

A Blasket Bore Reviewing the Review

On first reading this review, one is struck by the impression that the reviewer, a prize-winning creative writer, was, like many of his predecessors, as far back as Horace, reacting to the murder machine of bad teaching that would have us endure dollops of the classics, whether we liked it or not. For the tone of this mischievous little rant is mean, petty, spiteful, arrogant and sensational.

On first reviewing this review one is struck by the fact that it is not a review of the work under review at all (Bannister and Sowby's translation), but a pretext for having a go at the author of the original, Irish scholars and Conradh na Gaeilge.

One might have expected a comparison with Flower's translation, if only a reference to the superiority of the inclusive title *The Islander* to Flower's *The Islandman*, and the advantages of such gender-neutral terminology in Irish (e.g. 'cathaoirleach', 'chairman', 'chairperson'). But the reviewer doesn't get it, and chooses to scoff at Titley's introduction and Ó Coileáin's preface instead. He draws attention to Titley's note in relation to the 'difficulties of translating from Irish to English', and remarks, 'This new translation seeks to update that of Flower, and to present a version that prioritises, as the translators put it, clarity and readability. And in this they have succeeded. It's clear and you can read it.' Is that to suggest that Flower's translation could not be read? He goes on to criticise the failure, in the new translation, to highlight those restored passages which were missing from the Flower translation. Would this information add to the reader's enjoyment, or not, as the reviewer believes, of this literary text? This new translation, having restored these passages, is more in line with the 'original Gaelic', a point which the reviewer fails to acknowledge.

But the butt of the reviewer's bile is the original text and its author, although he doesn't quote a single word of the original. He is repetitive in his criticism of, what he considers to be, the repetitiveness of the text. Title, subtitle and legend accompanying the illustrations are indicative of the reviewer's pettiness. The plosive straining for alliteration in the title (like a bad ad. for Dunne's Stores) is wide of the mark, for whatever else may be attributed to Tomás Ó Criomhthain, self-confidence, eccentricity, boring he most certainly was not, nor is the work, held in such high esteem by such critical minds as Máire Mhac an tSaoi:

'In *An tOileánach* the writing has a flavour, a quality of goodness you can almost taste, like the goodness of fresh bread or of a sound apple. It recreates a climate made up of a profound acceptance of the realities of life coupled with an intense appreciation of the mere physical joy of living reduced to its simplest terms...'

Myles na gCopaleen makes the point that '*An tOileánach* is the superbest of all books I have ever read'. Perhaps the greatest tribute to Ó Criomhthain's masterpiece is Myles' *An Béal Bocht*, in the same way that Joyce's mock-heroic twenty-four hour pub crawl, *Ulysses*, is a tribute to Homer's *Odyssey*, and yet, the reviewer cites the parodies of Myles and *Father Ted* as a negative accolade. Are imitation and parody not the highest forms of flattery?

The subtitle ('Even in a new translation, a Gaelic classic shows no emotion or curiosity about the wider world') implies that the fault lies with the original. Is the reviewer suggesting that this new translation should have rewritten the original story? The facts of evidence are simply not true: (references *repeatedly* to his uncle Dermot; getting drunk often).

He criticises Ó Criomhthain 'who makes of his life a list of things he's done, easily told things in which he takes pride'. This is the story of a people, not a person. However, if the reviewer considers this to be a purely autobiographical text then, what is he looking for? If an autobiography is not a list of the subject's deeds in life, then what is it?

The illustrating photographs ('remote ruins' with no reference to the conservation and renovation now being undertaken; and the juxtaposition of the author 'who gives an oddly superficial idea of himself') are of the same genre, indicative of a total lack of appreciation or awareness of the living heritage of the Blaskets.

Ultimately, the reviewer protests that he 'can imagine' ('and I really hope this is true' – one wonders) that the author is 'a far fuller person than this book suggests'. Again he doesn't get it. Unlike Peig or Muiris Ó Súilleabháin, Ó Criomhthain is not telling his own story, but 'ár leithéidí', 'ár gcúrsaí', the story of a community, not autobiography, but 'allibiography', testimony to peoples ingenuity and heroism, before famine, emigration and State neglect obliged them to forsake their homestead. Donne's 'No man is an Island' celebrates our animal sociability. But there is another side to existence: each of us is 'An Islander', marooned in a sea of infinity, trying to make sense of it all. Tomás Ó Criomhthain's work then is a heroic epic of individual and communal struggle for survival and meaning.

Back in the 1960s the late Gus Martin chose chapter nine, 'The Killing of the Seal', in illustration of Ó Criomhthain's philosophy, in the tv programme *Markings*. Here Tomás becomes a Beowulf or a Cú Chulainn, and his heroics will enshrine the memory of his race. The need to keep death in its place lies deep in human nature, and the art of biography arises from that need. Tragedies like the drowning of Tomás' son are facts that are treated with the stoic dignity of the native heroic tradition, stretching from the Death of Aoife's only son to 'The Lament for Art O'Leary'. These are not the work of individuals but the defiant, lasting voices of a community mediated through individuals. He who has ears to hear let him hear. Surely, Ó Criomhthain cannot be faulted for his portrayal of a living people. What good to them dwelling on the loss of the dead rather than the survival of the living?

The reviewer states that there 'is no politics other than a smug dismissal of Home Rule and the basis that the Blaskets have never had anything else.... There is no sense whatsoever of curiosity about a wider world.' Even today when you cross the Blasket Sound and set foot on the Great Blasket you cannot help but get the sense that you have stepped into another world, where time almost stands still and the happenings of the outside world no longer matter. The expanse of water surrounding these islands created an independent people, for whom 'getting about their business' was akin to survival. What difference to them a change in rule or in ruler? Had they not their own *Rí*, a figure who appears regularly in Ó Criomhthain's work, to 'govern' when required?

Those of us familiar with the story of the Islanders know that, for many, An Daingean and, for some, Tralee, was the boundary of their world on one side. But to suggest that they were unfamiliar with parts of the world on the other side, is to show an ignorance, yet again, of Blasket life. Many of them were as familiar with tidings in *An Talamh Úr* as in their own locality, a knowledge borne out of the harsh realities of emigration. Surely the numerous references Ó Criomthain makes to *An Talamh Úr* and *Meirice* are indicative of, at the very least, a casual curiosity in the wider world.

The reviewer talks of the ‘formulaic invocations that punctuate every page’ and yet claims ‘we hear nothing about his beliefs’. These invocations were the very essence of the living faith of the Islanders, their beliefs being a foundation stone of their community. Without this faith they would never have withstood the anguish and tragedies that inevitably befall an island community. For the reviewer to pass off Ó Criomthain’s invocations as anything other than a portrayal of his beliefs, is to deny the very concept of a living faith. The absence of a church on the Island may give the impression to some of a faithless people. But rather it is indicative of the opposite. Without the on-site guidance of ministry, it is the true believer who actively practices his faith. Are we not told in *Romans* that ‘the just shall live by faith alone’? As Mícheál de Mórdha puts it in *Scéal agus Dán Oileáin*,

‘Sagart nó gan aon tsagart, ba dhream iad a raibh creideamh láidir ina gcroíthe agus a chreid go diongbháilte i nDia agus gach a bhaineann leis sin.’

Tadhg Ó Dúshláine & Tracey Ní Mhaonaigh