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The Islandman

TOMÁS O'CROHAN

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TRANSLATED FROM THE IRISH

BY

ROBIN FLOWER

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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 this literary tradition, evoking a way of life which has now vanished.

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FOR E W O R D

THE book here translated was first published in 1929, and had an immediate success among readers of Irish. It was 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, to set out the way of his life upon his remote island from childhood to old age. This attempt had an interest of its own, but the fascination of the result was greatly enhanced by the unique individuality of the writer, who, though sharing to the full in the character and interests of the community in which he grew up, 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. That little world—the island group of the Blaskets lying off the extreme point of the peninsula of Corcaguiney in West Kerry—he nowhere attempts to describe. And it may be of use to the reader unacquainted with that part of Ireland to have before him some brief account of the natural environment of the life depicted in this book. The peninsula of Corcaguiney runs out west into the Atlantic between the two bays of Dingle and Tralee. It is a wild world of inter-tangled mountains, culminating in the great mass of Brandon, beyond Dingle. West of Mount Brandon again two hills, the pointed shape of Croaghmartin and the long body of Mount Eagle, divide the two parishes of Ventry and Dunquin, and beyond Dunquin, to the north, lies the parish of Ballyferriter. In the old days the approach to Dunquin, to which parish the Blaskets belong, was by the hill pass that climbs between these two summits. But in the days of the great famine a relief road was constructed round the promontory of Slea Head under Mount Eagle, and the heavier traffic now takes that way. Going by the

old road, you see below you, as you top the pass, the parish of Dunquin, and, out in the sea beyond, the six main islands of the group. Nearest to the land lies Beginish—a small flat island of good grass. A mile to the west is the Great Blasket—a high, narrow island, three miles by one, with a little cluster of houses on its eastern front towards the mainland, perched on the cliff above the tiny harbour and the long beach of sand called An Tráigh Bhán, the White Strand. Beyond the White Strand to the north there is a cliff-ringed beach of shingle known as the Gravel Strand, on which boats may be pulled up. Here the island sheep are driven for shearing, and on the rocks, out from the beach, weed is gathered for manure. The adventure of the women in Chapter 2 happened here, and here Tomás had his encounter with the seal (Chapter 9). The island rises westward in a series of hills on which the cattle and sheep find scant pasturage and rabbits burrow in the lofty cliffs. The best turf in the island is on its summit, on the hill called Sliabh an Dúna, beyond the prehistoric cliff fort which gives its name to the height, and a rough road leads some way back along the island in that direction. Above the road is an old martello tower, dating from the French wars, which stood unimpaired until a few years ago, when a thunderbolt shattered it. At the end of the island the hill falls away into a grassy expanse, slanting to the south, where was an ancient settlement, of which only fragments of beehive dwellings now remain. Beyond this again the land narrows, and you climb over jagged rocks to Ceann Dubh, Black Head, the extreme western point of the island. A narrow strait separates Ceann Dubh from Inish na Bro, Quern Island, and a little farther off lies Inishvickillaun, where is an ancient church and a little modern house, now only intermittently inhabited. The caves of Ceann Dubh and Inishvickillaun are haunted by seals, and Inish na Bro and Inishvickillaun teem with

rabbits. Farther out to the west is the Teeraught, the Western Island, a high pinnacle of rock carrying a lighthouse, the last light that Irish emigrants see on their voyage to America. North of the main island is Inish Tooshkert, the Northern Island, a fastness of cliffs, in which is a well-preserved ancient oratory.

These islands and the seas about them are the theatre of the events described in this book. They are inhabited by a small population of fishermen of comparatively recent mainland origin, who support themselves precariously by fishing and on the produce of their fields and flocks. Their church is in Dunquin, their market-town is Dingle, and few of the older inhabitants have ever ventured farther east than Tralee. They are all Irish speakers, and, though English is taught in the little school, it has made no way in the common intercourse of the island. The older inhabitants have a rich store of folk-tale and folk-song, and in the period described in this book the little community was a typical example of an Irish village of the old fashion, practically untouched by modern influences. 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, but solely concerned to preserve some image of the world that he has known, or, in his own words, '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'.

For the purposes of such a record Tomás was admirably fitted by a long and unconscious preparation. It will be clear to every reader that from his earliest days he was keenly observant, watching and judging the people about him, eagerly alive to their tricks of character, and appreciating to the full the humours and tragedies of their life. He has always been a handy man, meeting with ready

expedients every call on sea or land and scornfully critical of the left-handed blunderings of the less expert among his fellows. Life on such an island, where there are no shops and no craftsmen at call, develops an all-round competence in the individual to which our specialized civilizations afford no parallel. The experience of these islanders is necessarily narrow in its range, but within that range it is absolute and complete. At sea and on the hill, in the house, in the field, or on the strand, they must at all times be prepared for every event. There is always a narrow margin between them and famine or violent death, and their faculties are the keener for that. All this necessary equipment of an islandman is raised to a higher power in Tomás by a natural critical faculty. He has always reflected on his experience and watched his fellows with a certain aloofness. A not unfriendly irony distinguishes his conversation and gives a sharp flavour to many of the pictures in his book. He has an inborn sense of decency and restraint, and in the wild scenes of carousal, which are the inevitable relief demanded by the monotonous and restricted life of a community imprisoned by the sea, he will be seen observing a quiet moderation and watching lest his more reckless companions come to any harm.

This critical alertness is very noticeable in his use of his native language. Those who, like myself, have had the privilege of his friendship and instruction have often wondered at the neatness and precision of his explanations of the meaning of words and phrases, his ready production of synonyms and parallels out of a vast vocabulary, the finish and certainty of his phrasing in ordinary conversation.

