hadn’t half his gift for remembering the past and recalling every detail” (49). But, as already discussed, this gift doesn’t put food on the table and therefore wasn’t as desirable as the work ethic his parents did pass along.

Tomás’ defense of the island lifestyle was extended to the rest of his family, and further to all of the islanders. There is a sense of hostility from the islanders towards the mainlanders, except their own relations. This is interesting considering how much the islanders depended on the mainland to buy their fish and provide assistance in difficult times, although there is far more independence on the island at Tomás’ time than appears in *Peig*. There seems to be an intense

competition between the boats from the island and those from Dunquin, for example, when they islanders kill a number of porpoises on their beach:

When the Dunquin boats saw the rich prey ashore and those on land drawing their blood, in they came to take boatloads of them home with them, but those on shore wouldn't let the take a single one...There was one Dunquin boat that never stirred hand or foot to interfere. The Islanders gave them the best porpoise on the strand, and the six other boats went home without a taste of them. (8)

The islanders are extremely defensive of their resources, and resent the opportunistic and often unskilled Dunquin fishermen. At times they just make more work for the already strained islanders, as when they have to rescue a boat abandoned and tangled in a net (149). The islanders aren't afraid to use force against these outsiders, as they used against the bailiffs and tax collectors. When the Dunquin boats came to take some of the islanders' porpoises one hero of the day is the old woman, who "nearly killed the captain of one of the Dunquin boats with a blow of a shovel" (9).

This isn't the last time a woman will strike out against authority in defense of the island and their men. The poet Dunlevy's wife is reknowned for scaring off the bailiffs for good as "a woman of the Manning family, a marvelous woman" (215). The fact that O'Crohan gives her any sort of name is an honor in itself, he doesn't even name his children and wife. She stabbed the bailiff through her roof, and "That's the last bailiff we've seen" (216). Apparently this violence doesn't alter her femininity (one might argue that her and her husband, the poet, have reversed gender roles, as she fights back physically and Dunlevy uses satirical poems). Indeed, she is honored even though it might not be considered the most honorable of actions. The women are also important in rising up against the state, as no invader—state sanctioned or otherwise—could justify killing women and children. Tomás praises the women who stand up to the fleet that comes to collect rent, saying, "they felt less fear than they inspired" (54). Indeed,



they put several men out of commission throwing rocks. The women aren't quite as adept as men are, however, and one mother even almost throws her own child at the invaders when she runs out of rocks, but is stopped just in time.

But Tomás isn't always favorable of women superseding authority, especially when that authority is their husband. When one man's wife complains to him about failing to bring her any tea to dye fabric with, she chases him away and he is justified in his leaving. The woman in this anecdote is completely out of line and O'Crohan's language clearly illustrates this:

When this villain of a woman got home, she was spoling for a fight, and grudged every minute till her husband came home. She dressed him up and down...She made him so savage in the end that the neighbours had to come and separate them. (73)

Here, the wife is not only a "villain" but is the active subject of the description. She "made" her husband savage, he can't be blamed for what she forced him to do. The husband left the next morning, and it seems that this was an entirely reasonable response to her behaviors.

Religion is not at the forefront of O'Crohan's discussion as it was in Peig's. He mentions "God's will" on occasion, but there is no sense of devotion and religious fervor as there was in Peig. O'Crohan provides an account of religious worship as was tended to on the island, but it was "endless trouble" getting across the sound for Mass (237). Tomás also intimates that what religious devotion he may have held growing up is waning, disappointedly commenting, "Not half the respect is paid to the priests now that was paid in the days of my youth" (237). This is not to suggest that O'Crohan does not possess any spirituality—rather it can be found in his sensual descriptions of nature.

It is particular to O'Crohan's style that he emphasizes the relationship between man and nature. In his final chapter a particularly reflective scene can be found which comments on the landscape of both the island and its people:

This is a crag in the midst of the great sea, and again and again the blown surf drives right over it before the violence of the wind, so that you daren't put your head out any more than a rabbit that crouches in his burrow in Inishvickillaun when the rain and the salt spume are flying. (242-3)

The islanders are surrounded by the violent forces of nature, a nature which equalizes them with the likes of rabbits. The reader can taste the salt in the air as a violence wind stirs up both land and sea with deafening and blinding power. Nature isn't something to be challenged or conquered, here, but is rather an immutable force. This reverence for the will of nature and recognition of its positive and negative aspects can also be noted in O'Crohan's discussion of shipwrecks, saying, "It's an ill wind that blows good to nobody, and our folk often got through a bad year with the help of storm and tempest, through it was bad business for poor people who were at the mercy of the wind" (6). Here the reader might even wonder who the "poor people" at the mercy of the wind are: the sailors who don't survive the shipwrecks or the islanders that have to hope for a storm to wash a ship of supplies ashore.<sup>11</sup>

