

Primitive Communism and The Blasket Islands

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Houses on the Blasket Islands in the 1920's

In the fifty volumes of the *Collected Works of Marx and Engels* there is very little speculation as to what a future socialist society might look like. The reason for this as Engels makes clear in *The Origins of the Family Private Property and the State* is that we cannot know how people freed from class oppression will choose to live their lives.

But Marx and Engels had a real interest in the past and how people lived in pre-class societies. Though little was then known about the past - particularly the social relations of pre-class society. They were interested in the evolution of society for a number of reasons. Firstly, because they wanted to illustrate that the organisation of society and the social relations on which it was based was not static or permanent. Class struggle is the motor of history, where changes in the social relations of any society, reflect the changing material relations of that society. Secondly, they were interested in pre-class societies because of the insight they might throw up as to how people freed from class oppression might live their lives. Marx and Engels relied on the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan's book, *Ancient Society* (1877) for much of their information on the social or-

ganisation of pre-class societies. Morgan's study of the family relations of the Iroquois Indians was the intellectual basis for Engels *Origins of the Family Private Property and the State*.

Engels visited Ireland on three occasions, in 1856, 1867, and in 1870. He was collecting material for a 'History of Ireland', a project he never completed. In 1856 he visited West Galway, and in his letters he says he found a post-famine Ireland that was 'broken and demoralised' and incapable of raising itself up again. It is a pity he never ventured to the South-West, especially to the Blasket Islands. I suspect Engels would have been fascinated by what he found there.

The Blasket Island is situated about four miles of the Southern tip of the country. There is evidence of stone-age occupation on the Island, but it is the later occupation of the Island that concerns us. In the 1750s about forty or fifty people lived on the Island. In 1841 this had grown to approximately one hundred and fifty, and in 1901 had reached one hundred and eighty. From then on there was a slow decline in numbers, especially among the young people, until the Island was evacuated in 1953 when the population had declined to about forty souls.

What was so interesting about this Island was the fact that because of its isolation it had escaped the modernising effect that had destroyed the old Gaelic way of life across most of Ireland in the nineteenth century. Because it was cut off from the Mainland this cultural destruction was delayed for over sixty or seventy years. The Island was owned by the Earl of Cork but the Islanders had stopped paying rent in the period following the famine. On oc-

casions the landlord's agent sent a raiding party to the Island to seize goods or cattle owned by the Islanders, but they were repulsed by the women of the Island who assembled at the top of the cliff and hurled rocks down on the agents boat. After that they were left in peace to get on with their lives. This was a close knit community based on kinship and co-operation. Solidarity was a condition of survival. This was what John Millington Synge called an 'unalienated environment'. There was insufficient material wealth on the Blasket for there to be inequality, but it was rich in social capital.

Co-operation

If Engels had visited the Island on one of his trips to Ireland he might have experienced a community who 'gave according to their ability' and received 'according to their need'. However, this was not some utopian community. The harsh material conditions on the Island made co-operation a necessity rather than a choice, in order to survive. Fishing and subsistence farming was the mainstay of the island. Land was held in common. Each family was allocated a field - the size and needs of the family determined the size of the field. Field ownership was not permanent but changed over time according to need. Turf banks were allocated on the same basis. That accounted for the best land, about sixty acres just above the village, the other twelve hundred acres were held in common.

Fishing was organised on a communal basis, usually two boats with three men in each boat. Trust was an important factor in building a sense of community. Each member of the crew knew that the others held his life in their hands, as they faced out in the canvas covered currachs into some of the most dangerous seas off

the coast of Europe.