There has always been a strong literary tradition among the Munster peasantry. They have preserved orally a considerable corpus both of folk-song and of the more elaborate poetry of the eighteenth century. And their folk-tales

are related by the best exponents in a fascinating idiom which has a natural quality of literature. All this tradition Tomás inherits from the poets and taletellers with whom he consorted eagerly in his young days. The island poet may have made him suffer, but he taught him much. And his own inborn genius for speech has refined his acquirements into an individual style. He has told me that, in writing this book, he aimed at a simple style, intelligible to every reader of Irish, using none of the 'cruadh-Ghaoluinn', the 'cramp-Irish' of the pure literary tradition. This aim he has achieved. For the narrative runs easily in the ordinary language of the island, with only an occasional literary allusion of a straightforward kind. But the style is none the less unmistakably his own, and to those who have known the man his whole figure and character is implicit in the manner of his writing.

If I may speak for myself, the reading of this book brought vividly to my mind my earliest experience of the author, when he was in his strength, over twenty years ago. He was in those days a small, lively man, with a sharp, intelligent face, weathered and wrinkled by the sun and rain and the flying salt of the sea, out of which two bright, observant eyes looked critically upon the world. He was then hard at work, fishing and helping to build houses for the Congested Districts Board, but he spared the time to help me with my studies. Lying under the lee of a turf-rick, or sitting in his own house or the King's kitchen, he would pour out tales and poetry and proverbs, quickening the whole with lively comments and precise explanations of difficult words and interspersing memories of his own life and of the island past. If this experience had been forgettable, this book, which gives so vivid a picture of the man, would have brought it back to me. And I can only hope that my attempt at translation does not fail too hopelessly to convey this double image.

For the method adopted in this translation a word of excuse may be offered. Irish and English are so widely separated in their mode of expression that nothing like a literal rendering from the one language to the other is possible. It is true that there has come into being a literary dialect, sometimes used for translation from Irish or for the purpose of giving the effect of Irish speech, which in books or on the stage has met with considerable applause. And in skilful hands this mixture of Irish and English idioms has often an effect of great charm. It does not to my ear, however, convey the character of the language as naturally spoken by those to whom it is their only speech. There is always something slightly artificial about it, and often a suggestion of the pseudo-poetic. This literary dialect could not be used to render the forthright, colloquial simplicity of the original of this book. For the same reason the more sophisticated forms of literary English are also excluded. It seemed best therefore to adopt a plain, straightforward style, aiming at the language of ordinary men who narrate the common experiences of their life frankly and without any cultivated mannerism. The constant charm of Irish idiom, which is so delightful in the original, must necessarily be lost. But rouge is no substitute for a natural complexion.

A few words may be added on the genesis of the original book. It would probably never have occurred to Tomás to write his life, had it not been for Mr. Brian O'Kelly of Killarney, who encouraged him to set about the work, and read over part of Maxim Gorki's autobiography to him to show the interest of that kind of writing. The book was written in a series of letters to Mr. O'Kelly. This accounted for the bulk of the matter. These letters Mr. O'Kelly handed over to Mr. Sugrue, who, under the name of 'An Seabhad', has published a series of delightful tales in the language of West Kerry. Tomás then wrote

the remaining part of the book, and it was published under Mr. Sugrue's editorship, and in the Irish form met with immediate success. My own thanks are due to Mr. Sugrue, who has been kind enough to read over this translation. The photographs by Mr. Thomas H. Mason of Dublin are reproduced by his kind permission.

ROBIN FLOWER

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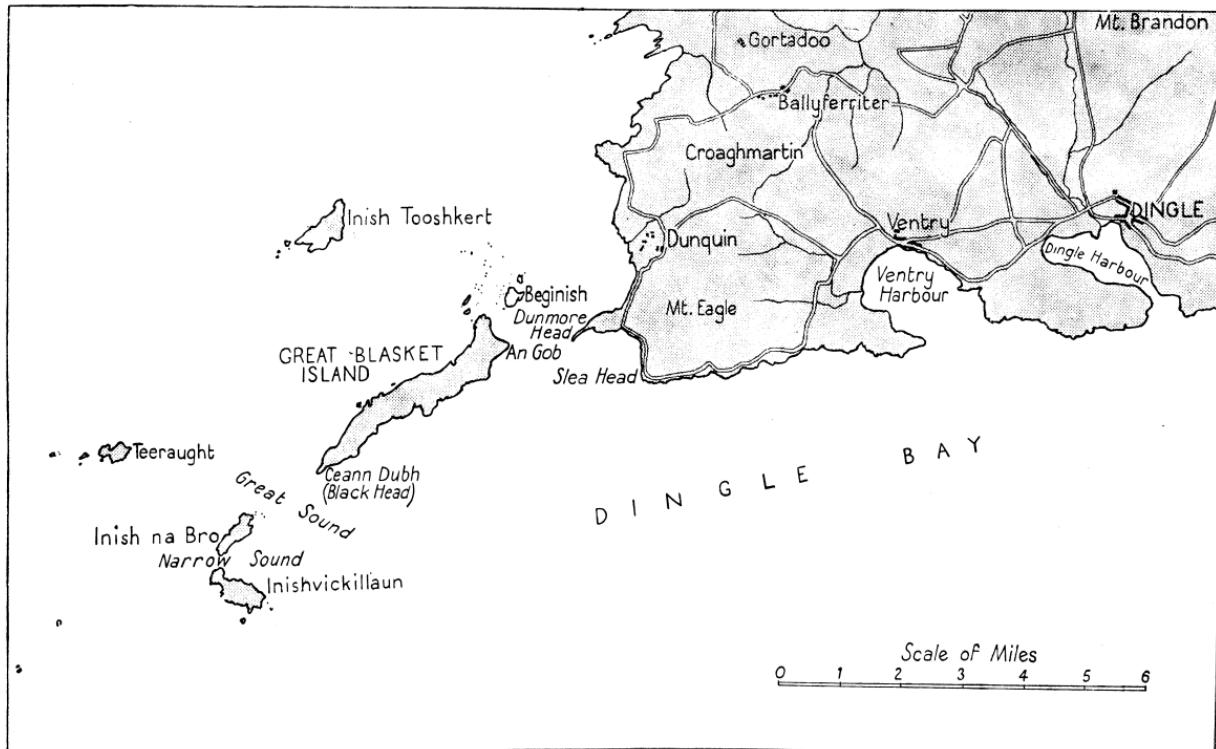
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THE BLASKET ISLANDS