Tomás also differs from Peig in his critique of alcohol. Not that Peig's culture was one ultimately dependent on drinking, but there is a different attitude towards drunkenness in *Peig* than in *The Islandman*. Peig permits her father a few drunken episodes and is of the generation that involves liquor in wakes. Tomás only witnesses drinking at a wake towards the end of his life and completely disapproves, saying after one such event, "There have not been many wakes since without a cask or two, and I don't think much of the practice, for it's the usual thing that wherever there is drink there is horseplay, and that's not a fit thing in a house of the kind" (214). Even under other circumstances, Tomás frowns upon wild intoxication, as he resents his good

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<sup>11</sup> Tomás fails to pass total judgment on this, and instead accepts it as a fact of life, saying of one such ship, "If she destroyed her own crew, thousands survived the worst year of the famine through her" (10).

friend for “turning nasty” with the drink and forcing Tomás to spend the night helping him along (69).

The mythology was an important aspect of Peig’s storytelling as it applied to the oral tradition and her style of telling hero-tales. Tomás, despite being untrained in the oral tradition to the same extent Peig was, has a deep sense of ancient Celtic myth and uses it in his autobiography. Aside from naming his dog Oscar, after a popular character in the Fenian cycle, O’Crohan’s sense of mythological tradition is clear in his storytelling. Ciaran Ross argues that, “O’Crohan’s fascination with the Fianna...is more a fascination with male strength and physical power, a sort of objective correlative for his own masculinity and stoicism which his story serves to exemplify” (138). The Fianna would continue to be embraced in the nationalist movement as inspirational figures as part of a resurgence in Irish history and literature. The Fianna were especially fit for attention as the “semi-mythical body raised for the defence of Ireland against the Norse” (Ross 138). The Fianna exemplified the theme of the strong Irishman expelling outsiders from the homeland.

This tradition can be seen in the battle between Tomás and the cow seal, as previously discussed. This instance would be one example of what Fitz Gerald calls “episodes of [O’Crohan’s] autobiography [that] are narrated in such a way as to leave no doubt in our minds that he was highly influence by the hero tale: not only are there allusions to or comparisons with Finn-tales as well as direct quotations of formulae from them” (287). One might also consider O’Crohan’s presentation of the “monsters” in the sea that nearly kill him and his fellow islanders one afternoon and strike fear into the men for many weeks after (230). A common element in Celtic mythology is supernatural powers, such as the ability to predict one’s time of death. It is interesting that not only did Peig’s mother do this, but Tomás’ father does as well, remarking that he will never see the potatoes sprout in the field (168). Whether O’Crohan intended to

consciously compare his lineage to mythical beings or because he accepted it as a true indicator of supernatural powers is unclear.

Another important contribution is O’Crohan’s portrayal of America, which is not as distinct in Peig’s work. Tomás refers to America as the “land of sweat,” and rarely has anything good to say about it (80). America makes the old woman’s daughter uglier than she was before, and few characters have good experiences abroad. Unlike Peig, who longs to join Cait-Jim, Tomás never expresses interest in going to America. His sister, Maura, had to learn to live “like a rabbit” in America, and Pats expresses the same sentiment when fishing with Tomás: “O God of the Miracles! how I should have had to sweat in America to make two shillings, and all I have to do here is pull up a pot through two fathoms of water!” (177) This difference in perception of America is certainly due to the times when both pieces were written—for Peig’s time America was the logical next step for youth that could afford to get there, but for Tomás it was an unnecessary gamble that often resulted in suffering and eventually returning to the Blaskets.

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There may be evidence to the contrary that O’Crohan seems to resent his task of setting down his daily life as it begins to pass into history. Tomás expresses that language was a secondary occupation to farming and fishing, and intruded on these other tasks (Quigley 398)<sup>12</sup>. Carl Marstrander, the Norwegian linguist, through his demands on Tomás for letters and ultimately an autobiography, commodified a man that had only ever wanted to farm his land. Unlike Peig, who seemingly embraced her project, O’Crohan doesn’t seem as pleased to. Here the framing of a quote found in the introduction can be quite important:

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<sup>12</sup> When Dunlevy intrudes upon Tomás hard at work cutting turf, O’Crohan complains, “I fancy that no poet has ever been much good at carrying through any job that had any work in it except only poetry, and that was the way with Shane, too. I can produce some sort of evidence for this statement, for, whenever I take it in hand to compose quatrains (and I often do) I shouldn’t be much use in a gang of workers or in the field so long as I was engaged upon them” (86).

It was never my way to refuse anybody, so I set about the job. What you're reading now, reader, is the fruit of my labours. I was putting the world past me like this for some time more; people coming in ones and twos and threes, and every one of them having his own sittings with me... That's the most painful month's work I ever did, on land or sea. (240)

It seems that Tomás did not truly want to engage in this task. He may have been aware that he was slowly being absorbed by the state in a project bigger than just him, but also in a sort of Irish nationalism that would soon sweep the countryside and send tourists pouring into the Blasket and Aran Islands as well as the far-flung farms in the West. However, Tomás actually composed several articles and other written works for magazines and publications for years preceding his autobiography. Additional scholarship is currently attending to this inconsistency.