Family Structure

Nearly all marriages on the Island were arranged to cement communal ties, though there was the odd love marriage. Despite this the status of women was not diminished. In the Iroquois society Morgan had noted that descent was reckoned through the mother and the high status of women reflected this arrangement. This was not the case on the Blasket, but women were valued. In many cases women retained their maiden name on marriage. Young men were identified by their mother's name. As storytellers, which was a highly regarded ability, women were seen as the equal of men. The distinction of parent, grandparent, uncle, aunt, or cousin was blurred on the Island in relation to child rearing. There was always a loose collective approach to child rearing. The Island also had a more liberal approach to sexual matters than that of the mainland. The people were very religious, but it was not a faith that was mediated exclusively through the church or a local priest. There was no church or priest on the Island- and as a result this was not a 'priest ridden' community. The morality on the Island reflected that of the more liberal Gaelic past rather than the Victorian strictures that dominated the Catholic Church at the time.

Money

There were no monetary relations between the islanders. There was no shop or pub on the island, but money was needed for goods such as sugar, flour, and tobacco that were purchased from the jobbers and shops on the mainland. But the islanders had no experience of buying in order to sell. No money circulated on the Island

and there were no master/servant relationships. The islanders were bound to each other by close ties of blood, marriage, and interdependence. All of them were engaged in the same occupations and faced the same dangers at sea. Meitheal is an old Irish word for co-operation that is still current in some rural communities. On the Island co-operation was at the core of all activity. Whether it was fishing, building a house for a newly married couple, or looking after the old and the infirm the islanders looked out for each other. In the books of Tomás Ó Crohan and Muiris O'Sullivan there are many stories of fishermen returning home and leaving a few fish for an old or infirm couple. Turf was cut for them, rabbits were provided, and the community took responsibility for the old.

Democratic

There are echoes of a people's democracy from ancient Greece or of people's assemblies in the way decisions were made. One of the houses on the Island was known as the Dáil or parliament; where the issues concerning the community were discussed. Votes were not taken but issues were thrashed out and an informal consensus reached. It was a form of self-government. There was no police or law on the Island. As Séan Ó Criomhthain has recorded; if an offence was committed, or somebody did something wrong 'the people would not be content to let it pass. You had to keep to the straight path, otherwise people would intervene and correct you'. A visitor once asked Tomás Ó Crohan what was his attitude to Home Rule, an issue that was convulsing the country at the time. Tomás replied that 'the Islanders never had anything but Home Rule'. An indication both of their independence and their isolation from events on the mainland. The British state had little

or no meaning for them. When Peig Sayers heard about the 1916 Rising in Dublin and the destruction of the city, she spoke of how 'strangers' had burnt the city to the ground. Peig had little concept of and almost no connection with the great historical events that were unfolding at that time.

Culture

Marx and Engels had used the term primitive communism to describe these pre-class societies. The social and economic structures on the Island up to about the 1920s fits this description. There was no division of goods based on a top-down hierarchy. Rather, it was a society of mutual support and a real humanity, without which no-one on the Island could survive. For that reason alone the Island community is worth consideration.

But this was also an Island that was highly cultured with an oral tradition that harked back to the old Gaelic bardic tradition of poetry and story-telling. George Thomson a young student who had studied classical Greek at Cambridge University arrived on the Island in 1923. He was born in England to Irish parents and inspired by the revival movement he wanted to learn Irish. He was directed to the Blasket Islands as they were reputed to speak the purest form of Irish.

In his book, *Island Home* about his connection with the Blaskets he describes his amazement at the language and culture of the inhabitants: 'when I first heard those ragged peasants speak it was as if Homer had come alive'. The relative isolation of the Island preserved a language and culture where the lyrical and musical value of the spoken word had been developed to a high degree. This was a tradition that stretched back to the seventeenth-century Gaelic speaking Munster of Geof-

frey Keating (*Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*) and Brian Merriman (*Cúirt an Mheán Oíche*). And as George Thomson recognised - back to the Greek tradition of Homer. One commentator described the islanders as 'walking libraries' where the heroic tales of the Fianna and Cú Cúlmann were mixed with religious tales, aphorisms, and genealogies in a culture where the past was alive in the present. Tomás Ó Crohan writes about the poet Piaras Ferriter as a man who walks the hills with him and who was his companion at work, not as someone from the past who had died almost three hundred years ago.

