



Pedagogická
fakulta
Faculty
of Education

Jihočeská univerzita
v Českých Budějovicích
University of South Bohemia
in České Budějovice

Jihočeská univerzita v Českých Budějovicích
Pedagogická fakulta
Katedra anglistiky

Bakalářská práce

Tomas O’Crohan’s *The Islandman* as the Object
of Satire in Flann O’Brien’s *The Poor Mouth*

The Islandman Tomase O’Crohana jako předmět
satiry v *The Poor Mouth* Flanna O’Briena

Vypracovala: Denisa Rossmüllerová, ČJu-AJu-SZu
Vedoucí práce: PhDr. Christopher Erwin Koy, M.A., Ph.D.

České Budějovice 2021

Prohlašuji, že svoji bakalářskou práci jsem vypracovala samostatně pouze s použitím pramenů a literatury uvedených v seznamu citované literatury.

Prohlašuji, že v souladu s § 47b zákona č. 111/1998 Sb. v platném znění souhlasím se zveřejněním své bakalářské práce, a to v nezkrácené podobě elektronickou cestou ve veřejně přístupné části databáze STAG provozované Jihočeskou univerzitou v Českých Budějovicích na jejích internetových stránkách, a to se zachováním mého autorského práva k odevzdanému textu této kvalifikační práce. Souhlasím dále s tím, aby toutéž elektronickou cestou byly v souladu s uvedeným ustanovením zákona č. 111/1998 Sb. zveřejněny posudky školitele a oponentů práce i záznam o průběhu a výsledku obhajoby kvalifikační práce. Rovněž souhlasím s porovnáním textu mé kvalifikační práce s databází kvalifikačních prací Theses.cz provozovanou Národním registrem vysokoškolských kvalifikačních prací a systémem na odhalování plagiátů.

V Českých Budějovicích dne 4. 7. 2021

Denisa Rossmüllerová

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my thesis' supervisor, PhDr. Christopher Erwin Koy, M.A., Ph.D., for his invaluable insights and encouragement during the formation of this work.

Abstract

After an overview of the literature written in the Irish language, this thesis analyzes the English translation of the memoir *An t-Oileánach (The Islandman)* by Tomas O’Crohan with the interest in the pattern set by the author in describing the rural Irish life. Then the English translation of the comic novel *An Béal Bocht (The Poor Mouth)* by Flann O’Brien is investigated for intertextual references to O’Crohan’s memoir as well as the elements of satire in the novel. The work of the author of the illustrations from *The Poor Mouth*, Ralph Steadman, is briefly described. The last chapter gives an overview of how fictional depiction of the Irish country people evolved during the 20th century.

Key words: Tomas O’Crohan, The Islandman, Flann O’Brien, The Poor Mouth, Blasket Islands, Corkadoragha, autobiography, satire, Ireland, peasant

Anotace

Po přehledu irsky psané literatury se tato práce zabývá anglickým překladem autobiografie *An t-Oileánach (The Islandman)* Tomase O’Crohana se zájmem o popis venkovského života v Irsku. Poté je zkoumán anglický překlad humoristické novely *An Béal Bocht (The Poor Mouth)* Flanna O’Briena se zájmem o odkazy na O’Crohanovu autobiografii a prvky satiry. Krátce je zde popsána i tvorba Ralpha Steadmana, autora ilustrací v *The Poor Mouth*. Poslední kapitola podává přehled o tom, jak se během 20. století vyvinulo fiktivní vyobrazení venkovských Irů v literatuře.

Klíčová slova: Tomas O’Crohan, The Islandman, Flann O’Brien, The Poor Mouth, Blasket Islands, Corkadoragha, autobiografie, satira, Irsko, rolník

Table of Contents

Introduction	6
1 Overview of the Literature Written in the Irish Language	7
1.1 Introduction	7
1.2 Earliest Works and Mythology	7
1.3 Irish Middle Ages	9
1.4 The Early Modern Period	10
1.5 Early 19 th -Century Literature and the Great Irish Famine	11
1.6 The Irish Literary Renaissance	12
1.7 Other 19 th and 20 th -Century Irish-Writing Authors	12
2 The Analysis	15
2.1 Introduction	15
2.2 <i>The Islandman</i>	15
2.2.1 Introduction	15
2.2.2 Foreword	16
2.2.3 O’Crohan’s Youth	16
2.2.4 O’Crohan’s Adulthood	22
2.2.5 O’Crohan Gains Interest in Irish	30
2.2.6 Summary of <i>The Islandman</i>	33
2.3 <i>The Poor Mouth</i>	34
2.3.1 Introduction	34
2.3.2 <i>The Poor Mouth</i>	35
2.3.3 Summary of <i>The Poor Mouth</i>	47
2.3.4 <i>The Poor Mouth’s</i> Illustrator	48
3 Evolution of Fictional Depiction of Country People over the 20 th Century	50
4 Conclusion	53
5 Bibliography	55

Introduction

According to the Gaelic League, the Irish language is a part of Ireland's identity. During the process of exploitation by the British, Ireland went through waves of famine and migration. Learning and speaking the English language was required of the Irish people and the use of their native language started to plummet.

The Blasket Islands resisted the British influence well, as they are cut off from the mainland. It was a place sought by Gaelic learners and enthusiasts. Tomás Ó Criomhthain (Tomas O'Crohan) belongs among the most influential people of the Great Blasket Island, as his autobiography *An t-Oileánach (The Islandman)* became a symbol of rural way of life in Ireland.

Brian O'Nolan (Flann O'Brien) was one of the people who opposed the symbol of the ideologized Irish peasant and set to overthrow it with the use of satire in his comic novel *An Béal Bocht (The Poor Mouth)*.

The purpose thesis is to analyze the works *The Islandman*, with the focus on how Tomas O'Crohan captured the way of life in rural Ireland, and *The Poor Mouth*, with the focus on references to *The Islandman* as well as how Flann O'Brien satirizes the autobiography.

The analysis is preceded with an overview of the history of literature written in the Irish language. The final chapter will give a brief overview on how the depiction of country people (the figure of the Irish peasant) changed in Irish literature over the course of the 20th century.

1 Overview of the Literature Written in the Irish Language

1.1 Introduction

Although Irish-born authors enriched the world with novels such as *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), *Dracula* (1897), *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956), or drama such as *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773), *The Countess Kathleen* (1892), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), *Pygmalion* (1913), or *Waiting for Godot* (1953), it can only be disputed whether their English-written works would be this successful if they were originally written in the Irish language, especially since most of the Irish writers that are still well-known today felt compelled to leave Ireland in search of freedom or wider recognition.

The Irish writers who did not know Irish were almost exclusively Protestant, as opposed to Gaeilge speakers, who were almost exclusively Catholic, except for Oscar Wilde, who converted to Roman Catholicism shortly before dying. This pattern can be seen on the four Irish Literary Nobel Prize winners – W. B. Yeats, G. B. Shaw and S. Beckett who were Protestant and did not know Irish, whereas Seamus Heaney knew Irish and was Catholic. The difference in religious views between Ireland and Great Britain was crucial throughout the history of the two lands.

1.2 Earliest Works and Mythology

Before being introduced to the Latin alphabet, the Irish used their own alphabet called *ogham*. The earliest documented cases of its usage are believed to come from the 4th century. The only surviving ogham inscriptions are carved on stone but it is believed it had been used on wood to write secret messages in primitive Irish or other simple words like personal names.¹

If the oldest simple texts like inscriptions in Irish are omitted, the earliest texts in so-called archaic Irish originated from around the 6th century and whose authorship is mostly attributed to monks and missionaries.² Their works include poems and

1 Ager, S. *Ogham alphabet*. (2021, June 1). Omniglot. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://omniglot.com/writing/ogham.htm>

2 de Bernardo Stempel, P., Slocum, J. (2019). *Introduction to Old Irish*. The University of Texas at Austin Linguistic Research Center. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://lrc.la.utexas.edu/eieol/iriol>

mythological epics, of which *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, or as commonly referred to as *The Irish Illiad*, may be mentioned.

The earliest preserved Irish texts are short glosses between the lines of Latin texts that were taken to various parts of the world by Irish missionaries. Due to Irish not being understood, the entries were not overly observed nor damaged as opposed to the texts that remained in Ireland.³ Other and more extensive texts have usually been preserved in their later transcriptions, meaning we only know the originals and the language used indirectly.⁴

Dallán Forgaill is the first identifiable Irish writer with his work *Amra Coluimb Chille (The Elegy on Columba)* whose subject was a Christian missionary of Scotland whose poem is one of the most important poems from the early medieval Gaelic world.⁵

The earliest Irish poetry was mostly non-rhythmical, just alliterative, or in other ways mixed with prose, making the texts *prosimetra*. Among the titles belong e.g., adventure (*echtra*), battle (*cath*), cattle-raid (*táin*), destruction (*togail*), vision (*aislinge*), or wooing (*tochmarc*).⁶

Regarding Irish mythology, most of it was lost due to its exclusively non-oral preservation. Once the Irish were introduced to Christianity, like almost every Pagan illiterate culture, irreversible damage was then done to the original myths, though it also brought the first desires to preserve the myths in written form. The inconsistency of Irish mythology documentation has caused the whole subject to be incomplete and contradictory, undoubtedly hindering the mythology from being studied as thoroughly as the Norse or the Greek ones.⁷

Despite these daunting issues with the Pre-Christian Irish mythology, there are enough manuscripts to enable the recognition of four literary cycles: The Mythological Cycle, the Ulster Cycle, the Fenian Cycle, and the Historical Cycle.

3 Thurneysen, R. (1946). *A Grammar of Old Irish*. Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. Page 4

4 *Introduction to Old Irish*. (2019). The University of Texas at Austin Linguistic Research Center. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://lrc.la.utexas.edu/eieol/iriol>

5 Dallán forgaill m. eirc. (2016). *Saints in Scottish Place-Names*. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://saintsplaces.gla.ac.uk/saint.php?id=84>

6 de Bernardo Stempel, P., Slocum, J. (2019). *Introduction to Old Irish*. The University of Texas at Austin Linguistic Research Center. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://lrc.la.utexas.edu/eieol/iriol>

7 Tale Foundry. (2017). *Why isn't Irish mythology more popular?* — Irish mythology series. On Youtube. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxLtDNGq1A4>

Among the Mythological Cycle belong stories of unearthly magical beings and events. *Children of Lir* suits as an example, as the theme was children's cursing and subsequently living under a spell for 900 years, dying soon after the magic wore out, though still managing to get baptized into Christianity, which was new to Ireland, before their passing.

The Ulster Cycle consists of heroic legends from the first century AD, of which the stories about the Ulaid dynasty are of greatest importance. The stories are centered around the reign of Conchobar mac Nessa and his nephew, Cú Chlainn. The stories also include a tragic legend of Deirdre, a topic written about by Jitka Stará in a University of South Bohemia bachelor thesis.⁸

The Fenian Cycle is named after Fionn mac Cumhaill, a hunter-warrior whose stories' narrator was his son Oisín, a legendary Irish poet.

The Historic Cycle, or the Cycle of the Kings, tells stories of existing kings who were made into legendary heroes. There are also naturally Irish adaptations of classical stories such as Odyssey, Aeneid, Hercules, as well as King Arthur.

These cycles portray the literary development of Ireland, namely the shift from religious themes towards more realistic ones.^{9,10}

1.3 Irish Middle Ages

For centuries, verse was the most common style of literary genre. *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* or *The Book of Invasions* is one of the collections of poems and prose of the Irish history which was used as an important historical source until the 19th century.¹¹ *Dindsenchas*, directly translated as *Lore of Places*, is another poem collection which is significant for its source of information regarding mythology.