Regardless of how Tomás felt about his task, he knew it was one that must be done, and done at the present moment. He had begun to see the beginning of the end, and recognized it as such early enough to incorporate it into his closing chapters. In a period of relative calm and a lack of seizure of land for debt, Tomás comments, "I'm afraid it won't be so for ever. We are getting poorer every day" (235). The poverty that came to typify the ideal Gael wasn't the same poverty Tomás had experienced as a child. The most famous line from his autobiography comes during another reference to the purpose of his writing:

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

Perhaps O'Crohan even saw himself as contributing to the downfall of his own society. In acquiescing to the demands of the outside world, by writing daily letters and embracing a literary mode of communication, Tomás recognized that the written word began to replace the oral

tradition as books appeared on the island. He asserts that soon he was in high demand to read the books to the awaiting islanders in place of telling stories in the oral tradition, since, “they had lost their taste for telling them to one another when they compared them with the style the books put on them” (223). It seems that in seeking to preserve his culture, Tomás only hastened its inevitable decline.

*TWENTY YEARS A-GROWING*

**MUIRIS O’SULLIVAN (1904-1950)**

Muiris O’Sullivan is the youngest generation of Blasket authors. Muiris was born on the Island but was left in the care of a foster home in Dingle Town when his mother passed away until his father could take care of him. Consequently, Muiris began speaking English until he returned to his family and had to learn Gaelic. This is reversed when Muiris goes to Dublin to join the Irish Garda as a young man. Muiris composes his autobiography, *Twenty Years A-Growing*, after seeing the success of O’Crohan’s *The Islandman*. Unfortunately, his later manuscripts were rejected for publication. O’Sullivan died the youngest of the three authors, drowning while swimming in Galway Bay.

Muiris O’Sullivan’s autobiography, *Twenty Years A-Growing*, provides a refreshingly unique perspective on life in the Blaskets and is by far the most youthful of the three texts. Like Peig’s, Muiris’ first chapters take place on the mainland and he later moves to the Great Blasket Island. Like Peig, Muiris is first an outsider to whom the entire Blasket lifestyle is confusing and foreign, but by the closing chapter he will have become such a Blasket man that a trip to Dublin is very nearly an international excursion.

**A Blissful Focus**

Readers of *Twenty Years A-Growing* might find themselves wishing they had grown up on the island from O’Sullivan’s idyllic narration. When Muiris first returns to the Great Blasket from the orphanage he imagines himself “leaving behind the distress of the world and the oppression of the matrons!” (18). His journey is set to the tune of birds singing, to which Muiris responds, “Indeed, little bird... there was a time when I thought I could never be so happy and contented as you” (18).

The defining aspect of Muiris' work is his youthful vitality and innocence. His narrative is full of energy and glee and while it doesn't dismiss the more somber moments of island life he certainly doesn't linger on them. For Muiris, there is always a silver lining. Eamon Maher describes it as such:

Because of life being viewed through child-like eyes and at a stage when O Suilleabhain was no longer living on the island, *Twenty Years A-Growing* is far more buoyant in its celebration of the joys associated with living in close proximity to nature, the excitement of hunting animals and collecting birds' eggs, the joys of music and conversation, the solidarity among neighbors. (265)

Maher's point is well illustrated in the content of Muiris' autobiography, which dwells on beautiful passages describing nature while failing to elaborate on heartrending moments, which Tomás or Peig may well have emphasized. One of Muiris' favorite places to visit is the Inish, and he makes it very clear. In the closing paragraph of his chapter, "A Night on the Inish," Muiris mentions their contentment three times in two sentences: "We were seated at our ease without a trouble or a care in the world... It was a comfortable time... not a touch of stress on us" (138). This is in contrast to the few words dedicated to the powerful closing scene at the end of "The Wake," whereupon Muiris' grandfather cries, silently. Muiris only mentions it briefly, saying, "The tears were falling down his cheeks," and then promptly turning home (119). There is no long passage describing the breeze, the surf, or other aspects of nature as we often find in moments of happiness.

Muiris turns a blind eye, it seems, to the suffering of the world in favor of childish delight. "The War" is only a distant news story that keeps the old men up debating from 1914-1918 as the rest of the globe is embattled in the war to end all wars. Even when remains begin to wash up on shore it is a source of delight, not despair. One man even says, "By God, war is good" (142). Muiris then goes on to emphasize the abundance that the war brings the island



through several shipwrecks with several short sentences that pile up instead of using conjunctions and clauses as he does elsewhere:

The war changed people greatly...There was good living in the Island now.