The purity of language, almost uncorrupted by contact with the modern world attracted scholars from all over the world. In 1903 Dr. Carl Marstrander, a Norwegian professor of Celtic Studies arrived on the Island, followed by Robin Flower from the British Museum, and sometime later George Thomson from Cambridge University. The arrival of outside scholars such as Marstrander coincided with literacy on the Island. The ability to read and write changed their way of life. It opened their eyes to modernity and to what was available in the world beyond the Island.

Robin Flower and George Thomson arrived as scholars, but were enchanted by what they found. They returned year after year, as friends, as part of the community where for a few short weeks every year they shared in the life of the Islanders. They understood that this unique way of living was passing away and they encouraged the Islanders to write about their life. By the end of the 1940s about twenty books were written or transcribed by the Islanders, a remarkable literary output by a community of about thirty families. The Island's rich oral culture ranks as 'the chief surviving element of Gaelic civilisation'. The books capture the transition from the oral to the written tradition. George Thom-

son described it as a little 'library the likes of which is not to be found in any other language'. A small number of them are of outstanding merit in both literary and historical terms. They have been translated into many languages and are read all over the world. The first of them *An tOileánach* was written by Tomás Ó Crohan in Irish and published in 1929, followed by an English edition *The Islandman* in 1937, which was translated by his friend Robin Flower.

Twenty Years A-Growing

This was followed by Muiris Ó Súilleabháin's *Fiche Bliain ag Fás* which was published in both Irish and English in 1933. Peig Sayers autobiography followed in 1936. Both Peig and Tomás were uneducated. Tomás only learned to read and write in his sixties, Peig was illiterate; her book was transcribed by her son, taking notes as she sat by the fire. Both were medieval in their outlook, but Tomás knew his way of life was coming to an end. His book ends with that famous line - 'the likes of us will never be again', Tomás wanted to leave a record of his way of life. In Tomás's book there are few descriptions of the landscape, this was a materialist look at his society. It's written in the heroic style that records both the rich culture of the Island and the almost brutal material conditions they lived under. Peig's book is different; it has no grand narrative in the way that *The Islandman* has. Peig was a storyteller. Her book is a series of reminiscences about her life interspersed with legends and myths from the past. More than any other Blasket writer the editorial intervention dominates her book. Hers is a literature of a pre-literate society. Her stories and reminiscences collected and transcribed amount to over 8000 pages - almost a million words. The selection process reflected De Valera's image of

Ireland where ‘comely maidens danced at the crossroads’. The book was state published and was a key text in the school curriculum. Peig’s narrative was edited and censored to match the conservative morality of the Irish state. All the earthiness, the sensuality, and the fun was removed. The editing process was not kind to Tomás Ó Crohan’s book either. His book went through many hands before it saw the light of day. Despite the academic disputes over issues such as the editing of the original Irish manuscripts and the effect this had on the published version of *An tOileánach*; this was Tomás’s book and he had something to say that was unique. He spoke of his own experience of life on the Island, but it was also a communal voice that articulated the collective experience and culture of the Islanders. Tomás exercised a great deal of artistic licence for the sake of imaginative truth. He was a creative writer with a full appreciation of ‘the artistic significance of form’, always conscious of improving on the actual events he was describing.

In recent years a new edition of *An tOileánach* has gone back to the original manuscripts in both Irish and English and these unexpurgated and newly translated editions illustrate what a wonderful literary creation it always was. In the original edition all the earthiness and sensuality was removed from Tomás and Peig’s book. In the new edition Tomás tells the story of the young men who stripped off to go swimming and when they emerged one of a group of girls on the beach stood her ground and stared at the young men. Tomás’s remark that ‘she saw a baptism long before she saw a wedding’ gives us an insight into the sensual lives on the Island that was not disfigured by the false Catholic sexual morality that prevailed on the mainland. Many of the books tell of the dances that took place in the

houses and how the young people would pair off and go up the back of the Island. Peig was a beautiful and sensual woman, but nothing of this appears in the book. According to one source, Peig’s papers contain a description of a contraceptive device the women used on the Island - bee’s wax shaped into a cervical cap. But all of that was to change; Eibhlís Ní Shuilleabhain records in a letter in the 1930s that the ‘missionaries came, mixed bathing and dancing were forbidden’. W B Yeats remembered some poems by a Blasket Islander which were circulating in manuscript form that ‘pleased a Gaelic scholar’ whose judgement he valued, but were ‘too Rabelaisian to please the eye of Government’.