8 Stará, J. (2012). *The Deirdre Legend in Irish Fiction*. Theses.cz. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://theses.cz/id/a2slm4/?lang=sk>

9 Caroll, S. (2017). *The 4 Cycles of Irish Mythology | Irish Myths & Legends*. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://blog.carrollsrishgifts.com/the-four-cycles-of-irish-mythology/>

10 O'Mahony, O. (2019). *The Four Cycles of Irish Mythology*. Shamrock Craic. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://www.shamrockgift.com/blog/four-cycles-of-irish-mythology/>

11 hÓgáin, D. Ó. (1991). *Myth, Legend & Romance*. Prentice Hall. Pages 296-297

The language used we now know as Classical Irish. There were also prosodic stories, whose turning point was the Norman invasion of the 12th century which brought new themes into literature.¹²

Unfortunately, the Norman and English interference on Irish sovereignty resulted in a decline in Gaelic literature, though some poetic pieces were written for commissions.¹³ The 14th century brought to existence *The Yellow Book of Lecan*, *The Great Book of Lecan*, *The Book of Hy Many*, and *The Book of Ballymote*, which were manuscripts that dramatically helped with deciphering the ogham alphabet.

1.4 The Early Modern Period

Ranging from around the year 1500 to 1800, Ireland went through what we now call the Early Modern Period. During this time, the Gaelic culture started to wane because of the Anglo-Saxon intrusion and the suppression, often violent, of Irishmen.

A large part of this period's literature was created by professional poets called *filidh*, often called *bards* in English. Among their commissioned works was both personal and religious poetry. The *filidh* class was mostly heritable. For instance, Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn (c. 1550 – c. 1591) came from a family of professional poets and the number of lords he addressed his poems to suggests he was himself of large value to society.

One of the most accomplished Gaelic poets of all time, Aogán Ó Rathaille (1670-1729), during whose life the era of the bardic tradition came to its end, is the author of the first Aisling poem.¹⁴ The best-known aisling of his is *Gile na Gile* or *Brightness Most Bright*. Aisling, meaning “dream” in Irish, is a vision poem, in which Ireland appears to the author in a form of a woman, usually bringing some predictions.

The 18th century's poets were overshadowed by popular songs, relegating most of them beggars. One of the best-known poets of this period is Eibhnlín Dubn Ní Chonaill (c. 1743 – c. 1800), the author of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* or *Lament for Art O'Leary*, her

12 *Movement to Know: The Irish Middle Ages*. (2018). Ireland Lit Guide. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://irelandliteratureguide.com/movement-to-know/the-irish-middle-ages/>

13 *Irish Literary Renaissance*. (2018). Encyclopedia.com. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/literature-other-modern-languages/miscellaneous-european-literature>

14 Connolly, S. (2011). *The Oxford Companion to Irish History (2nd ed.)*. OUP Oxford. Chapter “Literature in Irish”

husband. Míchál Ó Coimín's *Laoi Oisín ar Thír na nÓg* (*Oisín's Song about the Land of Youth*) later became a source for Yeats's poem *The Wanderings of Oisín*.¹⁵

1.5 Early 19th-Century Literature and the Great Irish Famine

One of the most important turning points of modern Irish history was the Act of Union which came into effect in 1801. Among the results of the unification of Ireland and Great Britain was the removal of Dublin's parliament, causing the rest of the already declining number of the Irish nobility to leave their homes for England.¹⁶

The Act of Union has also caused a massive rise of English speakers residing in Ireland. At the beginning of the 19th century, it is estimated between one-third and one-half of Irish citizens spoke the Irish language only whereas by 1901 only four percent of the nation was labeled monolingual.¹⁷

The sources of the language shift mostly come from folk humor since most of the 19th-century manuscripts did not directly focus on linguistic changes. For instance, in 1847 an Irish scholar Robert MacAdam recorded a story about two Irish-speakers mistaking English-speaker's word "agony" with Irish "eagnaidheacht" (argue, dispute) creating a humorous situation around a dreadful story about a child's death.¹⁸ Similar stories were documented by Douglas Hyde and David Comyn. Even the collection of the Irish Folklore Commission was mostly made of jokes and humorous stories.¹⁹

In 1875, the Irish scholar Francis Keane explained that the Irish needed to learn English as the English visitors overwhelmingly did not know any Irish.²⁰

15 Mac Mahon, M. (2007). *Clare's Gaelic Bardic Tradition*. Clare County Library. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from https://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/literature/bardic/micheal_o_coimin.htm

16 Notable periods in the history of Irish literature. (2019). Ireland Lit Guide. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://irelandliteratureguide.com/resources/notable-periods-in-the-history-of-irish-literature/>

17 Hindley, R. (1990), *The Death of the Irish Language: A Qualified Obituary*. London, 15-19.

18 Ó Tuathail, É. (November 1943), "Meath Anecdotes," *Éigse* 4, no. 1 10-11.

19 Wolf, N. (2009). "Scéal Grinn?" *Jokes, Puns, and the Shaping of Bilingualism in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*. JSTOR. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25482962>, Page 53

20 Francis Keane, "Report on the Present State of the Irish Language and Literature in the of Munster," and "Report on the Present State of the Irish Language and Literature in the of Ulster" [1874-75], Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, MS 12 Q 13, Pages 98, 128-131.

1.6 The Irish Literary Renaissance

As Ireland was struggling to maintain being a self-governing country during colonization, a cultural resurgence was needed to back up the citizens' patriotism. The interest in Gaelic mythology had risen and legends were retold. For example, Douglas Hyde published *A Literary History of Ireland* in 1899. A cultural organization *Conradh na Gaelige* or the *Gaelic League* was founded in 1893 to support this movement with Douglas Hyde serving as its first president. The league is still active to this day and has insisted that Irish as a language must be used in Ireland as it is a part of its identity.²¹

1.7 Other 19th and 20th-Century Irish-Writing Authors

The turn of the century output of English-writing Irish-born literary industry truly flourished and continued with the world-famous writers such as Oscar Wilde, Bram Stoker, James Joyce and the four Nobel Prize-winning writers William Butler Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett, and Seamus Heaney, none of whom built their fame purely on Irish-written works. Samuel Beckett even wrote in French, rather than Irish.

Regarding the most recent popular literature written in Irish, apart from Tomas O'Crohan and Brian O'Nolan (who went by the pen name Flann O'Brien) whose works are the main interest of this thesis, a lot of works were produced also, though not very world-acclaimed.

Many authors chose to write in both English and Irish. For example, the aforementioned Brian O'Nolan wrote novels such as *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policemen*, as well as *An Béal Bocht* (translated into English as *The Poor Mouth*). The Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney was also an author of several Irish works, mostly poetry. Patrick Pearse was one of the most visible people one generation earlier, mostly because of his political activism i.e., leading the 1916 Easter Rebellion. According to Louis De Paor, he was "the most perceptive critic and most accomplished poet" of the Gaelic revival.²² Among the Irish prose works Patrick Pearse wrote belong *Eoghainín na nÉan* (*Eoineen of the Birds*), *Íosagán* (*Little Jesus*), *An Gadaí* (*The Thief*), and other short stories, which are still in print.

21 Mac Donnachadha, (2020). P. *The Forming of the Gaelic League*. Your Irish Culture. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://www.yourirish.com/history/19th-century/the-foundation-of-the-gaelic-league-1893>

22 Paor, L. D. (2016). *Leabhar na Hathghabhála. Irish-English Bilingual* (ed.). Bloodaxe Books. Page 20

Furthermore, Eoghan Ó Tuairisc created both Irish prose and poetry. Brendan Behan's English-language novel *Borstal Boy* deals with his experiences from prison to which he was sent due to his actions as a member of the Irish Republican Army. While imprisoned, he perfected his Irish language skills.²³ The Irish language drama *Dorchadas* (*Darkness*) is one of the well-renowned works of Liam O'Flaherty. Although a vast majority of his works was originally written in the English language, he published several works in Irish as well. He and Pádraic O'Conaire thought "drama was the best means of starting a new literature in Irish". However, their attempts at staging Irish drama were unsuccessful.²⁴

Among the writers who chose to write mostly or exclusively in Irish belongs Pádraic Ó Conaire, who was labeled as the earliest author of modernist fiction in Irish by an Irish author Angela Bourke.²⁵ Other well-known modernist authors were Máirtín Ó Cadhain and Brendan Behan.

"One of the greatest woman storytellers of recent times" according to Irish Folklore Commission archivist Seán Ó Súilleabháin, who illustrated the cover page of one of *An Béal Bocht*'s original Irish editions, was Peig Sayers.²⁶ Though not a writer on her own due to illiteracy, she became known via her autobiography *Peig* and other books which she dictated to others. She spent a great part of her life on the Great Blasket Island, the home of Tomas O'Crohan. Máiréad Ní Ghráda was another female Irish poet as well as a playwright. She is known as an author of the first science fiction novel in Irish, *Manannán*.

An important Gaeltacht writer was Seosamh Mac Grianna, who was very critical of the Anglicization of Ireland. His creative period was cut short by mental issues. His brother Séamus Ó Grianna was popular among Irish language learners of the 20th century, and he was one of the most prolific authors of his time.²⁷

23 *Brendan Behan*. (2015). Britannica. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Brendan-Behan>

24 O'Flaherty, L. (1996). *The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty*. Kelly, A.A. (ed.). Wolfhound Press. Page 206

25 Bourke, A. (2003). *Legless in London: Pádraic Ó Conaire and Éamon A Búrc*, Éire-Ireland, Vol. 38. No.3/4, Page 54

26 O'Sullivan, S. (1999). *Folktales of Ireland*. University of Chicago Press. Pages 270–271

27 Breathnach, D., Ní Mhurchú, M. Ó *GRIANNA, Séamus (1889–1969)*. (2016). ainm.ie. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=203>

Regarding contemporary poetry, this period was represented by Caitlín Maude, Eoghan Ó Tuairisc, and the well-renown trinity Máire Mhac an tSaoi, Seán Ó Ríordáin, and Máirtín Ó Direáin.²⁸

28 Dorgan, T. (2003). *Twentieth-century Irish-Language Poetry*. Archipelago. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <http://www.archipelago.org/vol7-3/dorgan.htm>

2 The Analysis

2.1 Introduction

The two subjects of my analysis are the books *An t-Oileánach (The Islandman)* and *An Béal Bocht (The Poor Mouth)*, the first one capturing the life of the inhabitants of the Great Blasket Island and the latter imitating it in a satirical manner. The island is cut off from the mainland by three miles of seawater and its last inhabitants abandoned it shortly after the Second World War.

The author of *The Islandman*, Tomás Ó Criomhthain (Anglicized Tomas O’Crohan, 1856-1937), spent nearly his entire life living on the island and was one of the last people to live such a unique lifestyle. *The Islandman* is essentially his autobiography, capturing the daily life of the Blaskets’ inhabitants, and his only major written work.

The Poor Mouth (1941) is a satirical novel by Brian O’Nolan (1911-1966), better known by his pen name Flann O’Brien. He is most famous for his modernist novels written in English such as *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) and *The Third Policeman* (1967), and he has also written short fiction, essays, and drama. The Irish version of *The Poor Mouth* was released under the pen name Myles na gCopaleen.

2.2 *The Islandman*

2.2.1 Introduction

Born on December 21, 1856, Tomas O’Crohan had the opportunity to live in one of the last places almost untouched by the influence of English in Ireland, the Blasket Islands. Set two miles off Ireland’s Dingle Peninsula, the islands offered an unspoiled and unique way of life for hundreds of years, including the conservation of the Irish tongue. Such life was destined to offer harsh living conditions. The hardships of the said era have been portrayed in O’Crohan’s biography *An t-Oileánach (The Islandman, 1929)* and later belittled by the younger generations, who were required to read his book in school for Irish class. Some people took it as far as writing a parody of such lifestyle, which is how *An Béal Bocht (The Poor Mouth, 1941)* by Flann O’Brien came into being.