Money was piled up. There was no spending. Nothing was bought. There was no need. It was to be had on the top of the water,-- flour, meat, lard, petrol, wax, margarine, wine in plenty, even shoes, stockings and clothes. (142)

Following these seven shorter sentences is a multi-clausal sentence that spans nearly a third of the page. The effect is to bury the reader beneath so many items, much like the beach after the winds brought the barrels and trunks of goods to the shore.

Even the dead body of a sailor—not a pleasant object to find at all—provides excitement and interest instead of horror and sympathy. The boys, Muiris and Liam, run to the beach and describe the corpse: “It was a terrible sight, the eyes plucked out by the gulls, the face swollen, and the clothes ready to burst with the swelling of the body” (145). The islanders even make jokes about what to do with it, Muiris’ father saying he will bring it home like a pet. The arrival of the peelers to take charge of the body is another source of “excitement,” and the reason onlookers don’t immediately search the man’s pockets for identification is the stench, not out of respect. In fact, the use of “it” instead of “him” to describe the corpse effectively dehumanizes the figure, allowing the reader to enjoy the moment as much as Muiris does instead of being absolutely horrified at the sight of a dead man.

Muiris’ hesitance to examine the more somber moments of island life can be seen to indicate some sort of weakness. Harrison argues that Muiris’ autobiography is similar to Tomás’ first hundred and fifty or so pages of *The Islandman*, “but does not show the same fortitude in the face of hardship that gives the earlier book some of the characteristic full flavor of living the island life” (492). Whereas Tomás and Peig admit pain and then move on because life demands it, Muiris never seems to admit true hardship and suffering—though it certainly existed at this

time. Muiris wrote as the island community was in severe decline, and had he lived long enough and remained there he would have been eventually evacuated by the government for fear of his own safety and livelihood. While Peig and Tomás admitted that death was a common occurrence and wasn't to be dwelled upon because the dead could not feed the living, the closest Muiris comes to similar statements is made through the elders. When discussing death in the family, Tomás' grandfather muses: "Ah, that is the way of the world," but nowhere does a similar sentiment appear in Muiris' narration (165).

One moment when we might expect Muiris to express sentiment at loss is when Muiris sees his sister, Maura, for the last time before she emigrates to the U.S. However, Muiris promptly ends the chapter instead of musing in retrospect as Peig does when she sees Kate-Jim leave for America. O'Sullivan narrates from a distance, relying on the plural "we" instead of providing insight into his own perception of the event. He mentions "sorrow and tears" but doesn't describe the scene, only providing a train whistle and ending with, "In a moment they were out of sight" (220). Perhaps it is the absence of a comma after the first clause or any sort of break that might slow the sentence, but the reader cannot help feeling that the scene is rushed, followed immediately by another chapter.

Instead, *Twenty Years A-Growing* is filled with games, ghosts, and glorious weather. Muiris provides more of an insiders' perspective on the hearthside activities the youth of the island participated in. He describes a game that measures relationships in terms of floating beans and apples were hung from rafters. One can almost imagine Tomás sitting in a corner at the Halloween celebration, admiring the youths and their good, clean fun. Muiris has an innocent mischievous streak in him as well, especially at the orphanage. Between accidentally calling everyone within earshot to communion with the church bell and running from trouble, Muiris presents his young self as inexhaustible and imaginative, though incredibly naïve as all young children are.

One element in particular might be seen as a childish: Muiris' incessant fear of ghosts. Muiris' fear of ghosts follows him throughout the autobiography, and chokes his screams on more than one occasion. After old Kate's death, Muiris imagines that he sees her at the window, sending the narrative into a tailspin as he strains to regain his composure:

I gave a start. Two shining eyes were peering in at me. My blood turned as cold as ice. The eyes were staring at me—old Kate's eyes... I tried to cry out. But my tongue swelled in my mouth, while I could not take my eyes away from what was in the window. (105)

It isn't until after a paragraph break that Muiris is finally about to scream. O'Sullivan's sentence structure presents a choking effect, breaking off unnaturally between "I tried to cry out" and "But my tongue swelled in my mouth," as the reader must pause at the period as Muiris paused only to realize that he couldn't physically make a sound. Then, the reader is trapped in the next sentence which continues onto the clause "I could not take my eyes away," gluing the reader to the page just as Muiris' gaze was glued to the window. Muiris' fear of the dead isn't limited to ghosts, however, as he imagines that the corpse of old Kate "will surely get up and eat [him]" at the wake (107). Ghosts and zombies aren't quite as prominent in the prior autobiographies, perhaps because Peig and Tomás focused on more pressing fears such as drowning and sickness.