George Thomson met Muiris Ó Súilleabháin when he first stepped ashore on the Island in 1923. They were roughly the same age and became firm friends. It was Thomson who encouraged Muiris to record his life. Muiris was only twenty five years old when he put pen to paper. His book, *Fiche Blián ag Fás*, has all the enthusiasm of youth. The title is from the first line of an old Irish proverb that spells out the different stages of life. Muiris wrote about his ‘Twenty Years A Growing’. This is the story of an idealised childhood where the sun always shines - unlike the time-worn resilience and resignation of Tomás’s book. But it is more than just nostalgia for a lost childhood. It’s about the joy of living in a society where children are valued and culture is part of their lives.

Reception

The Irish state showed no interest in the material lives of these Irish speaking communities scattered along Western seashore. They appropriated a sanitised version of their life to promote a vision of an Irish-speaking society that was locked into a

backward poverty-stricken way of life - one that denied the benefits of modernity to communities that it alleged it cherished. That is why the project to restore the Irish language in post-independence Ireland failed. Irish was associated with poverty and backwardness. The Irish state failed to offer a vision of an Irish speaking community linked to progress and an improvement in living conditions. It became clear to large sections of the Irish peasantry that if they wished to make a place for themselves in the community or in the wider world they must first 'bow to the language of their masters' and discard that 'infirm language, hiding it from the sight of strangers'.

About half the population spoke Irish in 1841; by 1851, in the immediate post-famine period that figure had fallen to 23.3 percent, and by 1891 only 14.4 percent claimed to do so. Very few were literate in Irish, which became more and more a language of the home while English was the language of public life.

The Irish Language

Unfortunately socialists have a poor record with regard to the Irish language. Socialists have had little to say on this matter. Those who did speak up usually suggested that any attempt to promote Irish was a reactionary or backward step. We need to look to a different tradition, that represented by Marxists like George Thomson and Tim Enright. Thomson arrived on the Island as a young academic wanting to learn Irish. What he experienced changed his whole outlook on life. He departed a socialist, and in time a Marxist, who went on to play a leading role in the Communist Party in Britain. Thomson saw that there was a link between the communal way of living and the cultural richness of that society. Unlike many of the scholars who came

to the Island who could only see dignity in the peasant's hut; Thomson also saw the hardship of their lives and understood that there is no dignity in poverty. In the 1930s Thomson taught classical Greek through Irish at Galway University. He set himself the task of saving the Irish language. He believed that Irish speaking communities could only be saved by engaging with modernity and developing a standard of living that could sustain the community. But this transformation should take place on their own terms and in the context of their own culture. Thomson set about his project in the Galway Gaeltacht, organising meetings and outreach classes trying to build a movement that could start the process of transformation. But the local clergy were terrified of an English socialist stirring up the people and banned Thomson from using any of the local halls or facilities. The project came to nothing and Thomson in despair returned to England and continued his career in academia and in the Communist Party. Thomson is one of the finest Marxists to be associated with this county. His book, *Island Home* is a wonderful insight into the life and culture of the Blasket Islands. His vision of the Blaskets was the yardstick by which Thomson measured progress. His books on classical Greek drama especially *Aeschylus and Athens* are still highly regarded today. He suggested that Greek tragedy owed something the primitive collectivism that he had experienced on the Blasket Island. When it was published Thomson insisted that a cheap paperback edition should be issued as well. He believed that workers should have access to the higher things in life as well as the rich. His pamphlet on *Marxism and Poetry* in 1947 was a welcome break with the 'socialist realism' school of Marxism that was dominant in critical circles in the Communist Party.