It is fitting to mention that shortly before Tomas O’Crohan was born, the infamous Great Famine of Ireland took place (1845 – 1852) and the whole country of Ireland found itself in a period referred to as *An Drochshaol (the hard times/the bad life)*.²⁹

29 A collection of testimonies/memories of the great famine which can be found on:
<https://www.duchas.ie/en/tpc/cbes/4427742?con=GA>

Though Tomas O’Crohan’s autobiography is one of the most prominent, there were other books written by the residents of the Blasket Islands. To name a few, Maurice O’Sullivan wrote *Fiche Bliain ag Fás* (*Twenty Years A-Growing*, 1933), Peig Sayers wrote *Machnamh Seanmhna* (*An Old Woman’s Reflections*, 1936), Robin Flower, the translator of *The Islandman*, is the author of *The Western Island* (1944) and Seán O’Crohan, the very son of Tomas O’Crohan, wrote *Lá dár Saol* (*A Day in Our Life*, 1969) in which he had the opportunity to write about the evacuation of the last residents of Blasket Island, which happened in 1954 due to the island’s radical population decline.

2.2.2 Foreword

The autobiography was first released in 1929 and was very well received. Described as both an observer and a vigorous participant, O’Crohan’s way of storytelling plays a large role in the book’s success, alongside his way of life being simply fascinating.

On the Blaskets, English was taught in “the little school”, though it failed to be implemented in the inhabitants’ day-to-day use. The community was a typical example of an Irish village from the old days, full of folklore, songs, and stories untouched by the mainland’s modern influence. O’Crohan’s storytelling is valued for not trying to impress the reader but simply attempting to reveal the way of life of Blaskets’ inhabitants, ‘for the like of us will never be again’ (one of the best-known quotes of O’Crohan).

2.2.3 O’Crohan’s Youth

A few years before Tomas O’Crohan was born, the great famine took place. A ship sank nearby the islands and the wheat it carried fed the Islanders for years. Had it not crashed, nobody on the island would have survived, the old people used to say.

The youngest of six siblings, Tomas O’Crohan, was the most spoiled of the bunch, by his words. The food they ate was mostly meat-based, coming both from sea and land.

Their house is described as little and cramped. It was common for them to share the house with farm animals like cows and an ass, the hens nesting in the thatched roof. Houses stood right next to another, and the families chattered and visited daily. The neighbor lady, which O’Crohan calls “the old hag”, was a gossip and spoke inappropriately of Tomas, being “an old cow’s calf”.

As there were no shops or services on the island, the inhabitants needed to be capable of various labor. Aside from common handiwork, O’Crohan’s father was a fisherman, a stonemason and a boat’s captain.

Despite being very young, O’Crohan vividly describes various stories from his childhood. For instance, there was a year in which a ship sank nearby the island, and its cargo, palm oil, massively helped the inhabitants get by as they could sell it. O’Crohan describes it as follows:

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. (*The Islandman*, p. 4)

The ship also left behind several brass bolts, which the inhabitants could sell as well. The old people used to say if it were not for the shipwreck, nobody on the island would have survived. *The old hag* said it was God who sent it to the poor, which is the same thing she said about the previously mentioned sinking, which happened before O’Crohan was born. This suggests *the old hag* often repeated herself.

One day, a large school of porpoises found themselves near the shore. There were boats of the Islanders and boats with the people of Dunquin, a mainland village that overlooks the Blasket Island. Both groups tried to lead the porpoises ashore and a vicious fight between the two groups broke out. Eventually, the Dunquin were forced to leave empty-handed, and the Islanders had no lack of pork for a year. Everyone in the aftermath is described as covered in crimson red blood and had little Tomas been caught up in the skirmish, he may have been killed. In another story, Tomas went fishing with his father but a six feet long conger he had caught dragged him overboard.

Education on the Blaskets was dependent on teachers coming from the mainland. They often lasted a few years on the island before moving back. Tomas went to school for the first time at the age of 10, when Nancy Donoghue became the first teacher on the Blasket Island. One of their schooldays was interrupted by the salvation of boats caught up in a tempest.

The eldest of the siblings, Maura, had a marriage arranged but her spouse died one year later. She left her newborn son with her family and went off to America, returning after three years. Around that time, the teacher got married and moved away. The new

teacher named Robert Smith only lasted in his position for three months as he failed to gain respect among the children.

Since school was canceled, the children were able to help around the house more often. One time, O’Crohan’s mother and other women went out to collect limpets from the strand. Before they managed to get back, the high tide returned, cutting their way off. Once the men were alerted, they came running towards the sea. It was Tomas’ father who first ran home for a ladder, ensuring the women’s safe return.

The way of life during O’Crohan’s youth differed from the time he was writing the memoir as an older man. Though the size and appearance of the houses varied, most of them simply consisted of one room divided by a dresser. One part of the room contained beds under which potatoes were kept, the other was the part the family spent most of their days in. Apart from the kitchen, there was a chicken coop and at night-time, there would be a cow or two, or a calf, an ass, and a dog, even a pet lamb. Up until O’Crohan’s adolescence, the main light source were cressets fueled with fish oil. During O’Crohan’s youth, animals also slowly began to get their own sheds outside.

The work on the houses was rushed as a lot of people took part in the building process. The walls were made from stones, mortared with clay. The thatches were made of rushes and reeds, which worked well until they started decomposing and worms started attracting the hens. O’Crohan recalls a story in which a family was seated around a table ready to dine when suddenly, two little chickens fell straight onto the food. There were ten other chickens and a hen nesting in the roof.

The family of this house were gathered, every one of them, round the table at supper, with plenty of potatoes, fish, and milk before them, and all their jaws keen set to grind them and send them on down. The man of the house was sitting at the head of the table, with a wooden mug full of milk beside him. He'd just put his hand to his plate, to take out a piece of fish, when he saw some object fall into the mug. He looked down, and there was a lump of something drowning in the milk. They had to fetch the tongs to get it out, and not a one of them had the faintest idea what it was. 'It's a young chicken,' said the woman of the house, 'whatever the dickens brought it there?' (*The Islandman*, p. 28)

'Devil. take it! there's a hole in the house,' says he to his father. 'Come here and you'll see it.' When the man of the house saw the hole, 'Wisha,' said he, 'may Satan sweep all the hens and eggs and chickens out to sea.' 'God turn a deaf ear to you,' said the wife. (*The Islandman*, p. 29)

This excerpt shows that O’Crohan’s way of storytelling was vivid despite not being present at some of the described situations. It also shows the way of speech of the Islanders.

There was not much time to eat in the lives of the Islanders, so the people usually had just a morning meal and an evening one, which they never called breakfast or supper. It usually consisted of fish, potatoes, and milk. As time went on, the Islanders were introduced to tea and wheat flour and started to eat even four times a day, which O’Crohan criticizes as in his young days people would last even on one meal for two days.

When O’Crohan was around the age of 14, another teacher came to the island. She was a sister of the first one, Kate Donoghue. O’Crohan’s friend King distracted him and slowed down progress of his studies. Despite that, he preached the island’s people to be observant, curious, and always ready to learn. One of the things that encouraged learning he claimed to have been the breeze coming from the shore which always cleared one’s head.

Although the sea brought several benefits, it was also a source of injuries. For instance, one time, there was a scarcity of fish. Young Tomas’ father swam for crabs he planned to use as bait. O’Crohan was to keep an eye on them, but one of them ended up clawing into his fingers. They only got the claws away after ripping them away from the crab and smashing them against a stone. O’Crohan’s fingers were all black and bloody and even *the old hag* was worried about him. Eventually, all was alright and O’Crohan’s father brought home a couple of fish. Tomas was even told to bring one to the neighbors and as they had nothing to offer, *the old hag* promised Tomas her daughter for marriage. Tomas was not happy about that promise as the whole family was rather unhandy, though kind-hearted. Nevertheless, the family’s father, Bald Tom, as everyone called him, was allegedly very smart, despite having no education.

Their third teacher lasted three years before she went away to marry. During her teaching, an inspector visited the island. He was the first person to wear glasses that the children of the island had ever seen, and he was laughed at for being “four-eyed” and coming from hell. The inspector left at once after telling the teacher something in English. The teacher then fainted and even though the pupils were awaiting trouble, the teacher just sent them home, showing she was sensible. A month or two later, another inspector visited the school. He was described as rather light-hearted and rewarded the smartest student from each class with a shilling. It was Tomas who got it and he gifted it to his father, who bought some tobacco with it.

It was not long before the fish reappeared. Allegedly, three boats returned full of fish every day with one thousand fish for each man of the crew. Tomas carried his thousand home and as a reward, he was taken to Dingle for the first time the next day.

Dingle is a town around 20 kilometers away by boat. Tomas' cousin, Jerry, got seasick and since Tomas did not know seasickness as he had never traveled this far, he thought Jerry would die. In Dingle they ate and shopped for salt and food. Tomas even got new pair of boots, which was uncommon as most Island people apparently wore boots for the first time on their wedding day. The boots supposedly made Tomas look so marvelous people did not recognize him when the boat returned to the Island. At home, they were rewarded with bread, eggs, and milk, as they were sick of eating fish all the time.

The next chapter, numbered six, contains the book's first authentic photograph. It is titled *Island Kitchen* and captures two people, a man and a woman, sitting in a room, staring at the camera. The woman is working on a spinning wheel, which dominates the picture. There is not much furniture around, only the stools which the people are sitting on. Their backs are facing the house's fireplace.

The chapter starts by saying that after the third teacher got a marriage proposal around 1873, she only spent one last week with the children. By that time, a sixteen-year-old O'Crohan got around six years of education and got nowhere near close to gaining proficiency in English.

The next week, since there was no school, O'Crohan's friend, King, visited him. O'Crohan was just eating breakfast, fresh bread with butter, which was a rather luxurious ingredient. He even compared having it with an old Irish saying used for any improbable things: "It is a rare thing to see a cat with a saddle on him." Later, the two of them went looking for crabs which they would use as bait for fishing.

Their fishing spot for the day was Dunlevy's Point, named after the Island poet. Compared to O'Crohan, he was a much older man who, despite annoying young O'Crohan with his poems, taught him some manners of speech, which can be sensed while reading his autobiography. Both O'Crohan and King allegedly caught 20 fish, until O'Crohan accidentally stuck his finger in the hook. King had to cut the hook with a knife and at home, O'Crohan's sister Kate cut away the piece of skin in which the hook was stuck in with a razor.

While painful and tedious to heal, O'Crohan barely noticed his sore finger when their neighbor, Bald Tom, came each night to tell them about the hard times he went through. For instance, he told O'Crohan a story of how the people of Dunquin and Ballyferriter, two mainland villages, came to dislike each other. The tale of the Boat of Gortadoo tells a story of a ship which went adrift on the sea. The Dunquin reached her first and started taking everything they fancied. Later, the Ballyferriter arrived and started

quarreling with the Dunquin. Eventually, the Ballyferriter took so much stuff their ship sank. The Dunquin, knowing they would not be able to save all 21 men, rather sailed away, despite some of the men being related. The consequences were gory, and peace was only restored when a Ballyferriter woman married a Dunquin man. O’Crohan’s mother thanked God such savage times were over.

Bald Tom’s wife, *the old hag*, would keened for her daughter every dawn. She was not dead, but as she moved to America, her mother did not expect to ever see her again. One morning, she ran into the O’Crohan’s house, alerting the family of a large ship carrying men with dark uniforms, which was anchored nearby. O’Crohan’s father said he expected it to arrive sooner or later and that there probably will not be many houses left on the island by evening. It turns out, the people came to collect taxes.