I. *My Childhood*

MY PEOPLE · THE OLD WOMAN NEXT DOOR · THE
TURF BASKET · THE PALM-OIL · MY BREECHES ·
THE PORPOISES · THE WHEAT SHIP · MYSELF AND
THE CONGER-EEL

I WAS born on St. Thomas's day in the year 1856. I can recall being at my mother's breast, for I was four years old before I was weaned. I am 'the scrapings of the pot', the last of the litter. That's why I was left so long at the breasts. I was a spoilt child, too.

Four sisters I had, and every one of them putting her own titbit into my mouth. They treated me like a young bird in the nest. Maura Donel, Kate Donel, Eileen Donel, and Nora Donel—those were their names. My brother was Pats Donel, and I am Tomás Donel. Maura is living still in this island, two of them are still alive in America, and Pats isn't dead yet. Kate died after drawing the old-age pension for three months. That was the whole bunch of us. They were all well grown when I was a baby, so that it was little wonder that I was spoilt among them all. Nobody expected me at all when I came their way.

My father was a middle-sized man, stout and strong. My mother was a flourishing woman, as tall as a peeler, strong, vigorous, and lively, with bright, shining hair. But when I was at the breast there was little strength in her milk, and besides that I was 'an old cow's calf', not easy to rear. For all that, the rascal death carried off many a fine young ruffian and left me to the last. I suppose he didn't think it worth his while to shift me. I was growing stronger all the time and going my own way wherever I wanted, only that they kept an eye on me to see that I didn't go

by the sea. I wore a petticoat of undressed wool, and a knitted cap. And the food I got was hens' eggs, lumps of butter, and bits of fish, limpets, and winkles—a bit of everything going from sea or land.

We lived in a cramped little house, roofed with rushes from the hill. Often the hens would nest in the thatch and lay a dozen eggs there. We had a post bed in the corner, and two beds at the bottom of the house. There used to be two cows in the house, the hens and their eggs, an ass, and the rest of us. Our house was reversed: that is, its door faced north—all the others were turned to the south.

There was another house opposite with its door towards us, and the two families chattered together every day. The woman from that house was in and out of our house all day long. She always had something as a result of her visits. She was 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. But all the same, she had a good heart.

I was soon sprouting finely, and the grey petticoat was getting too short for me. I was coming to know things then. I took the measure of the old girl opposite pretty soon, and gave her tit for tat. The two families used to be in our house every Sunday when my father said the Rosary. The woman from the house across the way used to say to my mother every Sunday: 'You'll leave the grey petticoat on him till you're looking for a wife for him. Isn't he growing at a rate, God bless him!', so she would say, with a great lump of a bream safe in her stomach.

My father's kin were from Dunquin. He married into the Island. My mother's people were from Ventry. They were both willing to take one another. They hadn't the way that some couples have that makes you want to take a

stick to them to make them marry! They settled down in a little cabin to live on the produce of the sea, and they had a bit of land, too; and both of them were well gifted to make the best profit out of sea and land. There were no asses in the Island in those days, only a creel on the back of every man—and of every woman, too—that is to say, every woman that wasn't a pet or a sly knave who would rather starve than work.

My father was a marvellous fisherman and a great man for work. He was a stonemason and boat's captain, and handy at every trade. He often did a hand's turn for other folk, for in those days most of them were little better than a drove of asses in a field. It was a great year for fish, that year when I wore the grey petticoat, and was still throwing an odd glance now and again at my mother's breast, for I had a fancy that I ought to be dragging at the teats still. I suppose that they weren't more than two years behind me that time.

One morning my father was going out fishing. They had a fine rick of turf on the hill, well on in the year, and they had been told that all the turf had been stolen the day before. He told my mother to do her best to bring some of the turf home, for the day was fine. She threw the creel on her back, and had brought back six creels of turf before the pet woke out of his slumbers. She had to leave the turf alone then and lend an ear to him now he was awake. She dressed me in the grey petticoat and gave me a bite to eat, and, though I ought to have been contented, I wasn't. My mother set the creel straight to make for the hill again, but I had my eye on her and she had to let me go with her. I could only make a shift at climbing the hill, crawling on all fours sometimes, and I soon grew tired, so that she was forced to throw me into the creel and carry me up the hill. She cursed me once or twice, and I don't blame her.

When she had filled up the creel with the turf, she signed

to me to be making my way down hill, but I made more fuss about going back than I had about coming. I remember well that she put the toe of her foot under me and lifted me clear off the ground to help me well away, and said: 'Bad cess to you, you've made a fine muddle of the day on me.' She had to carry me home in front of her with the creel at her back as full as it had ever been before. She dropped me on the floor, and told Maura to shove me under a creel and leave me there to live or die. For all the tricks I played, she brought down a score of creels that day, and by Sunday she had the whole great rick of turf safely housed. My father got five thousand fish that week. My mother would be telling these tales to the old hag over the way.

A hard year came about the time when I was still very young. A ship was wrecked that year on the north side of the Island. The ship was ground to smithereens, and her cargo—some kind of palm-oil it was—went afloat in lumps all over the sea. It was valuable stuff, and very little of it would bring a poor man a half sack of white meal—yellow meal hadn't come in at that time. There were coastguards in Dunquin in those days, and there was need of them, for ships were always being driven in on the coast, as there was no other contrivance known for propelling them but sails. When the bluecoats (that's the name they had in the countryside) heard of the wreck in the Island and of her cargo, they kept rushing into the Island night and day, without allowing themselves time for sleep, for they had a splendid boat, well-equipped, and they themselves were knowledgeable men. They worried the life out of the Islanders, who were trying to hide the lumps of palm-oil in holes in places where neither cat nor dog could come at them.