The End of the Island

There are many reasons for the decline and eventual evacuation of the Island in 1953. The Government was indifferent to the Islander's pleas for help and support. By 1940 the population had fallen to about forty, mainly elderly people. There was only one boat still fishing. The school had closed as there was only one child left on the Island. Emigration had taken its toll and in the end those remaining just gave up and asked to be moved to the mainland. The Island was like a ship that requires a certain crew and no longer has them.

Many fine writers have recorded the last days of the Island community and reading about the slow erosion of a genuine culture is quite harrowing. There are many reasons why this happened. The decline of the fishing was one of the reasons advanced, but in reality they were just overwhelmed by modernity. The increase in emigration in the post-war years stripped the Island of its young people and its vitality. Emigrant's remittances disturbed the 'equality of poverty' that had existed on the Island. Some families has access to American dollars, others did not. With the advent of literacy came newspapers that opened their eyes to an apparently rich way of life beyond the Island. Tomás summed it up when he wrote; 'a time came when the young people wanted to buy the goods they saw in the newspapers and on the mainland rather than make them themselves'. To obtain them money was needed, and all they had to sell was their labour power. The only place work was available was in America. Every Summer after the harvest four or five young men and women headed off. That is what destroyed the energy and vigour of the Island. George Thomson caught the mood of the time in a beautiful piece of prose:

To those exiles America offered an

escape from the poverty of their home life, but only on condition that they surrendered their cultural values.

Some of them paid the price without regret, others only with a lifelong sense of regret.

For a few the price was too heavy, and they came home.

Cáit Kearney was one such young woman who left the Island to work as maid; she returned home her hands red and raw from the work. She was determined never to let that happen again. She was one of the few exceptions. The young people left and by the end of the 1930s there were more Islanders living in Springfield, Massachusetts than on the Island itself.

Legacy

Their way of life is gone, but their books are a monument to what has been lost. The fact that the Blasket authors recorded their own stories and culture is what makes these books important. These are not the impressions of outsiders, or anthropologists, or historians, but a unique insight into a cultured society where co-operation and community support is at the hearth of their world. As Thomson observed they are 'an insight into what was lost by the impact of modernity'. And equally important; they are an insight into the future - how people freed from the oppression of class society might live their lives - but this time in an age of plenty.

Notes and Reading List

Almost all of the books written by the Islanders are in Irish and most of them are available in translation. The Blasket library has grown to close on forty books

by the Islanders themselves, and spawned an academic industry that would fill many shelves. I have restricted my reading list to a handful of key books that the reader can access in both English and Irish.

- Tomás Ó Criomhain, *An tOileánach*, (Helican Teoranta, Baile átha Cliath, 1980).
Tomás O’Crohan, *The Islander* (Translation), (Gill & MacMillan, Dublin, 2012).
Muiris Ó Súilleabháin, *Fiche Blian ag Fás*, (An Sagart, Má Nuad, 1981).
Maurice O’Sullivan, *Twenty Years A-Growing*, (Translation) (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000).
Peig Sayers, *Peig, ClÓlucht an TalbÓidigh Teoranta*, (Baile áta Cliath, 1933).
Peig Sayers, *Peig: An Old Woman’s Reflections*, (Translation), (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000).
Peig Sayers, *Labharfad Le Cách: I Will Speak To You All*, (Bi-lingual with two CDs), (New Island Books, Dublin 2009).
Robert Kanigel, *On an Irish Island*, (Alfred A. Knopp, New York, 2013).
George Thomson, *Island Home*, (Brandon Books, Dingle, 1988).
Robin Flower, *The Western Island*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1967).
Irene Lucchitti, *The Islandman: The Hidden Life of Tomás O’Crohan*, (Peter Lang, Oxford, 2009).
Muiris Mac Conghail, *The Blaskets: People and Literature*, (Town House, Dublin, 2001).