Everyone came running outside, preparing to defend the Island. Tomas was ordered to gather stones with the women, and they apparently collected a ship’s load of them. Finally, the ship hit the shore and a man came onto the land. All the men, including the ones on the ship, were aiming their guns at the women, who stood their ground proudly above the shore. Suddenly, they started throwing rocks at the man on the beach and the ship left almost immediately. There were two other ships it met with on the sea and all of them returned to the Island. The same wave of stones started falling on them, hitting one of the men directly on the head. First, the men backed off, but later made one more attempt in entering the Island as they thought the women ran out of ammunition. They were mistaken, plus if the women ran out of stones, they threw anything else they could. One of them even attempted to throw her own child, but the woman next to her caught it mid-throw and urged her to keep it. The news stated that a steamship with armed men aboard failed to tax or gather rent from the Great Blasket.

A few years later, a similar incident happened. This time, the people of the Island were warned about the men’s arrival and decided to move all their cattle to the very west of the Island. When the British sheriff and his men searched the Island, they found nothing but two old mules which the sheriff did not want to take with him as he was afraid of being laughed at.

During the winter, O’Crohan was urged to stay at home and not visit other people’s houses without fire and warmth. O’Crohan did not mind, as Bald Tom was still coming to visit them and the conversations between him and O’Crohan’s father were captivating. One of their favorite stories was the one about the ship on fire. It was, in fact, the first steamship they had seen and thinking it was on fire, several men rushed after it with the

intention to help it so gruelingly two of the men onboard almost died. They also talked about the people who came to collect the rent. Apparently, all but one died poor, which was a curse from God and all the Island's inhabitants.

O'Crohan's last teacher was a former soldier, who arrived on the Island with his amputee wife and their two children around a year after the previous teacher married away. The teacher's skin was pitted, which was a result of smallpox. He was not much of a skilled teacher, but he was kind-hearted, and the children missed only a little number of schooldays. He became sick a few years later and asked O'Crohan and King to take his place in the meantime. They ended up teaching for a month. Not much later, the teacher died, and school closed once more.

O'Crohan, as the youngest child and King, as the oldest child of their respective families, could do almost anything they wished. One day, they decided to go hunting for rabbits. King took his grandfather's ferret and released it into a warren. The ferret chased out two dozen of rabbits which the young men caught into a net.

2.2.4 O'Crohan's Adulthood

All O'Crohan's older siblings eventually got married or moved someplace else. The house in which talking never stopped became silent. One of the stories O'Crohan's family exchanged with the neighbors was about Bald Tom's grandfather, who, along with other villagers, was abducted by a British captain of a ship they went to help. They were taken to the north of Ireland and returned unrecognizable to the Blaskets two weeks later.

During this time, the Islanders encountered tea for the first time. It was discovered in lost cargo and not knowing what it was for, many men just threw it back into the sea. One woman discovered she could use it to dye her petticoats and another woman got so angry at her husband for not keeping any of the boxes that he ended up moving away.

When it was time to start gathering seaweed used as manure, O'Crohan went on the shore before dawn. He started scooping up the seaweed when suddenly, he found a sleeping seal. He decided he would kill it with his pitchfork. The battle was rough, and the seal managed to bite a huge lump of flesh out of O'Crohan's calf.

She bit a huge lump out of my calf. As much as her four front teeth could get a grip of-all that she tore out of my leg. I didn't give in, though blood was flowing out of it in torrents, just as it was out of the seal. Well, I'd finished the seal at last, and the seal had pretty nearly finished me, too, and it was like to be my last day when I looked closely at my leg and saw the lump out of it and the fountain of blood spurting. The last drop had nearly left my heart; I had to strip off my little vest and twist it round my leg, binding it with the cord from my waist. (*The Islandman*, pp. 75-76)

Luckily, people started arriving to the shore, so they helped him home and took the seal for skinning. *The old hag* suggested O’Crohan puts the seal’s meat in place of the flesh that was bitten off by the seal, as she knew a man whose leg was saved by this. O’Crohan did so and in a week, he was as well as he ever was.

Chapter 10, titled *Time Passes*, contains two photographs. Both overlook the lower village. The first one, titled *The Lower Village, The White Strand, and the Rocks of the Road* depicts around a dozen houses, which look almost identical. They are placed close to the seashore. There is a ship out on the sea and some islands can be seen in the distance. The second photo was taken next to some of the houses. It depicts three attached buildings, which gradually decline as they get closer to the shore. The second photo is titled *Houses of the Lower Village with Beginish Beyond*, and it captures a few people going about.

The old hag promised O’Crohan her daughter, though he was not so keen on marrying her. Eventually, when she returned from America, she married another man. Around that time, a dance teacher came to the Island, providing the inhabitants with dance classes, which were four shillings per class. Before long, many started gathering at the lessons, including O’Crohan, who claims to have become a marvelous dancer. Not long after the dance teacher left, a man named Barret came on a visit to the Island. He brought plenty of alcohol, and the Islanders did not go a moment without singing and dancing during the week he stayed on the Island. After the man left, he sent a lot of presents to the Blasket, including a pound of tobacco to the poet Dunlevy, who afterwards praised him in a poem.

O’Crohan met Shane Dunlevy almost daily, be it in the village, on the shore, or the plains. One day, they met on the Island’s hill, both looking to cut off some turf. Dunlevy encouraged O’Crohan to sit down and relax, as the day was hot and working in the afternoon would be more bearable. O’Crohan was too shy to refuse, as well as afraid offending the poet would result in him being ridiculed in a satirical poem. The poet recited one of his poems and expressed his anxiety about losing it if it is not written down. Fortunately for Dunlevy, O’Crohan had a bit of paper and a pencil on him, so he wrote it down for him, even though he was vexed.

O’Crohan had no luck getting turf even the next day, because there was a heap of fish nearby the Island, allegedly consisting of 8,000 fish. Three boats full of fish were taken on the Island that day. Suddenly, the neighbor’s son came to O’Crohan, asking him and other men to help him go get a priest, as his mother, *the old hag*, was dying. After her

funeral, every man returned to what needed doing. It was the turf-cutting season, so everyone finally went on the hill to cut it. The young girls brought the men drink and food and their antics made O’Crohan realize he should get married.

As mentioned before in the story where O’Crohan single-handedly killed a seal, seals were important to the Islanders during O’Crohan’s youth. One day, they took a boat and rowed to a nearby island in whose caves the seals lived. Two men swam into the cave and killed seven seals, which they tied to a rope and the people waiting on the boat pulled them up there. One of the two men was O’Crohan’s uncle, Diarmid, who was not much of a swimmer. On his way back, the rope that was leading him broke and it was O’Crohan who pulled him to safety. Apparently, at that time, seal meat was of the same value as pork, which cannot be said about the time O’Crohan was writing down his autobiography, in which people would only throw seal meat to dogs.

The next of the stories takes place on the mainland, on which the Islanders brought four of their pigs for sale. One of the pigs rolled down into the sea and it was O’Crohan who saved it from drowning. After selling the pigs, the people spent three days in Dingle enjoying themselves with drinking and singing. O’Crohan started talking to a lady whom he fancied. When offered to go to Inishvickillane, one of the Great Blasket Islands, to hunt rabbits, he only accepted doing so because the lady would go there as well. Eventually, he left her behind, along with one of the allegedly merriest times he went through. The merry times were interrupted by the return to the Blasket Island and *Bald Tom*’s death, which happened a few days later. In the book, events and places related to this chapter are depicted in two photographs. The first, titled *The Harbour*, depicts a wharf in which 10 rowing boats are docked. In the second photograph, *Transporting a Cow to the Mainland*, there are two boats floating on the sea, each filled with three people and one of them carrying a cow.

It was not long before the Islanders traveled to Dingle again. When they went there around Christmas time, everyone brought some livestock or fish for sale. The group went through some brawls, in one of which O’Crohan’s uncle’s sheep was killed and Pats Heamish, O’Crohan’s sister’s husband, was arrested. Running errands took everyone a couple of days and when they finally returned to the Great Blasket, every woman and child was awaiting them, the supplies, and stories.

Diarmid, O’Crohan’s uncle, suggested Tomas, at the time a 22-year-old, should consider marrying soon. He complained about his wife, whom he got married to at the age of 20. However, Diarmid was not much of a good father and there was an argument in the

O’Crohan’s house. As a result, Diarmid did not give the O’Crohan’s family half a sheep for Christmas like they agreed to.

However, it was Christmas Eve and that is what mattered the most to everyone. Every house would be loud, even an old man who would not speak for a year would sing on that day. Each kind of light would be ablaze. O’Crohan compared the set of illuminated houses to a wing of some heavenly mansion, despite being set in the middle of seawater.

The twelve days of Christmas were spent playing hurling, an Irish game resembling field hockey, during which many got their legs bruised, ended up limping for a month, and got soaking wet after going for a ball which fell into the sea. During one of the games, O’Crohan’s uncles Diarmid and Tom were on opposite sides. After the match, there was an argument between the two brothers and Tom ended up knocking Diarmid off a cliff. Diarmid lost his speech for an hour and promised he would be the priest at his brother’s deathbed. In one of the later matches, O’Crohan hit his uncle Tom’s kneecap, which ended up falling out of its joint. His brother Diarmid assumed it would cripple him for a year.

New Year’s celebrations were held in a merry manner, there was a lot of drinking, singing, and visiting. O’Crohan recited 18 verses by the island poet Dunlevy. He met with him the following day when gathering cows and history repeated itself. Dunlevy made O’Crohan put on paper more of his songs, as otherwise, he would take them to his grave. O’Crohan was not too pleased with the poet’s request, but rather fulfilled it than risked being criticized in an upcoming poem. Halfway through writing, it got cold and dark and O’Crohan wished the poet were rather dead. O’Crohan noticed it was mostly him, whom the poet Dunlevy bothered the most. He did not dislike him, though the poet’s presence always caused his days to be idle. He even planned to not speak to him when he would meet him next time so that he would leave him alone as well, but he never fulfilled his plan, which, looking back, he was glad for. His dinner was cold by the time he got home. Afterwards, he headed to a house in which the youth gathered and socialized and often stayed in until midnight.

It has been a custom in the Blasket that when someone starts something, everyone else is eager to follow. After Shrovetide in 1878, no one fit for marrying remained unmarried, including Tomas O’Crohan. His wife, Maura Keane (Máire Ní Chatháin), was his friend King’s sister. In the houses of the newlyweds, Irish songs were sung until noon of the following day.

Since marrying at the age of 22, O’Crohan’s life changed greatly. He worked for his marriage, not just his parents. His views altered and his will to live fully increased.

Their offspring, however, were not so fortunate. Their oldest son was only seven or eight years old when he died after falling off a cliff. Two children died of measles, some more from epidemics, another son drowned. He had a helping boy, who also left him, and eventually, even his wife died, leaving him with a little girl, who died soon after growing up. The only ones left were his two sons, one in America, the other, Seán, living with him. As mentioned before, Seán O’Crohan was among the people who also lived through the transfer of the last Blasket inhabitants to the mainland, documenting it in his memoir *Lá dár Saol (A Day in Our Life, 1969)*.

The chapter dealing with the issue of marriage also contains two photographs. In the first picture, Tomas O’Crohan and Robin Flower, his later “student” and the autobiography’s translator, are standing in front of O’Crohan’s house. In the second picture, titled *Felt-Roofed Island House*, there is a house with fallen plaster, in front of which two people are standing.

Despite the Islanders often visiting the mainland and often being intermarried, when it came to fishing around the Blaskets, there were quarrels between the two groups. It was therefore necessary to go fishing with at least two boats. One would throw their nets into the sea and the second one would wait, assisting the other boat if it were to be carried away with the waves due to the catch being too heavy. In one such case, O’Crohan recalls a day when the mainlanders refused to rescue one of their boats which was getting carried away towards the rocks, so it was the Islanders who pulled the boat to safety.