Anyhow the people lived very well in the Island that year, though the bluecoats did their very best. They took a lot of the palm-oil across Dingle Bay, and sold it on the

opposite coast every night, though the bluecoats got away with enough of it to pay their rent, too. They came in on their boat one day, only four of them. An Island boat had just got in with six great lumps of the palm-oil in it. The coastguards took them into their boat at once, and they were very pleased with themselves. There was a young woman on the landing-place with a huge lump of jagged rock in her hands. She went into her father's boat, and the first thing the bluecoats knew was that she had flung the rock right through the bottom of their boat and the ocean was coming up through the hole. Out came the bluecoats. Out came the lumps of palm-oil afloat once more. The women brought them to shore again. The King's men had to drag their boat up the beach and patch her with a piece of tin, and once they had her put to rights, they made their best speed home. I fancy they didn't come visiting much more after that during all the palm-oil season.

Some time after that two of the men were on the hill and they saw a sheep that had fallen down on one of the beaches. They went down to recover the sheep, but, looking round, one of them saw a brass bolt under an over-hanging rock. He worked it out. It was four feet long. The whole beach was full of them—bolts of brass and copper. Nobody knows what quantity of that kind of metal the two of them salvaged that day, for that was the beach on which the ship had been wrecked, and great timbers from her were still there. The Islanders made a good deal of money out of the bolts that year.

Those were bad years, and if it hadn't been for that shipwreck, nobody would have survived on the Island, the old people used to say. I often heard with my own ears the old hag over the way saying that God Himself sent that ship amongst the poor. They lived well enough for a year or two because of her when the whole countryside on the mainland was famishing in extremity. When my father

used to bring home a load of those bolts in a bag, it was beyond my strength to stand one of them on end. 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, though it was a bad business for poor people who were at the mercy of the wind.

The day I first wore breeches I nearly went out of my senses: I was like a puppy dog unable to stand still. I felt no need to eat at all, and I didn't eat anything, either, but kept on running in and out, this way and that, and one of the family keeping an eye on me. Now, once when I came up to the fire, my mother looked at me and saw a patch of wet on my grey breeches. 'Heavens!' said she, 'that's what you've done, I'll bet.' I told her that it was so, and that I'd asked Nora to undo the buttons for me, and she hadn't done it. I suppose that was the first lie I ever told, for I hadn't asked Nora, though my mother gave her a good talking-to for not doing it. It's hard to be condemned for a crime you haven't committed, but see how soon roguery showed itself in my nature. My father set about the breeches again, for he was the one who had tailored them, and he made a smart job of them, so that they were ready for any use without trouble from that time out.

Eight years old I was that time, my mother said. Off I went visiting from house to house through the village next day, Eileen with me. It was the custom in those days, when a boy had a new garment or a new suit, for him to go into every house. You'd get a penny or two to put into your pocket in each house. I had three shillings in the pockets of the grey breeches when I came home. I gave them to my father, I remember, though I'd rather have given them to my mother, for she had more trouble with me than he had. But since my father was a smoker and, after all, he had made the breeches, I gave them to him.

Soon enough there was a hole through the bottom of the

breeches, with my shirt hanging out. My mother said that she must patch them before she went to bed. She did it, too, and warned me to take care and not make another hole in them again so quickly or I'd get a slash of the stick. I got it all right next morning!

It was a very fine day by the time I had a hen's egg down me and a cup of milk, and whatever else I had to go with them—potatoes, I suppose. I didn't escape the eye of the old woman across the way as I ate that meal. Her talk was changing now as she saw me growing in strength and spirits.

'My dear,' she would say to my mother, 'keep at him. He'll make a fine man yet.'

She was wrong in that, too, for nobody since has ever said that I was in any way kin to Oscar.

She was purring like a cat, to gain her own ends, for my father used to bring home all sorts of game, and her own man wasn't handy in that way at all. He was a fumbler on the hill and in the field, and good morsels were always coming her way in our house.

I was leaping out of my skin on the floor at that time, set up with myself, the grey breeches high and trim on me, full to the chin of food; and, if anybody felt the troubles of the world heavy on him at that time of day, it wasn't me.

As the height of the morning came on, I was sent off to the White Strand with Maura. When I reached the strand, I ran for all I was worth. Maura cast an eye along the strand and saw a school of porpoises rounding the Gob from the south, and they never stopped till they came over against us, just out from the shore, with their great fins sticking up out of the water, all of them close together like any shoal of fish. Maura had often seen them before swimming singly, but she'd never seen a great school of them like this. She thought that they would come ashore, and she was terrified. She took me on her back, and we hastened home.

When we got home my mother cried out that the boats were coming, and that some of them were making a ring round the porpoises, trying to drive them ashore. There were three large boats working seine nets in the Island in those days, and seven of them in Dunquin. Every one of those boats was on the scene busy about the porpoises, the Island boats trying to drive them ashore, while the crews of the Dunquin boats remained standing by, jeering at them. At last one of the porpoises went high and dry up on the strand. Some able fellow drew his blood, and when the rest of the porpoises smelt the blood they came ashore, helter-skelter, to join the other high and dry on the sand.

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 them take a single one. It wasn't long till the men there were as bloody as the porpoises, and the Islanders drove them down the strand covered with cuts and wounds. 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. Some of them found it hard enough to go at all. It was a tough job getting the porpoises home and salting them. But the people didn't spare their trouble, for in those days you could hardly get anybody to exchange a porpoise for a pig. My father's face was red with his own blood and the blood of the porpoises, but I knew him well enough all the same, for I had my wits about me then.