The folklore of the island would have focused a good deal on fairies—which were thought to be very different from the traditional Anglo fairies that might sprinkle children with pixie dust and teach them to fly. The fairies that haunted Muiris were six feet tall and malicious. The fireside tales of fairies works wonders with Muiris' imagination on the Inish when he wakes up in the middle of the night. He is thinking of these fairies when he sees a hand outside the window, causing the same reaction he had to the cat in the window impersonating old Kate: leaping up but unable to scream as his tongue swelled in his mouth (127). As it turns out, it seems a sailor visited their campsite that night, but we might have expected Tomás O'Crohan to

be more practical rather than crying, “Oh Lord, save me from the fairies!” (127). Even Muiris’ friends don’t heed his fears and tell him to go back to sleep. Steadfast Muiris is weakened again the next day when an other-worldly sheep darts out from a hole in front of him (132).

While O’Sullivan is writing beyond his immediate youth, he preserves his childish sentiments for the reader, especially in his first chapters. At times the reader may even forget the O’Sullivan is writing an autobiography and not a novel. There doesn’t seem to be much separation between author and character, and rarely does O’Sullivan provide a critique of his young self. Young Muiris detests women for their habit of kissing, saying, “women are the very devil for plámás, so that I did not like to meet them at all. Why wouldn’t they take it fine and soft like a man?” (19) This apparently bothers the young Muiris so much that he again refers to it as “the nasty habit of women” (22). We might assume that the matured Muiris has since changed his opinion of kissing women.

O’Sullivan is also careful to preserve his innocent reaction to first seeing curraghs, which results in a memorable moment repeated by documentarians several decades later. The young Muiris doesn’t know what to make of the figures, which he thinks at first are giant black bugs, asking his father, “are those beetles dangerous?” (22) As one such “beetle” approaches he jumps behind his aunt and cries, “Oh, the beetle!” (22) This moment is easily one of the most memorable scenes from O’Sullivan’s autobiography. We also might compare this naïveté to the scene when the islanders see black skin for the first time, the women wondering why these men didn’t clean themselves (150). This moment presents not only Muiris as innocent but also the islanders: not necessarily ignorant but perhaps more pure in their tradition, having not been exposed to the outside world in the slightest. Muiris is partially a product of the childlike culture he was raised in.

The isolation of the Blasket culture becomes apparent especially in the close. Though born on the Blasket, Muiris spent his first conscious years on the mainland in a town orphanage.

Muiris returns to the mainland at the end of his autobiography, and is as disoriented by his return as he was on his original return to the Great Blasket:

It is O’Sullivan who, as a child, is the uncomprehending English speaker on the Island. If a sense of linguistic alienation permeates the first chapters (the English-speaking boy enthralled by Blasket customs) it is the reversal of such an alienation that dominates the end of the book, as we accompany the uncomprehending Irish-speaking adult in anglicized Dublin, where he goes to get his first job. (Ross 140)

It’s possible that O’Sullivan’s perception of the island is idyllicized as a reaction to the unpleasant and unfamiliar world he meets in Dublin and in service, much the way many adults fondly remember their college days after beginning work in the “real world”.

If the islanders are unaware of the uniqueness of their culture they are also unaware of how dangerous and precarious their lifestyle would be considered. O’Sullivan fails to connect beauty to the danger of the island, such as when he is climbing across a cliff face, juxtaposing two very different thoughts: “There was nothing beneath my feet but the blue sea, and the slightest stumble would have sent me headlong as sauce for the crabs below,” followed by, “By God, George, said I in my own mind, if you were here now and saw this view, you would never go back to England again” (224-5). Only an islander would truly be able to understand such a statement. Muiris’ innocence of just how difficult his life might be considered is apparent when he sympathizes for the birds: “I thought what a hard life they had, foraging for food like any sinner” (39). It’s surprising that O’Sullivan doesn’t remark on the hardships on the Great Blasket: the steep grades, perhaps the food, backbreaking labor, dangerous conditions; especially after living on the mainland and spending time in Dublin.

This innocence may be a result of writing in his twenties, as opposed to the twilight years that Peig and Tomás wrote in. O’Sullivan lacks hindsight and perspective as the older authors

have, perhaps preventing him from reflecting as aptly as his elders. The passage of time occurs much more quickly for Tomás and Peig, while Muiris rarely reflects on his limited time left. What might be described as a sense of impending mortality is expressed only once, as he sits looking out over the ocean, watching the thrushes hunt for food as winter slowly claims the greenery of the island: “It was of the life of the birds I was thinking and the passing of the tide from the strand” (120). And even that moment is only an indirect reference to the passage of time as the seasons change and tides flow back and forth. In another example Muiris reflects on age rather than mortality, describing his grandfather:

Turning round I saw the old man was asleep. I looked at him, thinking. You were one day in the flower of your youth, said I in my own mind, but, my sorrow, the skin of your brow is wrinkled now and the hair on your head is grey. You are without suppleness in your limbs and without pleasure in the grand view to be seen from this hill. But, alas, if I live, some day I will be as you are now. (75)

Muiris is writing at just the age when his growth thus far has been rapid and changed quickly. In the span of twenty years so much has happened, he has grown so much, yet he is still far enough away from old age that his mortality is not yet a concern. Tomás and Peig witnessed changes on the island for nearly half a century, but O’Sullivan hasn’t been a Blasket man for long enough to see much change at all—the only thing that has gone to ruin is his friend’s, Padrig’s, home on the Inish from years of disuse into “ferns and nettles” (127).