The boats they had were rather wide, so when two Islanders arrived from Dingle on a canoe they bought while they were drunk, the Islanders laughed at them. That was until people from Dingle started coming near Blasket on canoes from which they dropped pots to catch lobsters. It was not long before all the Islanders sought to buy a canoe to effectively catch and sell lobsters themselves, including O’Crohan. It was highly profitable and people from as far as France were buying the lobsters from the Great Blaskets.

One of the large boats the Islanders had was the *Black Boar*. During one of their visits to the mainland, a storm came and swept the boat away. Fortunately, a man found it adrift the next morning near the Skellig Islands, which are located to the south of the Blaskets, and brought it to the quay at Valencia. Eight of the Islanders, including O’Crohan, went south to successfully collect their boat, which was put under the care of the local priest.

On their next trip to Dingle, their boats were seized by the local police due to their failure to pay taxes. The whole Dingle talked about the Blasket Islanders being imprisoned

on the mainland. The Islanders had no intention of redeeming their boats, so the sixteen of them travelled to Dunquin and went back on the Blasket from there. The rent collectors were furious, as they were unable to sell the boats and eventually left them to rot on a field. Since then, the Islanders kept no more boats, but only canoes.

Time of poverty came, and the tax was two pounds per cow. In the past, it used to be five, even more. At times, the rent collectors confiscated all cattle.

In 1888, the 31-year-old O’Crohan decided to cultivate a little field in the upper part of his holding. He decided to plant potatoes there, while his 70-year-old father visited his field daily. After some time, his father started getting weaker, saying he “shall not see a potato come up in that field”. True to his premonition, he ended up dying before potatoes sprouted. The funeral cost was ten pounds, whereas by the time of O’Crohan writing his life story, their cost increased to thirty pounds. His mother died a few years later at the age of eighty-two.

Sometime later, O’Crohan’s brother Pats returned from America. He was looking ill and poor as he spent all his money on his two sons, and drinking. Catching lobsters with buckets was still highly profitable, so that is what they did together. Soon after they went on the sea, a steamship and a sailing ship went past the Blasket Islands. The gentry aboard saw the two of them fishing and all passengers went on the deck to see what was happening. By that time, the two fishermen allegedly caught a few dozen of lobsters, crayfish, and fish. O’Crohan took a blue lobster and a crayfish and held them above his head for the gentry to see. Their two ships stopped, and the fishermen rowed towards them. They ended up selling the gentry three buckets full of fresh seafood. In return, they received money, food, and a bottle of some drink. They were told to try it once they return to land, but O’Crohan could not resist, took a spoonful, and blacked out. Luckily, Pats was able to row them back to land by himself. It was midnight by the time they arrived home. Everyone was looking for them, being sure they had drowned.

The next time they went for lobsters, it was late evening. Pats suggested they go pull out more pots with lobsters, rather than go home, as the catch is larger during the night. Pats was allegedly not someone to cross one’s opinions with, so O’Crohan agreed. They ended up on the sea the whole night, catching a few dozen of lobsters. In the morning, they met a ship that was after lobsters. The captain bought all the lobsters they caught and served them meals on his ship.

After that, they started catching the lobsters during all the fine nights, without anybody on the Island knowing. On one such night, some sort of singing described as soft,

long, and sweet could be heard. It turned out to be seals' singing. Another night, driftwood and timber started showing afloat, and Pats coaxed O'Crohan to collect all the wood they could. They went a whole night and day without food. Had there been wind blowing against them, they would not have made it back to the Blasket.

Another set of photographs appears in this chapter. One, titled *Schoolchildren*, portrays eight children sitting on a short stone wall, with the sea behind their backs. The second, titled *Approaching the Island from the Mainland*, depicts the village, located under a hill, with clearly divided grounds.

The next chapter is purely focused on the troubles of life. O'Crohan gives further details of his eldest son's death. He and King's son went to catch a seagull. O'Crohan's son caught the seagull and as it flew up, the young boy fell down the cliff. Fortunately, his grandfather from his mother's side found his remains so the family was able to give him a proper burial.

The lady he fancied in the merry time of his and with whom he eventually parted ways, returned from America due to poor health only to later pass away "on the healthiest island in Ireland". She got a sea funeral and eighteen canoes attended, the most O'Crohan has ever seen on such type of funeral.

During the winter, as throughout other seasons there was no time, O'Crohan himself built his family a new house. When they moved in, whooping cough and measles took two of his children. Since then, his wife's health started deteriorating. O'Crohan knew there was nothing he could do but endure these difficult times.

Another one of his children was lost, when a lady from the Ireland's capital visited the Blasket. She made friends with O'Crohan's daughter and one day, they misjudged the strength of the sea tides. O'Crohan's son, at that time an 18-year-old, saw the two of them drowning and went to save them. First, he rescued his sister, then he tried to save the lady, Eileen Nicholls, but both drowned. O'Crohan and Pats were just sailing back in their canoe when they saw the two of them being pulled out. The two of them shared their funeral, which was the biggest Dunquin had ever known.

Allegedly, there were no attempts at recovering O'Crohan's son, but several at reviving Eileen, as she was of higher class. In the news, O'Crohan's son was even referred to by an incorrect name and his lifesaving attempt was not even acknowledged by the public.³⁰ Eileen's parents, however, valued O'Crohan's son's efforts and were very kind to

30 Lucchitti, I. (2009). *The Islandman*. Peter Lang.

O’Crohan when they met. O’Crohan expressed his worry, hoping they did not think he was mad at them. He accepted his son’s fate as God’s will.

The recovery of his saved daughter was lightened by Uncle Diarmid’s visits. One day, however, he was brought to the O’Crohan house by misfortune, as his son injured his head. Diarmid asked O’Crohan to accompany him to Dunquin to get a doctor and a priest, which he did. According to the doctor, the boy would live, but his injury was acute enough to the extent that he would never do a profitable day’s work until the day he died.

That year was also full of starvation throughout Ireland. The Islanders went to Dingle for meal and flour, which they transported on an old, seaweed-covered leaking ship they forcibly borrowed from a similarly unkept man.

O’Crohan also remembers selling two of his pigs in Dingle. It took him three days, in which he spent half the money he got for them, which is why Islanders eventually gave up on selling pigs. After selling the two, he met a man from Dunquin. His mother died earlier that day and he was fetching stuff for her wake. The woman was a relative to O’Crohan, so he agreed to join him. The wake took place in Dunquin and O’Crohan gave details of the house, the people, and what they said; two people fainted from consuming tobacco and too much whiskey. The man of the house took special care of O’Crohan, as he was the furthest from his house. The wake lasted the whole night, followed by a funeral.

Not much later Shane Dunlevy, the poet, died on the Island. O’Crohan apparently knew his character better than anybody else, despite Dunlevy being old in O’Crohan’s days. He married into the Island. His marvelous wife, by O’Crohan’s words, once stabbed a bailiff with shears, ensuring no other bailiffs ever entered Blasket again. Dunlevy was a merry and charismatic man, but when his sheep was stolen by his neighbors, he did not hesitate to write a savage song “*The Blackfaced Sheep*” about the people.

Uncle Diarmid’s son suddenly became ill and was moved to Dunquin for his health. It was not long before O’Crohan’s wife died, leaving him to care alone for two little daughters. His spirits were low in those days. It was mackerel season, and the weather was stormy. Each boat caught around three thousand fish. While selling them in Dingle, news had it that Diarmid’s son was doing well. He returned home soon, but after a few months, during one night, he disappeared without a trace. Hunters found his clothes sometime later in the western point of the Island, Black Head. O’Crohan’s cousin’s body was found three weeks later floating on the sea, recovered, and buried at Castle Point on the Great Blasket.

This chapter, titled *The Wake*, contains two photographs. The upper picture is titled *Gathering Furze on the Hill*, and portrays a woman wearing a long light skirt and a

headscarf. To her right is an ass carrying two baskets, grazing on grass. The lower picture, titled *Going up the Hill for Turf* captures a view from up the hill, looking down at the village houses' roofs. The photo is overexposed, but another island in the background can be distinguished. A woman and an ass are facing the cameraman, who stands just a few meters above them.

2.2.5 O’Crohan Gains Interest in Irish

The following chapter, *I begin to take an Interest in Irish*, contains two photographs of landscapes. *Western End of the Island, Inish na Bró and Inishvickillaun in the Distance* and *Above the Gravel Strand, Looking Towards Sybil Head*.

This chapter, numbered 23, third from the end, describes how O’Crohan’s interest in Irish and writing began. During winter, he often remained trapped on the mainland and the house he used to stay in had schoolchildren, who read him stories and explained the difficulties of the Irish language. Very soon after, O’Crohan wrote a book or two and people started coming and listening to his tales.

One day, a man by the name of Carl Marstrander came to the Island in search of immaculate Irish. He was looking to learn Irish and was sent to Tomas O’Crohan. They spent two sittings a day together for five months.

Next of his “students” was Tadhg O’Ceallaigh, who spent a month on the Island. They spent every night together. Around this time, O’Crohan got a letter from the Norseman Marstrander, asking O’Crohan to document the Irish names of every animal and plant he knows, without the recourse of any books, spelling the names purely after his own fashion. O’Crohan was not that good at spelling at that time, so Tadhg O’Ceallaigh assisted him.

This chapter also contains O’Crohan’s most traumatic fishing experience. That night was stormy and catch so huge, some nets had to be let go. The main catch was a huge fish simply described as a beast tangled in six nets. His liver provided the whole island with light for five years. He was the size of the whole harbour basin in which he wallowed, drenching all the onlookers, frightening them to death. Had the canoe not been near the harbor, they would have probably drowned that night.

Another day, there were three men on a canoe, including O’Crohan, fishing with the line. A shark appeared and drifted nearby. One of the men was lying along the thwart, stretching his legs outside the boat. O’Crohan saw the shark with his jaws wide open, swimming towards the feet. He shouted at the man to draw his legs in, saving them, as

suddenly, the shark reared up, nearly sinking the boat. As a result, they did not have the courage to go back onto the sea for a week.

Sometime later, a white tent on the cliff above the harbour in Dunquin appeared, which worried the Islanders, as they were expecting the bailiffs to return. One man rowed to Dunquin on his canoe to see what was going on. It seemed to be an army of invasion towards the Blasket. He peeked into the tent and saw a few guns. One man saw him peering and aimed his gun at him. The man then ran and returned to the Blasket. His experience worried everyone. O’Crohan happened to be waiting for him to return. In the morning, he warned him not to go, and now, the man’s answer to what was going on was just to go see himself, which angered O’Crohan to the point he punched the man. It was the only time he had done such a thing.

The priest did not like the look of things and asked the Congested District Board for help. The Board was established to alleviate poverty in Ireland. The Islanders met with the pair, and they were willing to help the Great Blasket. The following day, the white tent disappeared. Soon, an officer from the Board came to the Island. He wrote down the names of the inhabitants as tenants under the Board. The Board spent a year and a half on the Island, helping in various matters, paying the inhabitants wages. Five new houses were built, and fences were put around each plot.

One day, O’Crohan was fetching a load of turf on the hill. The wind was fierce and swept some clatter down the hillside. It struck O’Crohan’s donkey, knocking him down. The creels it carried fell into the great sea. A trawler was on its way from Dingle and the wind tore its sails.

Regarding religion, the Islanders did not attend Masses, as they were held in Dunquin. A priest came to the Island once a year for confessions. During O’Crohan’s young days, priests were allegedly much more respected. Everyone would kneel before them and take their hats off. “Nowadays”, only the people in the front row would doff their hats, but none other. Even women were allowed to travel on the same ship as a priest, which used to be unthinkable. O’Crohan recalls only one time a bishop visited the Island.