I jeered at the old woman whenever she came along with a creel full of porpoise meat balanced on her rump. You might imagine that she came out of one of the porpoises herself with her creel, she was so thickly smeared with blood. But she had earned a meed of praise, for she

nearly killed the captain of one of the Dunquin boats with a blow of a shovel.

The Islanders had no lack of pork for a year and a day after that day, and it would have lasted two years if it hadn't been for all the relations they had everywhere on the mainland.

There was no risk of me forgetting that day even if I should live to be a hundred. Everybody you saw was crimson with blood instead of being pale or swarthy. Another thing, I was within an ace of being killed myself on the strand before any sea-pig or sea-bonham died, and Maura with me, if we had been so unlucky as to be caught in that skirmish with the porpoises on the shore.

The old woman took her food with us in the evening.

When I was a little lad, I used to hear tell of 'the wheat-ship'. That was another example of what storm on the sea would bring us and the help it would be to us when other people had suffered the limit of ill fortune. The year this ship was wrecked on the White Strand I can't remember, for I wasn't born or thought of in those days. But I know well all that happened to her, and all the people she saved from death, in the famine time, and I can give an exact account of her fate—how all her crew were lost when she was cast upon the strand, and not a soul of them all could be saved. It was from the woman over the way and from my mother that I learnt my lesson, for they used to be chattering together often and often.

There wasn't a vestige of canvas on the ship except for one rag on the foremast. They had to run her ashore on the White Strand. She struck far out, for she was deeply loaded. The men on board tied a piece of timber to a rope's end, but they failed to come ashore. The people said that they had never seen a wilder day. The wind was blowing out to sea across the strand. At long last, a block of timber from the ship came ashore on the strand somewhere.

Those on shore and those on sea dragged on the rope, but, alas, it broke, and away went the sailors southward through the smother. The Islanders have been the worse for that sight ever since. A while after the ship split in two.

If she destroyed her own crew, thousands survived the worst year of the famine through her. Those thousands of sacks of wheat saved the Islanders, for they lasted them and their relations a long while. If it hadn't been for her, not a soul would have survived in the Island, and you may be sure that the old hag said that it was God who sent her to the poor.

Eileen was only a year old when the ship struck, and she's still alive in the New Land (i.e. America). Her contemporaries have had a pension for three years in this country; that makes her seventy-three. My mother was on the strand, though she was only six days up from childbed. Pats, my brother, was strong enough to be there, too, although he was more a trouble than a help there, for he hadn't wit enough to look after himself. A lot of things came ashore, though there was much that didn't, for the wind was offshore.

The wheat began to sift out of her, too, as soon as she split. I suppose that it wasn't in bags at all, but cast loosely into her like coal or salt, for they gathered it mostly at high tide. It was drifting in from time to time—so as to give the people a chance to save it, they used to tell one another. They had to wash it in water to take the salt out of it, and then spread it in the sun, and after that they dried it by the fire. Then they would boil it till it softened and turned to a thick mash. *Baighrean* the people called it. Whatever else came their way, that was a great stand-by to them to keep them alive. I used to hear the old hag saying to my mother, again and again, that she never lived better in her life than the time it lasted. She had a double row of teeth

and two sets of jaws grinding together. It was said that she chewed the cud like a cow.

In the days when I wore the grey breeches, and went about on my own, I used to go to meet the boats every evening. The most common fish in those times was pilchard, and they were full of bones. They are very like herrings. The fishermen hadn't a good word to say for them. They're a small fish, and a lot of them go to a pound. Moreover, they rotted the nets. My father called me into the boat one evening, while they were throwing out the fish, and he put me behind him in the stern. I was peering about me, and before long I saw a line with a bit of pilchard on the hook. And what do you say if I didn't throw out the bait. My father saw me doing it, but he didn't trouble himself about me, for he never thought that there would be any fish so far inshore to take the bait.

But before long a fish bit, and I had the line twisted round my legs. The fish dragged me overboard. All the men on the harbour shouted out to my father, but, when he turned round, he saw his darling swimming away. He stuck the boathook into the grey breeches high up on my backside and dragged me into the stern of the boat. He pulled in the line, and it was as much as he could do to get the fish aboard. It was a huge big conger six feet long.

My greatest fear was that my mother would kill me for getting my breeches wet. The girls were bursting with laughter at me, but I wasn't grown up enough to have any feelings of pride. Stout young women they were in those days, up to their bellies unloading boats, as sturdy and strong as any girls that ever were in Ireland.

I went home hand-in-hand with Nora till we drew near the house, and then I struck and told Nora I wouldn't go a step farther, for my mother would kill me. She was coaxing me on, saying she wouldn't. By the greatest luck in the world my father came by, carrying a creel of fish. 'What do

My Childhood

you want, Nora?' said he. 'Why don't you take him home? He's dripping wet.' 'He won't come with me,' she said. 'He's afraid of mother.' 'O, come on, Tom, my lad. It was my fault you got wet, for I called you into the boat,' said my father. He seized my hand, and off I went with him.

When I went in, I wasn't as lively and playful as usual. My mother saw that there was something up. She sat me down near the fire, for she thought that something else was wrong with me, and before long I had the hearthstone swimming wet. My father came in. 'Have you taken the clothes off him yet, for he's wet through?' he said. He was dragging the conger behind him. He brought it in, and it was as long as the hearth.

'Yerra, is it how he fell into the sea?' said she.

'Don't you see the fine big fish he caught? And for the first fish he ever caught, it's a very fine catch,' said my father.

He told her the whole tale then, and saved me. All my clothes were stripped off me and dry things put on me. I didn't like the breeches I got, for they were an old, patched pair. She didn't give me tea either, but a mug of porridge with milk, after all my swimming.