### **A Poetic Style**

Stylistically, Muiris’ childlike perspective and energy is translated into an obvious love for the beautiful. O’Sullivan manipulates his language deliberately to achieve various effects. In several instances, O’Sullivan seeks to overwhelm and surround the reader with sensory

information so they might appreciate the beauty he experienced. The first example of this comes early, in the second paragraph of his autobiography:

I am a boy who was born and bred in the Great Blasket, a small truly Gaelic island which lies north-west of the coast of Kerry, where the storms of the sky and the wild sea beat without ceasing from end to end of the year and from generation to generation against the wrinkled rocks which stand above the waves that wash in and out of the coves where the seals make their homes. (1)

The entire paragraph consists of one sentence that doesn't allow the reader a single breath. The paragraph is full of action, the storms and sea beating without ceasing, repeating "end" and "generation" with the consonance of "wrinkled rocks" and "washing waves" that go "in and out," the sentence almost has the capability of causing seasickness. This description of the Island isn't necessarily benevolent; rather, the violence is tangible. The excitement of the spraying water and crushing waves create a beautiful and dangerous scene that typifies the Island: the cliffs that create incredible views are also the site of many deaths and shipwrecks, the waves that provide a sonic backdrop have also drowned many men. Muiris, in his childlike excitement, appreciates the dangerous beauty of the Island, but seems more conscious of the beauty than the danger.

A similarly effective overwhelming passage can be found when Muiris goes to the races in Ventry. The paragraph begins with a short, deliberate sentence: "We started off on our road" (68). The rest of the paragraph is a single sentence with more than fifteen clauses contained within:

The sun was sinking behind Mount Eagle in the north and the evening fine and warm; mirth and merriment, laughter and shouting here and there after the day; every man merry with drink, children with cheeks stained from ear to ear from eating sweets, tricksters hoarse from shouting, racers exhausted from all the sweat

they had shed, tinkers at the roadside sound asleep after two days' walking to the races; here a pair singing, there a pair fighting; groups of people in the distance far as the eye could see and they staggering from side to side; all of them making for home and talking of nothing but Tigue Diarmid and his crew; a melodium at every cross-road making the hill-sides echo in the stillness of the evening; groups of boys and girls dancing to the music and boys shouting 'Up Cuas!' at the end of every tune.

The description includes visual stimuli, from the "sun," "Mount Eagle," "cheeks stained... from eating sweets," and "groups of people in the distance as far as the eye could see." The aural cues include "laughter," "shouting," "tricksters hoarse with shouting," "a pair singing," "a pair fighting," "talking," "a melodium... making the hill-sides echo in the stillness of the evening," "dancing to the music and boys shouting 'Up Cuas!' at the end of every tune." The reader can taste the sweets, the drink, can feel the racers' exhaustion and sweat, and are overwhelmed by a constant back and forth "from side to side," the here-and-there phrases, and the incredible length of the sentence. The scene may be oppressive and crushing, but it's exciting and enjoyable—Muiris' friend, Tomás, laments that they can't stay longer (68).

Descriptions of nature are O'Sullivan's strength, however. An example of his poetic talent can be found as Muiris and his friends relish surviving an encounter with a whale:

The sun had sunk in the west, the stars beginning to twinkle, wonderful colours spreading over the sky, a seal snoring here and these in the coves, rabbits over our heads among the clumps of thrift, sea-ravens standing on the rocks with their wings outspread. (102)

Again, we find an entire paragraph consisting on only one multi-clausal sentence. The movement is simply amazing, and captures so much more than a photograph might be able to. There is light and color, sound and action: O'Sullivan creates a dynamic scene to surround his



reader between sky and rabbits, with a soundtrack of snoring seals, a background of twilight, and sea-ravens in the foreground.

Fitz Gerald argues that O’Sullivan’s passages reveal his “literariness” (289). Several passages interrupt dialogue and action with a lengthy paragraph, both physically on the page and in the reader’s mind. When Muiris and Padrig visit Seal Cove, its description follows dialogue and precedes the action of the trip, and is filled with phrases of incredible and surprising description. O’Sullivan again uses the language to mimic the action of the scene, describing the tide as such: “Then the wave would sweep back again and you would think it was hurling the rocks, weighing hundreds of tons, against each other” (90). The sentence’s second independent clause is interrupted with a dependent clause, forcing the reader to backtrack and read around the rocks, just as the water moves. It is followed by another wave in the next sentence, which begins with the conjunctive adverb “Then,” piling the waves on top of each other.