Many people came to the Island in search of Irish. One of them was Robin Flower, *Bláithín*, the Islanders called him, from London, who visited O’Crohan annually. They would have two sittings a day together which they spent writing.

His daughter, the one who was saved on the White Strand, married, and moved to Dunmore, leaving O’Crohan in dark and lonely times. He lived with his brother Pats, who was twelve years older than him. That was during the Great War, during which large

amounts of goods were found floating on the surface of the sea from British ships sunk by German submarines.

Brian O’Ceallaigh visited O’Crohan at that time and spent a year on the Island. Since then, O’Crohan would send him a journal every day for five years. Eventually, O’Ceallaigh talked O’Crohan into writing about his own life, which resulted in the book understudy, *An t-Oileánach*. Since then, O’Crohan had been working harder each year for the sake of Irish.

One of his sons returned from America after 12 years. Pats moved to a Dunquin house. The son with his family stayed only for half a year, as the stay was unprofitable. His other son, Seán, stayed with him and helped him around the house, as he was getting older and weaker. They had no cattle and no canoe, only some potatoes and a fire.

At the time of writing this book, he had been working with Irish for twenty-seven years. It was seventeen years since the Norseman, Marstrander, came his way. Only coincidences kept him from starving. Some people would say that their native tongue, Irish, is of no use, which cannot be said about O’Crohan, as by his words: “Only for it I should have been begging my bread!”

In the last chapter, titled *The End*, he expresses content with what he had put together. According to him, there was no lie or embellishment in his story. He wrote down what most mattered to him. The people of his like are described as simple folk, living from hand to mouth. They never repined over their hardships, always trusting that God would help them pull through. The nights could get frightening, with the sea and wind going wild. Their miseries would be drowned in drinking, which was very cheap.

O’Crohan looks back at his life, from his childhood to adulthood, famine and abundance, fortune and misfortune. He expresses gratitude for managing to capture his life and the life of people around him and see the book published, as this history would otherwise be forgotten. The best-known paragraph of this book is arguably:

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

In the last paragraph, Tomas O’Crohan, two months short of reaching his pension, remembers his parents, hoping in God that they will inherit the Blessed Kingdom and that he and every reader of his book shall meet them in the Island of Paradise.

2.2.6 Summary of *The Islandman*

The previous chapters summarize the contents of the English translation of the book *An t-Oileánach (The Islandman)* in consecutive order. While writing his autobiography, O’Crohan did not always follow a chronological order of events, which could be seen, for instance, on summarizing the fate of his family, even though he talks about it in more detail later in the story, or on occasional mentions of the Great Famine, which happened shortly before his birth.

The book contains 14 monochromatic photographs (including a portrait of Tomas O’Crohan on the front page) by Thomas H. Mason which were placed randomly throughout the book, taking no regard in what the context of the chapters was. Before the first chapter, there is also a map depicting the Blasket Islands and the piece of the mainland where many events described in the book take place.

In short, life in rural Ireland was a rough struggle for survival. There was no place for idleness, as it was a life-or-death matter. The isolated Islanders were forced to form a community of support and cooperation. Their options were limited, but it enabled the preservation of the rural Irish way of life, uncontaminated by British colonialism or the English language.

It is important to acknowledge that the way of life on the Great Blasket Island differed from the way of life on the mainland. Joanna Jarzab-Napierała writes about this issue in her article as follows.

The rich heritage of the oral tradition of Irish folktales, which are treated as the origin of Irish autobiography written both in Irish and English languages, is also a problematic aspect. The present paper questions the arguments treating Irish autobiography as a homogenous genre and rooted solely in oral tradition on the example of Tomás O’Crohan’s *The Islandman* as a representative of Blasket self-narratives. These autobiographies represent the life experience of a small community, which differs from the national experience of the time to a great extent. Still the way of life depicted by O’Crohan and his followers has become a synecdoche for the idea of Irish national feelings. Furthermore, the analysis displays the hybrid nature of this particular Blasket autobiography as a native autobiography partially following the tradition of oral storytelling, but also being inspired by a foreign tradition of autobiography writing.³¹

According to the article, Tomas O’Crohan was inspired by the autobiographies *Детство (My Childhood)* and *В людях (My apprenticeship or In the world)* by a Russian author Maxim Gorky. According to another online article, it was Brian O’Ceallaigh, one of

30 Jarzab-Napierała, J. (2019). Irish Native Autobiography: Tomás O’Crohan’s *The Islandman*. In *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*.

O’Crohan’s visitors, who encouraged O’Crohan to read Gorky’s works on peasant fishermen, as well as works by the French author Pierre Loti, furtherly proving O’Crohan’s literacy.³²

2.3 The Poor Mouth

2.3.1 Introduction

An Béal Bocht (The Poor Mouth) is a satirical work written by Brian Ó Nualláin (1911-1966). In Irish, it was first published under his pen name Myles Na Gopaleen in 1941, just four years after O’Crohan had died. For the English translation, the pen name Flann O’Brien was used, which is a name Brian O’Nolan published his other works under (*At Swim-Two-Birds*, 1939; *The Third Policeman*, 1967 – published postmortem).

The plot of *The Poor Mouth* is set in Corkadoragha, a fictional Irish-speaking region (*Gaeltacht*). In an Anglo-Irish dialect, “putting on the poor mouth” stands for the pretense of being poor or in bad circumstances to gain advantage for oneself, as well as simply grumbling. O’Nolan harshly comments on the “bad Irish life” and repeats stereotypical words such as “poverty”, “drunkenness”, or “potatoes” profusely. The people of Corkadoragha are also subjected to eternal pouring rain.

Brian O’Nolan is parodying the writing style of Gaeltacht authors such as Tomas O’Crohan or Máire (Séamus Ó Grianna).³³ The editor and author of the preface to the first edition (1941) of this work sarcastically explains that this book is likely the first one published about Corkadoragha, a remote Gaeltacht. There is apparently little report on the people living there and there should be some memory of them kept once their time passes, which is the reason behind the creation of *The Islandman* as well. Their Gaelic is said to be smooth and should be obtainable. Later in the book, we find out that behind the “smoothness” is speech rather noble, which is the opposite of how Irish in Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking regions) looks like. The readers are also sarcastically asked to keep in mind that the people of Corkadoragha are very distinct and the story does not reference any other Gaeltacht areas. The one-page preface closes by saying that the “author” of this

32 O’Kelly, K. (2014). *Folklore review: The Island Man by Tomas O’Crohan*. Heritage Project at the National Print Museum. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://heritagenpm.wordpress.com/2014/11/24/folklore-review-the-island-man-by-tomas-ocrohan/>

33 O’Brien, F. (1996). *The Poor Mouth*. Dalkey Archive Press. *Translator’s Preface*. Pages 5-6

“autobiography”, Bonaparte O’Coonassa, is still alive at the time of the book’s release, safe in prison where he is free from the miseries of life.

The editor of the 1964 edition adds in the Foreword that the current young inhabitants of Corkadoragha are migrating to Siberia in search of better weather, truly giving the impression that life in Corkadoragha is the most miserable of all. He also expresses concerns about Irish speakers’ decline.

2.3.2 *The Poor Mouth*

From the very beginning, obvious similarities to O’Crohan’s autobiography can be found. The Blasket Islands are the most western place of Ireland, just like the imaginary Corkadoragha. The composition of the comic novel *The Poor Mouth* is also noticeably similar to *The Islandman*. It is separated into chapters, which are begun with an overview of topics the chapter will cover. The two works also use the same font.

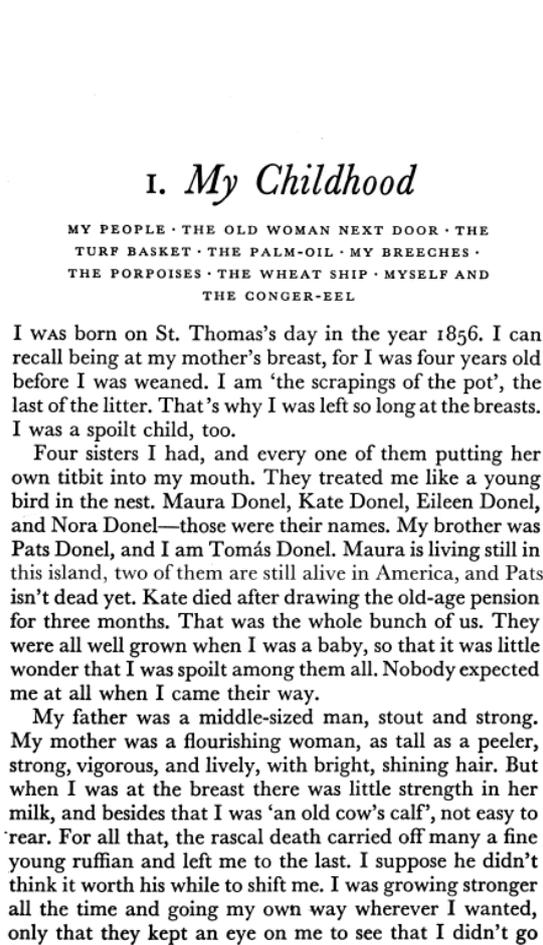


Fig. 1: An Excerpt from *The Islandman*

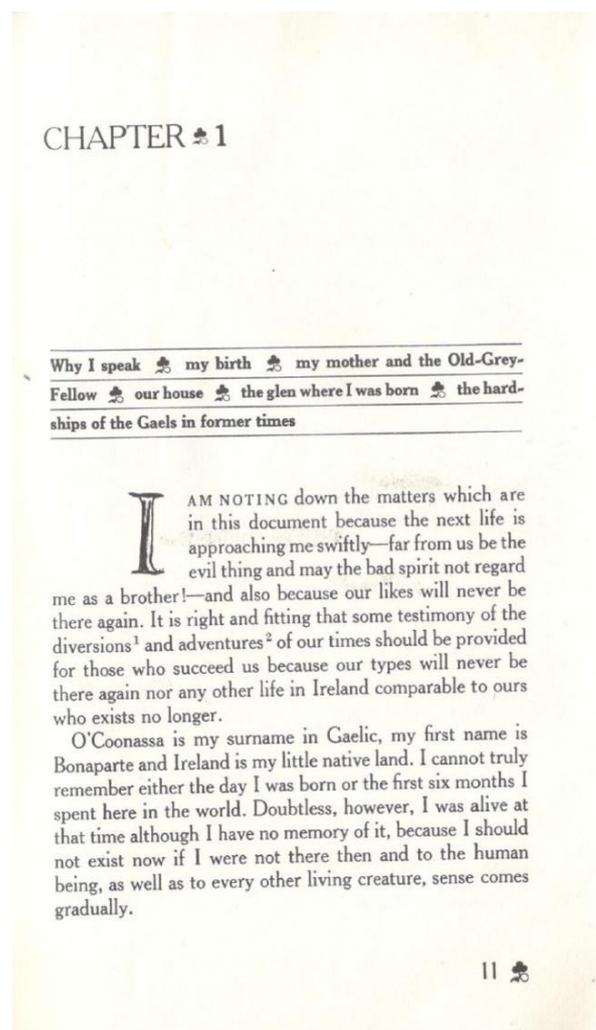


Fig. 2: An Excerpt from *The Poor Mouth*

The narrator of *The Poor Mouth*, Bonaparte O'Coonassa (Bónapárt Ó Cúnasa in the Irish original), explains he is writing this document because he is in his late years and “our likes will never be there again” – O’Crohan’s best known quote.