2. *My Schooldays*

MY FIRST TEACHER · THE SCHOOL · THE APPLE · THE
CAP FROM DINGLE · THE DERELICT BOAT · MAURA'S
MARRIAGE · THE WOMEN ON THE STRAND

THERE came a very fine day, a Sunday it was, and some business brought in a big boat from Dunquin (nothing was known of canoes in those days, or for some time to come). When the boat reached the harbour, the people said that there was a lady on board, but the lady turned out to be a schoolmistress. When I heard that, I was anything but pleased, for at that very time I was just beginning to go hunting by myself on hill and strand, with nobody to keep an eye on me now, for I was a big chap, they thought. I had a little rod, with a hook hanging from the tip of it. Each of us boys would have a score of minnows fished out of holes, not much of a catch, but we kept pet gulls, and the minnows were the very thing for them.

Well, Monday came, and when breakfast was over they couldn't find the man with the grey breeches. The girls were ready for school, but the hunter was to seek. Maura was sent out to look for me, but she reported to my mother that I was after minnows, with two other boys in my company—Johnny Meg and Mike Peg.

'He can have to-day,' said my mother, 'but may God take my soul to-morrow if he slips off without my knowing.'

I came to my gully and gave him the minnows I had caught. When I went into the house I wasn't so set up with myself as I would be other days. I saw that my mother had the net ready for me; besides, the old hag next door was in before me to see the beating I was to get, for I used to be

mocking her unmercifully in those days. But my mother was too clever for her!

When the girls came home from school, my mother catechized them about the mistress, and asked what sort of woman was she—kind or cross. They all said she was a splendid woman, and that she didn’t strike or thrash them. That’s when my mother brought the talk round to me.

‘Look at this fine fellow, running round all day since morning, in danger of tumbling head over heels into a pool, getting fish for his gully. But I’d have him know that he’d better be ready in the morning to go with you, in God’s name.’

‘Maybe,’ says Kate, ‘he’ll play the same trick on you to-morrow, since you didn’t frighten him.’

She was the pertest of them all, and the one I liked best.

‘O, he’ll be a good boy to-morrow, Kate. The beginning’s always the worst,’ said my mother.

We were on the best of terms with one another till bed-time came, the girls talking about the school, and telling my mother the teacher’s name. But they couldn’t bring out the name till late into the night, and they started to squabble together, so that I had as much fun over them as they had over me earlier on. At last Maura managed to get the name out—Nancy Donoghue. It was a difficult name for them, as they had never heard anything like it in the Island. Then off we all went to get ready for bed.

Next morning each one was ready for his post, and the meal was prepared pretty early, for—‘the tide doesn’t stay for high noon’.

Pats was in good trim in those days. He was the second oldest of the litter, only Maura was in front of him. My father was preparing ropes and a sickle for himself and Pats up and down the house. Maura and my mother were to go with them. It was flood-tide, and a fine day for cutting black seaweed for manure. Kate was to be the

housewife; Eileen, Nora, and I were for school—that's how we were settled or arranged that day.

A potful of boiled potatoes, fish and milk with them, we gobbled down our bellyful of them, young and old. As for tea, nobody in the Island in those days had ever seen a kettle, or for long after.

The horn blew, and off went the shore party, off went the scholars.

Kate stayed at home, quite grown-up.

'Be a good boy at school, Tom, my lad,' said my mother; and I thought she wouldn't leave a trace of skin or nose on me, she gave them such a scrubbing before she went to the shore.

I was ten years old that day I first went to school, my mother told me—about the year 1866.

As I went into the schoolhouse, hand-in-hand with Nora, I was bold and lively. Poor Nora thought I would make a show of her, but I didn't. The teacher was in the doorway and she gave me a fine apple, and I was surprised when I went in that nobody else had one. But she didn't intend to give us an apple every day—though I thought then that she did! It was a handsel apple given to every scholar the first day. This was my first day, and that's why I got it.

My prowess at school was little enough till I'd ground down the apple. I had good grinders in those days, though I can't say the same of them now.

I didn't take long to cast my eyes all round the house. I saw books and papers in little heaps on every side. A blackboard was hanging on the wall with white marks all over it, made with chalk apparently. I was beside myself with wonder what they meant until I saw the teacher calling up the oldest girls to the blackboard and point out the marks to them with the stick in her hand, and I heard her talking some kind of gibberish to them.

I nudged Pats Micky, who was sitting by me on the

stool. He's the same Pats Micky who has been King over us now for a long while. I asked him in a whisper what was the rigmarole the teacher was talking to the girls round the blackboard.

'Damned if I know,' says he, 'but I fancy it's a sort of talk nobody will ever understand here.'

I thought that hunger would make an end of me at school, but bedad it wasn't so, for pretty soon the teacher spoke: 'Playtime,' says she.

The word made me stare, for I hadn't the faintest idea what it meant. But immediately I saw the whole crowd in the school jump up and rush out through the door. Nora had to take hold of my hand before I would move from the stool. We all of us ran home.

There was a handful of cold potatoes waiting for us. They were set down by the fire, and we had fish with them —salted scad, and that's a very sweet fish. My mother had brought a dish of limpets from the strand with her, for they had returned from it while we were at school. She was roasting the limpets and throwing them to us one by one like a hen with chickens. The three of us hadn't much to say, but were chewing away at the food till we were near to being full. My mother began to question me then about the school, for she was afraid I'd choke myself if I answered her with my mouth full.

'Well, Tom, my lad, isn't school fine?' says she. 'How did you like the lady?'

'O, the great big apple she gave him!' said Nora.

I was cross with Nora for not letting me answer her for myself.

'Did you have one, Tom?'

'I did, mom, but Nora took a bite of it, and so did Eileen.'

'But it was a great big apple,' said Eileen; 'we left enough for you.'

'Off with you again, my dear,' said my mother to me.