The movement of O’Sullivan’s descriptions is at times linear, indicating one direction or another. For example, one description of the sunrise after a night spent on the Inish reads: “It was a lovely morning; steam rising from grass and fern as the sun drew up the dew; the goat, the sheep, and the birds stretching themselves after the night’s sleep” (134). O’Sullivan begins with steam rising from the grass, zooms in on the dew moving upward toward the sun, pans outward to the goats and sheep and finally ends on the birds, stretching the reader’s mind’s eye in the same way the animals and stretching from their long night’s sleep.

This movement can also be used to emphasize height, and O’Sullivan uses to describe the cliffs at Inish-na-Bro:

It was a wild backward place, great dizzy cliffs above my head in which hundreds and thousands of birds were nesting, the guillemot, whippeen, common puffin, red puffin, black-backed gull, petrel, sea-raven, breeding together in the wild cliffs; seals in couples here and there sunning themselves on the rocks, each bird

with its own cry and the seals with their moan, a dead calm on the sea but for the little ripples moving in and making a glug-glag up through the crevices of the rocks. (186)

O'Sullivan manipulates the reader's perception in three dimensions: first, he draws the viewer upwards, as a new ledge and more height must be added to accommodate each new species of bird higher and higher. Next, he draws the cliffs out horizontally with the seals "here and there" across the rocks. Finally, he brings the image to life laterally towards the reader, providing sound and describing the motion of the water. Rather than tell the reader that the cliffs are tall and busy, O'Sullivan forces the reader to paint his or her own image and stretch his or her own dimensions. Another example of this ability can be found as Muiris looks down on the village, describing the morning before a trip to the Inish, "...and when a sea-raven would dip himself he would send little ripples spreading out in a circle ever and ever till they were lost from sight" (231). Here, the language spreads out as the ripples do, using unnecessary phrases (it might be assumed that the ripples spread "in a circle") and repeating "ever" and ripples would double themselves one by one and finally leading the reader along to the end of the sentence, away from the "ripples" as the ripples themselves disappear.

Maher refers to these passages as "lyrical outbursts," such as the description of the intense sunlight in the chapter, "A Day's Hunting," where the sunlight is "on fire" and the "Kerry diamonds lying all around weaken [Muiris'] eyes with their sparkle" (41). The sunlight is blinding, yet it is a positive moment, a "pseudo-Rousseauist account of idyllic innocence and everlasting happiness" where even the unpleasant is pleasantly remembered (Ross 115).

O'Sullivan is fondly remembering his childhood, a simple time he wishes he could return to, and this perception is evident through his language.

O'Sullivan's literary skill isn't only evident in his choice of words and sentence structure, but also in how he shapes his narrative overall. O'Sullivan provides rounded closure and fulfills

his own prophecies. He appropriately delays or withholds information in order to manipulate the reader's emotions. When he encounters ghosts or fairies, for example, the reader doesn't find out what the creature or apparition really is until Muiris does. He sets up one such prophecy in the beginning of his autobiography, when the shop owner, Martin Kane, meets Muiris as he leaves Dingle for the first time on his way to the Great Blasket Island. Kane tells the boy, "Upon my word, the day will come when you will turn your back on that place, my boy" (20). Young Muiris of course objects, but O'Sullivan wouldn't have included the moment if it weren't important. Sure enough, 226 pages later, Muiris returns to the shop on his way to Dublin (246). Muiris surprises Kane and withholds his identity long enough to make a joke out of it, recognizing the circularity in both the moment and again in his narrative.

One evening, Muiris and Mauraid are discussing the fate of the island and where their adulthood will bring them, as Muiris tells her that their parents "will have to do without us," and though Mauraid refers to Muiris as "like a prophet" she also resists his prediction, saying "God is strong, Maurice" (206). Muiris cites fishing and emigration and the reasons the island community will fail, just as his father will mention when Muiris tells him he will be leaving, saying, "Well, I give you my blessing, for so far as this place is concerned there is no doubt but it is gone to ruin" (241). O'Sullivan anticipates and answers the questions his readers will ask.

O'Sullivan is the most literary of the three authors, but also calls upon the oral tradition in his narrative. As Fitz Gerald argues:

Maurice often 'reconstructs' conversations with his grandfather to recreate the oral setting through which his grandfather has transmitted aspects of this culture to him, thus creating a 'second person' situation... which we know to be a common way of telling seanchas. (290)

The effect of telling stories this way is to make the reader feel as though they are a silent observer, like a child at the hearth listening to the old men exchange stories. O'Sullivan is adept

at forcing the reader into his narrative, showing instead of telling, turning the story itself into an act to be observed rather than simply an object to be read. One of these stories is told by Muiris' grandfather about Egan who outsmarted the stingy farmer on the way to the Ventry races. The story lasts nearly four pages, and by the time it has ended the boys are nearly at their destination—the time has passed quickly for the eager boys and for the reader who has nearly forgotten where he or she is (51-53).