His father’s name was Michelangelo, which may suggest O’Brien is sarcastically comparing the hard-living Irishmen to some of the best-known greats of history. Bonaparte explains in unnecessary detail how he remembers nothing from his first six months of life, mocking the detail in which O’Crohan spoke of his early childhood. The day before Bonaparte was born, his father, Michelangelo, and their neighbor Martin O’Bannassa were chatting about the difficulties of life. From the clouds, they predicted thunderstorm and seeing ducks in the nettles, which was considered a bad sign, made them expect horror and misfortune. This event is also portrayed in the first satirical drawing, which are present in almost each of the chapters. In the drawing, the two men are sitting on a hen house and the surroundings accurately reflect the conversation they had. The night Bonaparte O’Coonassa was born, Michelangelo O’Coonassa almost passed away from shock. It was allegedly unfortunate that he did not do so since the remainder of his life was only filled with difficulties and declining health.

Bonaparte was born in Corkadoragha (*Dark Cork*), in the townland named Lisnabrawshkeen. Of his mother he speaks as follows: “*I noticed my mother in the house before me, a decent, hefty, big-boned woman; a silent, cross, big-breasted woman.*” (p. 14) The use of well-read adjectives is signature for O’Crohan. Bonaparte also says that his mother “*was sensible, level-headed and well-fed; her like will not be there again*”, repeating the O’Crohan’s quote again. She spent all her days cleaning animal excrement, milking cows and boiling potatoes, which is a common picture of the rural Irish people.

Bonaparte’s grandfather, who was called the Old-Grey-Fellow, is described as sharp-eyed man, whose face and chest were covered with a wild beard. His name might be a reference to O’Crohan’s neighbor *the old hag* whose real name was not revealed in the autobiography either. Bonaparte first confused the Old-Grey-Fellow for his father. The Old-Grey-Fellow once called him son, to which the 10-month-old Bonaparte replied: “*It may be that you’re my father and that I’m your child, God bless and save us and far from us be the evil thing!*” (p. 15), which was a follow-up to his claim of getting wise and understanding very early.

Just like O’Crohan, Bonaparte remembers events one by one, starting, for instance, one of them with: “*There is another day of my youth which is clear in my memory and eminently describable.*” (p. 15). By this, he is parodying O’Crohan’s vivid depiction of

events from his early youth. On this day, his grandfather criticized Bonaparte's mother for cleaning the house neatly and not leaving any ashes for Bonaparte to play in, which was allegedly an old Gaelic tradition. In response, Bonaparte's mother took a bucket full of ashes, muck and mud and smeared it around the hearth for young Bonaparte to play in. The stench is described as such like there will never be again. This event is also drawn in an illustration. It portrays the three people of the house with dissatisfied looks on their faces.

The Old-Grey-Fellow would often complain about the hardships from his youth. Allegedly, there once was a time in which they shared their house with two cows, two horses, sheep, pigs, and other lesser animals. This situation is depicted in a drawing in which the inside of the house almost perfectly resembles the look of the house from the photograph *Island Kitchen* from *The Islandman*.



ISLAND KITCHEN

Fig. 3: Mason, T. H. (n.d.). Island Kitchen [Photograph]. In *The Islandman* (p. 49).



♣ *The sheep used often start fighting and many times I went without a wink of sleep from the bleating and the roaring they used have.*

Fig. 4: Steadman, R. An Illustration from *The Poor Mouth*, p. 19

One time, a gentleman visited the place and in dismay, he suggested the people build a hut so that they do not have to share a house with the animals. The Old-Grey-Fellow's family was ecstatic with this idea. With the help of neighbors, they built a hut in a week. The family spent two nights in that hut before deciding to return to the house due to being cold and drenched. By this humorous unexpected twist, O'Brien satirizes the lack of common sense of poor Irish people O'Crohan praised. It may also be a reference to O'Crohan's memory of the farm animals getting their own sheds outside during his youth.

The house in which Bonaparte was born had two windows. From the left he could see the Blasket Islands, the door between the windows opened view to County Galway and from the right window, one could see the Rosses and Gweedore. This is as over-the-top hyperbole so common for *The Poor Mouth*, since the three mentioned places are spread across the whole island of Ireland.

Alongside the family, a pig named Ambrose lived in this house. The Old-Grey-Fellow had to bottle-feed it as its sow mother did not have enough breasts to feed all the piglets. Its overwhelming smell made passersby run half a mile away. When the sow came with all the piglets in the house for the night, the family often did not think they would live until the morning and sometimes took 10-mile walks in the heavy rain that none of the nights in Ireland went without. Ambrose became ill and large but could not be dragged out of the house. In response, Bonaparte's mother set their house on fire, in hope of reaching hell where there are no pigs. The Old-Grey-Fellow managed to put the fire out and gave the mother a beating.

For two weeks, Ambrose lied ill in the house, filling the air with a vapor allegedly comparable with a month old's corpse. Eventually, the family moved their beds outside. The pig released steam which made the neighbor Martin O'Bannassa think the house was on fire. He came to check on the family and helped them get rid of the pig smell by clogging the house's chimney, door, and windows. The family then waited outside.

The pig died of its own stench in less than an hour and once they opened the door, black cloud of smoke smothered the surroundings. The Old-Grey-Fellow could finally stop puffing his pipe with which he was trying to overpower the pig's stench for the past three months. From what O'Crohan had to say about tobacco, it seemed everyone from the Blasket Islands fancied smoking it. Bonaparte finishes the story by saying that no such pig will there be again and wishes good luck to it, shall it be alive in another world, echoing how O'Crohan comments on most of the deaths of people he talks about in *The Islandman*: "*The blessing of God's Grace on his soul!*" (p. 170) – The last sentence from the chapter

22 in which Tomas O’Crohan talks about the death of his son, or the final sentence from *The Islandman*’s last chapter: “*I hope in God that [my mother] and my father will inherit the Blessed Kingdom.*” (*The Islandman*, p. 245) O’Brien, however, speaks only of animals in this manner, rather than people.

Bonaparte, just like O’Crohan, went to school. His only piece of clothing were breeches, which is a reference to how often O’Crohan mentioned his grey-wool breeches (just in the first chapter of *The Islandman* they are mentioned twelve times) of which he was very fond of, as suggested by memories such as:

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 running in and out, this way and that, and one of the family keeping an eye on me. (*The Islandman*, p. 6)

The children who were going to school could sometimes barely walk. They had their breeches covered in ashes and there were sods of turf under their armpits. O’Crohan spoke of turf frequently, as it was needed to cover the Islanders’ roofs, and served as burning fuel because of the lack of forests in Ireland. The children were allegedly coming to school in Corkadoragha from Dingle (Southwest Ireland), Aran Islands (West Ireland), and even Gweedore (North Ireland). The roof of the schoolhouse was leaking, and water was running along the walls.

Their teacher, Osborne O’Loonassa, had a venomous look and spoke only in English. He might represent the English-speaking school inspector who made O’Crohan’s teacher faint. When asking the pupils for their names, instead of listening to their lengthy Irish names, he renamed all the children to Jams O’Donnell, just after they received a beating with an oar, from which many passed out and blood was flooding everywhere. Bonaparte especially pitied those who had to swim back home to Aran. He refused to return to school, as he did not want to get his skull split again. His mother found nothing strange about the situation, as it was simply the Gaelic way of life and that when the Old-Grey-Fellow went to school, he was also renamed Jams O’Donnell. She did not expect the life of the disrespected Gaels to become better anytime soon.

One day, when the Old-Grey-Fellow was buying tobacco in Dingle (a typical business done by the inhabitants of the Great Blasket), he heard a rumor that the British would pay the poor whose children could speak English. When he returned home (drenched and wet, Bonaparte usually adds when talking about Ireland’s rainy nights), he decided they would disguise their pigs to look like children. On the day the inspector came,

it was raining heavily. The Old-Grey-Fellow and Bonaparte were standing at the threshold, their eleven pigs were at the back of the house wearing breeches. The inspector asked Bonaparte for his name, to which he responded: "*Jams O'Donnell*", delighting the inspector. Sometime later, the family received their monetary support for all their twelve "children".

The next day, one of the pigs was missing. That angered the Old-Grey-Fellow, even though he would often steal their neighbors' pigs. In response, he stole and killed one of Martin O'Bannassa's pigs, since the O'Coonassa family was running short on bacon. This was humorously mentioned with no further interest, despite claiming they mainly survived on potatoes. A parallel to the story of the stolen pigs could be found in *The Islandman*. John Dunlevy, the poet from the Great Blasket, had a sheep stolen by his neighbors. As a result, he wrote a satirical poem "*The Blackfaced Sheep*".

O'Brien sometimes explains phenomena which would need no further explanation, i.e. "*A new month called March was born; remained with us for a month and then departed.*" (p. 39) Earlier examples can be found, for instance, on the page 34, "*But seven years afterwards (when I was seven years older) ...*" By this, O'Brien is referring to the almost unnecessary detail in which Tomas O'Crohan sometimes wrote about his life.

The missing pig has, however, returned, with its breeches' pockets full of tobacco, a shilling (which may be a parallel to the shilling O'Crohan got from the kind school inspector), and a small bottle of spirits. From rumors all around Ireland the Old-Grey-Fellow found out it was because of a gentleman who was seeking to gather Irish folklore, similarly to Carl Marstrander, Tadhg O'Ceallaigh, or Robin Flower, who visited O'Crohan for such purpose. The gentleman heard Corkadoragha was the perfect place for gathering folklore, as "the like of those people will not be there again". He gained a reputation of a man who would buy drinks for people in exchange for casual Irish talk. He also recorded the conversations on a gramophone, a machine of like which there might never be again, commented Bonaparte. The Irish people were terrified of that machine, so the gentleman only recorded during the night. One night, a "strange drunk man" in breeches crawled into the pub he was in, spewing unintelligible Irish talk. The gentleman, ecstatic he found a speaker of the true Gaelic, recorded the talk for one hour and left the gifts in the pig's pockets. The gentleman later received an academic degree for his fine find, which he presented in Berlin to the most educated people of the continent, referencing the "students" of Tomas O'Crohan, who were also linguists from all kinds of lands. For instance, Carl Marstrander, a Norseman, or Robin Flower from London.

One day, when Bonaparte was thinking of the ill-luck that had befallen the Gaels, the Old-Grey-Fellow returned home devastated. Considering the two of them were living in rural Ireland, their speech was rather humorously delightful. Bonaparte welcomed the Old-Grey-Fellow by saying:

Welcome, my good man! said I gently, and also may health and longevity be yours! I've just been thinking of the pitiable situation of the Gaels at present and also that they're not all in the same situation; I perceive that yourself are in a worse situation than any Gael since the commencement of the reign of Gaelicism. It appears that you're bereft of vigour? (*The Poor Mouth*, p. 46)

The Old-Grey-Fellow was a harbinger of terrible news for the people of Corkadoragha. Among other strange things, he witnessed a ray of sunshine. When he met a gentleman for which he freed the road by jumping into a ditch, which was expected of the Irish people, the gentleman spoke Gaelic to him. Before long, a great number of gentlemen, which the Irishmen called Gaeligores, started visiting Corkadoragha in search of learning Gaelic. Bonaparte did not forget to wish them blessings and comment that such like of them will not be there again. O'Crohan also started to get visits from Gaelic enthusiasts out of nowhere, though he did not express the feeling of being of lower status compared to his visitors.