We spent some time more in school, and the King kept his seat on the stool at my side. He was a fine, easy-going lump of a lad, and so he was always. We were the same age. He'd often point his finger at some boy who was being naughty—screeching out, maybe, or a pair of them setting about one another with both hands, or a lout here and there with his nose running. Sights like that worried the King, and he used to point them out to me. See how the character that is born in a lad sticks to him throughout his life. That's how it was with the King when he was a child. He didn't care for such disgusting, vulgar sights; but as for the rest of them, it's little enough they troubled their heads about them. So it's little wonder that when knowledgeable people came our way and thought that there ought to be someone with the style of King in the Island, they chose out the man fit to take the title and to carry it with credit.

My day at school hadn't lasted long enough yet for me, and it was too early for me when the teacher called out: 'Home now!'

Some of them stuck in the doorway, they were so keen to be gone.

A slice of bread and a drink of milk were ready for us. There was always any amount of fish ready cooked, but often we hadn't any fancy for it. Pats used to have as good a catch as my father in those days, and there was plenty and to spare in the cabin for us, a marvellous fire, 'kitchen' enough to go with all sorts of food that came our way, to gulp down with an edge on our hunger.

Off to the strand we went for the rest of the day.

The next day the whole lot of us were for school, for the spring tide for seaweed cutting was gone.

I saw that my mother was wearing her new dress, and I wondered what was up. She ran across to me and took me by the hand, hung my clothes on me, and gave me a kiss.

'Be a good boy now,' she said, 'until I come home. I'll bring you some sweets from Dingle. Do what Maura and Kate tell you, and go to bed when they say.'

I began to cry, but not for long. I started off for school with Nora and Eileen. Maura and Kate stayed behind to look after the house because my mother was going out.

When we went in, the whole crowd was there, though my chum hadn't come yet, the one I liked best. Little books were being given out that day, new things were being written on the blackboard and the old ones rubbed out. Other big objects were hung up here and there on the wall. I gazed at every one of them.

I had finished examining them all when the King came in, and I was delighted to see him. His place was waiting for him and he made his way to the seat beside me, and from the way I saw him thrusting through the others, so as to be next to me, I realized that he was as fond of me as I was of him.

'I'm late,' said he in a whisper.

'Most of them have only just come in,' I said.

The teacher called us up to the blackboard. She explained the letters on it to us six times.

Friday came, and when the day was over and we were getting ready to go home, she told us not to come back till Monday. Most of them were delighted at this announcement, but I wasn't over-pleased, for I'd rather have come back, not from any passion for learning, I suppose, but because I liked being with my chum the King.

My mother wasn't due back from Dingle till Sunday, and Maura and Kate thought that they wouldn't get me to bed whatever they did, and they began to coax me and to be very nice to me. But before bedtime came at all I fell fast asleep on my father's knee, and he told them to take me to bed. They did it at once. It was the cock woke me in the morning, and it was high noon then. Since I hadn't lost

them any sleep the night before they were all busy about me, all waiting on me. I wasn't quite the fool they imagined me to be, believe me. I had all my teeth and could use them to eat anything, and was further on than anyone would have thought at my age. For a proof of this, the old hag over the way had stopped calling me 'mother's darling' and 'old cow's calf'—all the things of the kind she used to say to my mother about me, though anybody would be ready to take his oath that the cow, whose calf she was, was fifty years old.

On Sunday my mother came home from the town. She had a white bag and a coarse cloth bag with her, and all sorts of things in them. But there wasn't a taste of sugar or tea among them, for nothing was known of them in those days. It was I who carried the white bag home, and I found it heavy enough, though its chief contents were clothes for the girls.

The grey old hag was waiting for me in the house to hear the news from Dingle.

The first thing my mother took out was a two-peaked cap, and she put it on my head.

'By the Virgin!' said my father, 'you've made a complete peeler of him!—and all of them burst out laughing.

'Well, maybe he'll get a post yet,' said she. 'He's young, and learning's to be got in his day, and he can stay at school till he's picked up all there is there.'

How well I remember that speech, for the troubles of the world changed that tune.

She had apples, sweets, cakes, loaves, tobacco for my father, a pair of boots for Pats, white dresses for the girls, and a great deal more. The grey woman had a taste of everything, for she was a little woman who liked a bit of anything that was going.

School every day then for all of us, except Pats, who was a great big fellow now going out fishing with my father.

Maura didn't spend long at school either, for she was a woman by this time. There were four of us getting on very well, helping one another to learn.

One day, after we had been let out of school, we saw all the people in the village collected on the cliff above the harbour, and both the teacher and we wondered what was up. A boy peered across to Slea Head, looking intently.

'Holy Mary! look at the boats in the midst of the tempest and the smother,' said he.

The boats were given up for lost, and nobody thought that we should ever see any of the crews again. The Island boats had a boat adrift in tow and the sea was sweeping right over them. They reached the harbour at last, for the tide was with them, and that was a great help to them. The wrecked boat was a fine big one. The captain was in her with two other men and a young lad about sixteen years old at his last breath. They lifted him to land out of the boat, and he died immediately. He is buried in Castle Point—the place where Pierce Ferriter had his castle when he ruled here.

It was beyond the power of the whole Island to bring the wrecked boat to shore, and the great sea swept her away again. My father was in her, acting as captain. Alec was the name of the captain, a fine big man. The name is still remembered on the Island, and will be for some time, for there are many on the Island who were born the year the boat came. They got salvage for bringing them to land, and many of those who lodged them were well paid for it. We were using a saw my father got out of her till the other day.

My sister Maura was a fine vigorous woman by this time, and as there were three more of them, they arranged to find her a home in one of the other houses. The chief man in the Island at that time was Paddy Martin. He had ten milch cows for a long time, but I never saw that much

in his possession, for he had two sons married in other houses, and he had given them some of the land, and cows, too, no doubt. He had five cows at this time, and his youngest son still lived at home unmarried—young Martin. A match was arranged between Maura and Martin, for what he wanted was a woman who knew what work was and was able to do it; and, in all truth, Maura was a woman of that kind, and I don't say it only because she was my sister. They didn't ask my father for any money, for they knew that he had none. They had had enough to do to keep us alive in difficult times.

