

The Great Blasket Island

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

The great Blasket Island was uninhabited prior to about 1710, except for monks in ancient times. The number of people living on the island ebbed and flowed. There was a population of about 150 living there in 1840, but after the Great Famine the population had decreased to 100. The population is said to have reached its peak in 1916, at 176. From then on it was in its decline until 1953/54 when the Blasket was abandoned.

The people of the Great Blasket Island were known as “Islanders” and spoke Irish as their first language. There were schooled to read and write English but spoke Irish. They were primarily a socialist community in that they worked together as a community of farming and fishing.

The original population back in the later 1700’s was protestant. A protestant school was built around 1840 but by 1880 all the protestant’s left the island for the mainland.

The **population** of the island grew with the influx of tenants evicted from their holdings by Lord Ventry during the first half of the 19 century. Many followed this path because the way of life was there was better than what they had to endure on the mainland. Nevertheless, Island life was a constant hardship and struggle – a 3-mile crossing to the mainland, followed by a 5 mile walk by road for a priest, or a 12 mile walk to reach a doctor.

The Way of Life

The Islanders survived mainly on fishing, a few ridges of potatoes and a patch of oats or rye. Some of them had a cow or two; others who did not would depend on a drop of milk from their neighbor. The land was poor and sandy around their houses, so their plots were scattered here and there. A year’s supply of manure would not go very far so this had to be supplemented with materials from the beach – mussel shells and seaweed; and sometimes soot from the chimney was spread as fertilizer.

The mountain was held in common by all Islanders with ternary rights and right to hunt rabbits.

There was an unwritten rule regarding the grazing of sheep: 25 sheep for each grazing cow, and a man who did not have a cow was not allowed to graze sheep on the mountain.

From 1905, when visitors began regularly to stay on the island, some extra vegetables- carrots, onions, lettuce, turnips and the like were grown by the households in which they lodged.

FISHING

The early inhabitants of the Island were not fishermen. However, with the introduction of the boat they were able to fish for their livelihood. Food was not only limited to fish, but two Englishman showed the Islanders how to fish lobster and crayfish. For many years Dingle was the only market for their lobster until a French vessel came to the area with large storage tanks for the lobster. The Frenchman and the Islanders got along well. They exchanged goods: nets, tobacco, wine, rum, or anything else. All items were debited to their account against the next haul of lobster.

A CHANGE IN THE WAY OF LIFE

A big change came with the early 1930s. The Island community began to decline, and the young people were loath to marry. Only two couples married there between then and the time of abandonment, with most making off for America where so many of their kin had preceded them. In some cases, entire households left in the 1940s and settled on the mainland. Their courage had deserted them a long time before the year of the great exodus in 1953.

The post office opened in 1941 and was the vital contact with the outside world in the declining years of the island. This meant that the islanders could contact the post office on the mainland in time of emergencies or to send telegrams. More often than not the link was out of order, as it was when Sean O Ceana died of meningitis in early 1947 without resource to medical aid. (Islanders had to row a boat to the mainland than walk 12 miles to get a doctor. This was not enough time to save Sean).

HOUSES

The maximum number of houses on the Island at its peak was 30. All houses had a large kitchen, with enough room to dance a set or to wake a corpse, and an adjoining “lower room”, and in some cases and “upper room” behind the heart wall. The kitchen had to be large enough to accommodate animals at night or during bad weather. A makeshift (driftwood) bed was usually placed in the loft above the lower room. The walls were built of stone and mortar, with earth floors inside. The earth floors were constantly damp and to keep them dry they spread sand from the beach on them a couple of times a day.

WRITERS

As a Gaelic-speaking community, away from the influence of the rest of the country, the islands had gained a reputation for refinement of language that attracted scholars to their shores in the summer months.

In the early years of the 20th century, some of these visitors, such as Carl Marstrader, George Thompson, Brian O’Kelly and Robin Flower, persuaded a few of the islanders to write their autobiographies as a record of island life. (When visitors came to the island, Islanders had many rich stories to tell i.e. Pieg.) Pieg lived in the upper village.

The first to do so was (**TOMÁS O’CROHAN (1856-1937)**) Tomas O Criomhthain in 1929, followed in 1936 by Peig Sayers. These autobiographies are classics of Irish literature and became required reading for Irish school children. Muiris O’Sullivan: (Muiris O Suilleabhain), who later left the island to join the Gardai, was persuaded by George Thompson to write his story, entitled *Twenty Years A-Growing*. Muiris wrote about what it was like leaving the island forever. This became a best seller, and is translated into several different languages.

Muiris left the island, later married and was posted to Connemara where he died tragically in a drowning accident.

Books that were written by inhabitants of the Great Blasket Island:

Best known are *Machnamh Seanamhná* (*An Old Woman's Reflections*, [Peig Sayers](#), 1939), *Fiche Bliain Ag Fás* (*Twenty Years A-Growing*, [Muiris Ó Súilleabháin](#), 1933), and *An tOileánach* (*The Islandman*, [Tomás Ó Criomhthain](#), 1929).

The islanders had a difficult life.

Tomas had 10 children. His 7 year old died falling off a cliff. 2 died of whopping cough. His son Donal drowned while attempting to save the life of a lady off the White Strand. Few more died as infants. And some immigrated to America.

In April 1947, having been cut off from the mainland for weeks due to bad weather, the islanders sent a telegram to the Taoiseach, Éamon de Valera, urgently requesting supplies which duly arrived two days later by boat.

Some observations that were made by visiting scholars to the island:

1. The islanders live in a sort of socialist commune, yet they bear themselves with the beautiful reserve and considered manners of real aristocrats. The “king” of the island is always elected. (The king was local community leader but at the turn of the century the main role was postman.)
2. The women of the island, perhaps as a result of made matches, seem more interested in their children than their husbands. Listen to the choice of words. The islanders would not say “my wife” but the “poor mother”. It is the characterization of the women as a mother rather than a wife. (Similar to what Synge found on the Aran Islands)
3. Robin Flower observed “there was always a narrow margin between men and violent death and their faculties are keener for that.”
4. Also Synge noted that “it’s impossible for clumsy foolhardy or timid men to live on these islands.” “Such a life without shops or specialist craftsmen develops an all-round competence, a total physical and mental alertness.
5. The islanders knew no division of labor, their work changing with the seasons from fishing to burning kelp, from cutting shoes to thatching houses, from building cradles to making coffins, in a way that kept them from the dullness and monotony of industrial life.
6. Moods and interaction of the people: After a successful fishing expedition the men go on a drinking spree to dingle, to the chagrin of the sensible Tomas, who berates his uncle for abandoning his wife, only to endure a savage put down: “She’s not too fine a woman....she’s in no danger.”

Tomas died at age 83 and is buried on the mainland at Dunquin, inscribed on his head stone is a quotation from his book ‘the Islandman’ which means

“Our likes will never be seen again”