This technique is not limited to Muiris' grandfather and is again employed when the stranger comes to visit in the chapter, "The Wanderer." Muiris is the audience, only serving to urge the man to continue the way a reader might turn a page. The stranger tells his story as he had witness it, the men listen, Muiris is an observer and a narrator, to all of which the reader is the audience. The spheres of involvement radiate outwards, bringing the reader again to the center of the action, if only to observe.

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O'Sullivan was in a unique position as an autobiographer, as he "had the opportunity to witness the reaction to his predecessor's autobiography (Tomás O'Crohan's) before describing his own childhood and early manhood spent on the island" (Maher 265). O'Sullivan's fascination with the island is apparent, and may have been significantly influenced by his disenchantment with Dublin and the civic guard. While Peig wrote in old age with hindsight and wisdom, Muiris was as youthful as ever, without the extreme loss and hardship that Peig claimed. Tomás wrote while still on the island, perhaps absence would have made him fonder of its dangerous beauty. Regardless, there is a sense of loss and mourning that runs through *Peig* and *The Islandman* that is not dominant or prevalent in *Twenty Years A-Growing*.

Without O'Sullivan's perspective on Island life, our portrait of the Great Blasket and its people would be incomplete. Muiris draws our attention to the beauty of both the island and its youth, instead of lamenting the dangers of the cliffs and currents and the hardships associated with surviving in such a precarious place. Muiris' youth was instead full of camping trips and hunting expeditions, punctuated at times by funerals and emigration, but nothing like the somber elegy found in Peig's and O'Crohan's autobiographies. Muiris' fond remembrances provide a jubilant rendering of the Island and a life that no longer exists.

## CONCLUSION

In 1953 the remaining inhabitants of the Great Blasket Island were evacuated. This marked the end of a long political negotiation, as well as the end of a way of life. Appropriately, harsh weather delayed the final evacuation by several days. Cole Moreton's book, *Hungry for Home*, claims the catalyst for evacuation came in 1947 when a young man died on the island without access to priest or doctor.

Without the Irish nationalist movement and the interest taken in the Blasket Islands it's possible that the community would have been lost forever without written record. Instead, these three authors have preserved the culture and image of the island community and their translation into English has expanded the audience to include continuing generations. As Bryan MacMahon commends,

Few subjects of literature are new. A subject belongs to him who says it best.

Harsh lives are everywhere endured by the storytellers of the Blasket: Sayers, O Cromhthain, O Suilleabhain and others saw to it that their tales were set down on paper, with the result that the whole island is viewed from the clifftop grave of Peig Sayers constitutes a memorial to the joyous spirit of man complementing what was written and ensuring that the memory of the islanders shall not die.

(108)

Indeed, beyond the moral, lyrical, and traditional contributions of the three authors, they have served to provide a living memorial for a culture that disappeared as quickly as it was discovered.

As the final chapters of close on both the Island and the author's novels, we find that all three invoke similarities. Peig closes with a blessing:

God's blessing on you, manuscript,

My blessing too, on those who see it,  
 Good luck attend my native land,  
 God strengthen those who strive to free it! (212)

Tomás does the same, in prose form:

I hope in God that she [Tomás' mother] 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)

Muiris, the youngster, does not conclude with a blessing, but returns to his home and describes what he finds:

When I returned home the lamps were being lit in the houses. I went in. My father and grandfather were sitting on either side of the fire, my grandfather smoking his old pipe. (298)

While the first two invoke blessings on the reader and the final closing describes an intimate family reunion, all three emphasize a circularity that is acutely aware of its finality. Peig and O'Crohan are intentionally ending their autobiographies with a Catholic invocation as tradition would have it, serving to address the reader directly and draw attention to impending mortality of a culture and the life of the reader. Peig wishes luck to her "native land" of Ireland as it struggles in upcoming decades to secure its place as its own nation free from colonial restraint. Tomás calls direct attention to his own death and that of his readers, hoping that he will meet them in "the Island of Paradise". Muiris, more indirectly, brings the reader to the warmth of the hearth inside his father's home. He has just come inside from the village that has changed a great deal in the two years he was away, leaving the reader with the impression that this warm and cozy setting will not exist for much longer—and he would be right. His grandfather sits smoking his "old pipe," smoke which will someday cease to rise.

It is not often that an entire civilization, albeit a small one, is chronicled in such a detailed fashion at its twilight hour. One cannot help but imagine, as the last of the foundations are overgrown and crumbling, that ours is a privileged society to witness the Blasket fortitude and beauty that is epitomized in these three autobiographies, and wonder what such narratives from our own time might look like. Every passing generation brings an end to one and a new beginning to others, but one thing is for certain: The likes of the Blasket Islanders will never be again.



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