Martin and his father and mother were all living in the house in those days, four of them, counting Maura, after the marriage.

Martin lived only a year after his marriage, and then my sister had to return home to her own people, for one of Martin's brothers came back to live with the old people. They wouldn't give Maura anything, although Martin left a boy child. Maura left the boy with us and went off to America. After three years there she came back home again. She had the law of them, and got the father's share for the son.

Soon afterwards the teacher was summoned home at Shrovetide to be married. That meant that the school was closed for a time until a thin lath of a master called Robert Smith came. He wasn't very nice to the rabble of scholars he found. My chum the King didn't like him at all. He had an unfriendly way with him. The King used to pretend to me that he came from Russia. A great mug he had on him, hollow eyes, and a sleek swarthy complexion. He had prominent teeth, and a bush dripping from his nose like a goat's beard. But the bush wasn't the worst part of him, for it was fair in colour and hid his ugliest feature.

The mistress married in a village in Ballyferriter parish. Her husband was a blacksmith, and the parish priest

favoured him, I suppose. She got a school in that place, and spent her life there till she got a teacher's pension. They are in the grave now, after eighty years of life, every one of them. That was the end of the first school-teacher that ever came to the Blasket.

Before long all the boys were whistling at Robert, and the girls laughing, and I tell you there were great lumps of women at school at that time. Robert soon saw that he would never be able to do anything with them. He spent only three months among us, and off he went.

As I was crunching my bite of food one morning, I was looking about me on this side and on that. My mother came in at the door with a sharp piece of iron in her hand—a piece of a boat's grappling. She didn't sit down, but set about looking for something else. She found a bag in the search. I was watching her like a cat watching a mouse, for I knew that she meant to go down to the strand.

'Well,' said she, 'would any of you like to go down to the strand, the day is so fine?'

It has always been a custom here to go and get 'kitchen' from the strand to eat on Good Friday for anyone who has the opportunity.

'Sure, mom, I'll go with you,' said I, jumping up from the table, though I hadn't finished my meal.

'Of course you can, but finish your meal, my love. I'll wait for you,' said she.

'I'll go with you, too,' said Nora.

'So will I,' said Eileen.

'There's nothing to stop you,' said my mother, 'since the world has been so good to you as to close the school.'

My father and Pats were digging in the field, Kate was looking after the house—with the baby in her charge, for Maura was over in the States. My mother charged Kate not to think of anything else in the world but him till she came back.

We went out at the door and turned our faces to the strand, and I was beside myself for joy, if any of them was, I was so set on paddling in the sea in my grey breeches. When we reached the strand there wasn't a single rock that hadn't a woman or child of some sort picking limpets and winkles, and such-like seafruit of every kind, that came in their way.

It was the ebb of a spring tide, and to the west of the strand there was an island called Woman's Island that could only be reached at a very low tide: limpets and winkles were very plentiful there because they were never gathered. It was separated from the nearer shore by a deep channel, but there wasn't much water in it that day. Before long I saw my mother gathering her skirts together and bringing them forward between her legs. I didn't mind a bit that the world should see my mother's legs and calves, for there was nothing stunted or lumpy about her: she was a fine well-grown woman, fair-skinned and bright from crown to heel. My grief is that I don't take after her in my whole person. But I suppose what ruined me was that I was 'an old cow's calf', for the rest of the litter were good-looking enough. I was watching her carefully to see what she meant to do. She called out immediately to the women near her to go to the Island with her. Four of them responded at once—the old hag over the way, my aunt, White Joan, and 'Ventry'. The water was above their knees, but a wash upset my aunt and Ventry and tumbled them head over heels. Ventry gripped my aunt very neatly, and they set them on their feet again. Anybody would take his oath that the old hag and my aunt came of the same parents; they had the same complexion, the same height, and the same way with them.

I was snivelling—my mother was so long out of sight. Nora kept egging me on, but Eileen was trying to stop me. Nora was always very much down on me, and we never

could get on together. But I understood the reason of it when I began to grasp things, and the old hag used to give me a hint of it, for, often enough, we'd just as soon be fratching as praying. Nora had been the favourite for five years before I came. I came unexpectedly, and, when they saw me, Nora's nose was put out of joint. And that's the reason why she thought less of me than the others did.

Before long women here and there began calling out that the women on the Island were cut off by the tide in the channel. Not a soul of them was to be seen. Off went everybody to look at the channel. The tide was flowing, and there was a man's depth in the channel already, and that was the moment that they came into view, every woman of them with a full bag. They had to stay where they were. Everybody present said that they'd have to stick there till morning, and I was beside myself when I heard it.

Some of the girls on the strand ran off to carry the news to the men on the fields that the women were cut off by the tide on the Island. Most of the men faced for the strand, but my father ran to the house to get a ladder. Very soon I saw him coming towards me with a ladder, twenty feet long, on his shoulder. They laid it so as to reach across the channel, but it was too heavy to put in the proper place. My poor father had to take to the water and swim across to catch hold of the end of the ladder, and fix it in a crevice in the rock. My mother was the first of them to go across on the ladder. Ventry followed her, and they came to land splendidly. Then the three others ventured on it. Two of them were on one side of it, and the third on the other side, so that the ladder overbalanced and upset, and down they went into the sea.

I was in high spirits now I'd got my mother again, singing 'Donal na Greine'. But I changed my tune soon enough, for my father had to jump into the sea again and

bring his sister to land on this side, and take a grip of White Joan; and the old hag over the way was going under when he caught her by the hair. I was at my last breath by the time my father landed: the old hag very nearly pulled him under as he tried to save her with her apron full of limpets.