One day, Corkadoragha started to seem too Gaelic, traditional, poor, putrid and tempestuous to the Gaeligores who stopped coming. The people of Corkadoragha built a college to provide a more friendly environment for the Gaelic enthusiasts, satirizing the teaching O'Crohan provided. The newcomers received honorary Gaelic names, such as Connacht Cat, Popeye the Sailor, The Sod of Turf, My Friend Drumroosk, The Robin Redbreast, The White Egg, Eight Men, Silver, The Dative Case, The Sea-cat, or Yours respectfully (p. 52-53). The opening ceremony consisted of ten speeches during which many of the malnourished Gaels collapsed, and one died. One of the speeches by Gaelic Daisy, the president of the feis, preached that the Gaels who do not speak only about Gaelic are not true Gaels. None of the sentences he said lacked the word "Gael" in some form. For instance: "*There is nothing in this life so nice and so Gaelic as truly true Gaelic Gaels who speak Gaelic Gaelic about the truly Gaelic language.*" (*The Poor Mouth*, p. 54-55)

Later, five men competed for a medal which would be won by the one who spoke Gaelic for the longest time. In a few hours, the men's speeches turned into inarticulate grunts. One of the men collapsed, another fell asleep and a third one had to be carried home with brain-fever, which killed him the following day. Eight more people died that

day from excessive dancing and malnourishment, referencing the dance parties the inhabitants of the Great Blasket would take part in during Shrovetide, Christmas, etc., though no fatalities linked to dancing in *The Islandman* were mentioned. According to Bonaparte, there was apparently not a scrap of skin left on the dancers' feet. The man who won the medal for speaking Irish for the longest time later set his house on fire and was never seen again.

Bonaparte was around twenty years old and had not worked a single day. The family was once again starving, and the Old-Grey-Fellow suggested they go hunting towards the Rosses in Donegal (Northwest Ireland). On their way, they met a man named Jams O'Donnell, who joined them, explaining the way of life in Rosses. Once they arrived the Old-Grey-Fellow went "hunting" by jumping into the house of the schoolmaster O'Beenassa, leaving it in a bit with some silver and jewelry. They stole from all the surrounding houses as all the people were by the strand awaiting their sailors who got caught in a storm. This is a reference to the people from the Great Blasket who were also once said by O'Crohan to await their sailors on the strand during a tempest.

When I had come home I must go out of doors again to find out if my relations were safe at home; it was the children that put me to that trouble, for their uncles were on the sea, and how should they know whether they had been caught in the storm or not? A heavy rain was still falling unceasingly, and I had to crawl on hands and knees from one house to the other. (*The Islandman*, pp. 227-228)

Afterwards, Bonaparte and others went to Old-Grey-Fellow's friend Ferdinand O'Roonassa's house in Killeagh. After he told them a dramatic story about the dangerous creature Sea-cat, Bonaparte went home. On his way, he rested by the seashore and was awoken by a strange sound, which after investigation turned out to be the infamous Sea-cat. Bonaparte managed to run away from it and according to the Old-Grey-Fellow he was the first person to survive an encounter with this creature, which was portrayed in a cryptic illustration. A parallel to the Sea-cat in *The Islandman* could be the fish beast O'Crohan mentioned in his most traumatic experience.

When Bonaparte grew into an unhealthy and unmanly adult, he realized he was laughed at by his peers. He was not yet married and thought children simply fell from the sky when propertied couples wanted them. The Old-Grey-Fellow suggested Bonaparte goes to Rosses again to find his future wife, as there was a man by the name Jams O'Donnell whose daughter Mabel was yet unmarried. They set out the next day, got drenched in a night's rain so much the fire of Jams O'Donnell had to be rekindled nine times, but succeeded in their quest. Once returning to Corkadoragha, Bonaparte's wife

Mabel had to be kept there by force by Bonaparte's mother, as she was trying to run away. The dowry Bonaparte received was spent by the Old-Grey-Fellow on alcohol.

The wedding turned out to be gory. Two men died that day. Mabel did not stop arguing with Bonaparte's mother, so they Old-Grey-Fellow suggested the newlyweds move someplace else. They chose the hut that was formerly built for the animals. In comparison, O'Crohan built a new house for his family and finally found purpose in his life. Bonaparte was also satisfied with their way of living, though for lesser reasons. Mabel was apparently skilled at potato-boiling and the Old-Grey-Fellow came every afternoon for visits, making this enough for Bonaparte to call his life extraordinary. Just like Bonaparte got his visits, O'Crohan was often visited by his friend King. O'Crohan's wife's name was Maura (Máire), sharing an initial with Bonaparte's Mabel.

It did not take long before Bonaparte's first son was born. They named him Leonard O'Coonassa. When he was a year and a day old, Bonaparte noticed his face went suddenly grey and cough attacked his throat. He ran to get his wife but found her lying lifeless along the pigs. When he returned to his son, he was also dead. With this, Bonaparte shows that life in Corkadoragha is predestined to be tragic. In O'Crohan's autobiography, the life and death of his wife Maura and their children were summarized in a similar manner, though some of their children lived long lives. Maura died quite early compared to O'Crohan, leaving him young children to take care of, whereas the death of Mabel and Leonard left Bonaparte with no offspring.

The poorest of the Corkadoragha's inhabitants was Sitric O'Sanassa, possessing the "best poverty". According to Bonaparte, he owned close to nothing and during winter he was seen fighting for bones with a dog, barking at each other. His dwelling was in a bog, a hole dug deep and covered with sticks. Bonaparte, the Old-Grey-Fellow, and Martin O'Bannassa once saw him barely standing and visited him. He had not eaten a potato in a week and after trying to eat turf the day before, he felt ill. Bonaparte fetched him a potato which heartened Sitric, though he still wished the three would throw him into the sea instead. Bonaparte said "O'Sanassa will live another day", referencing the phrase "Power will have another day", which Éamon De Valera (Ireland's political leader from the 20th-century) is best known for using.

Martin O'Bannassa suggested they visit the Great Blasket Islands, as there are plenty of seals and one such seal could feed Sitric for three months. In *The Islandman*, there are multiple stories of encounters with seals and their killings. In one such story, two

men swam into a cave full of seals to kill some of them and send them towards the boat waiting outside.

The following day, Bonaparte went up the hill early in the morning as he wanted nothing to do with the dangerous business. He lay on the hill, pretending to be hunting, watching the three men swim towards the Great Blasket. Despite all odds (the men never went on sea before), the Old-Grey-Fellow and Martin O'Bannassa returned. Allegedly, there was a sea current which took the person who swam into it to an underwater cave. Sitric was the first one to discover it and the two other men followed him. They spent the night there, feeding themselves off an already dead seal. The next day, Sitric refused to return to Corkadoragha. In this cave he had both food and company, and he would not get drenched from the night's rain, so after suffering the hardships of Corkadoragha, he would spend the rest of his days happily under the sea.

As years went by, the night's downpours in Corkadoragha became heavier. Non-swimmers were not safe in their beds and occasionally people drowned on the mainland from the amount of water. The people of the Great Blasket would often come fishing to Corkadoragha and were disappointed when no pig got caught in their fishnets. This could be a reference to the sea-pigs that were killed in one of the skirmishes O'Crohan talked about in his autobiography. It was said Sitric O'Sanassa once swam to Corkadoragha to have one last look on his former home, but some argue it was simply a seal. Around this time, Bonaparte and the Old-Grey-Fellow started wondering whether the Gaels were even human and if they will ever be dry again. Alongside their regular high-class speech, the pair starts calling each other humorous terms such as gentle person, mild one, little noble, or sublime ancient. According to the Old-Grey-Fellow, the situation was still alright compared to the past times. There was a period in which people would live their whole lives during the rain and only one man survived this time – Maeldoon O'Poenassa. Maeldoon was a hero of an ancient Gaelic story from the eighth or ninth century. Maeldoon O'Poenassa was clever enough to build a boat and escape Corkadoragha after looting everyone's house. He landed on an island which over time became an unclimbably steep hill called Hunger-stack.

When Bonaparte heard this story, he set his goal to one day climb the mountain. For a year he mapped Corkadoragha's weather until he concluded that it is always miserable. He went on the journey the following day. The way uphill was treacherous, but Bonaparte managed it. Exhausted, he was ready to succumb to nature, until he saw a light in the distance, which he followed. The source of light turned out to be a cave in which the

ancient Maeldoon O'Poenassa resided, barely alive. Bonaparte fell into a strange yellow river, which turned out to be whisky. It was what kept Maeldoon alive. Bonaparte drank enough of it to become vigorous again, taking all the gold he could carry and set to leave. Maeldoon tried to talk to him in 11th century Gaelic but that only made Bonaparte leave faster. On his way down, he lost consciousness. After waking up naked and bruised, but with the pocket of gold still in his hand, he went back home.

Owning gold did not make Bonaparte's life any easier. He could not decide what to do with it, as no hat would shelter him from Corkadoragha's rain, no other food but fish and potatoes would taste good to him, and alcohol always brought problems.

One day, the Old-Grey-Fellow and Martin O'Bannassa competed in lifting a rock. The Old-Grey-Fellow won, but the rock fell on his feet, breaking all bones in them. Neither Bonaparte nor his mother showed worry, just stated that they did not know the Old-Grey-Fellow had this much blood in him, as it was all over the house's floor.

O'Crohan also mentioned a couple of graphic injuries in his autobiography. For instance, a fishing hook stuck in his finger which had to be cut out with a razor, or a seal biting off a chunk of flesh from his leg.

This incident made Bonaparte want to buy boots to protect his feet in case something like this was to happen to him. He went on his way and bought a fine pair of boots. Since no one in Corkadoragha wore boots, he was afraid of being laughed at, so he buried the boots next to his treasure.

According to O'Crohan, the people of the Great Blasket first wore boots on their wedding day and the pair lasted a lifetime. He was quite lucky to get his pair of boots at a rather young age and valued them greatly.

Bonaparte eventually decided to try wearing the boots and did so around midnight, walking ten miles in them. The following day, the mood in the village seemed strange. He asked his mother whether the Gaelic misery was at end now and the paupers are waiting for the final explosion of Earth, but she claimed it was something worse. After going out, he met with Martin O'Bannassa, who stood above a strange spoor. It was undoubtedly Bonaparte's boot-mark, but Martin claimed it must have been the Sea-cat and Bonaparte was too afraid to refute his assumption.

Sometime later, a strange man who only spoke English came to Corkadoragha. Apparently, there was a man in Galway who killed another man and took his gold. Since Bonaparte was seen buying boots with gold earlier, he became a suspect and was taken with the Englishman.

During his trial, he did not understand anything, which is a reference to the injustice towards the Irish during the British rule, during which many people were judged and sentenced without understanding anything. Bonaparte was sentenced to 29 years in prison, which he learned from another Irishman. On his way to the jail, he met a strangely familiar person. Bonaparte asked him a question: “*Phat is yer nam?*” which appears in the work multiple times, always followed by the same answer, “*Jams O’Donnell.*” Suddenly, the men recognized each other to be a father and son and there was a spark of joy in both. Bonaparte’s father was just released from jail after 29 years.

Bonaparte finishes his story with weeping and stating that he certainly suffered Gaelic hardships and that his like will not there be again.

2.3.3 Summary of *The Poor Mouth*

The previous chapter summarizes the events of *An Béal Bocht*, a 1941 satirical novel by Flann O’Brien. The narrator, Bonaparte O’Coonassa, tells his life story in chronological order.

The elements of satire are clear in various cases. The way of speech of the people of Corkadoragha is noble, very unlikely for rural Irishmen. The difficulties of the heroes of this story are often incompatible with life (life-threatening injuries or living conditions). Some phrases are repeated for humorous purposes (O’Crohan’s quote). Hyperboles are very frequent. Irish last names are satirized with the characters’ last name similarities (O’Coonassa, O’Banassa, O’Loonassa, O’Beenassa, O’Roonassa, O’Sanassa, O’Poenassa). The characters’ first names often reference some historically important figures (Bonaparte, Michelangelo, Maeldoon...).

Nearly every chapter contains a drawing by Ralph Steadman. There is always at least one person depicted and their face expression is always negative. The surroundings are usually cryptic and distorted, possibly due to the everlasting rain of Corkadoragha.

This novel, translated from Irish by Patrick C. Power, contains the translator’s notes in which he explains some of the easy-to-miss references or untranslatable puns. The illustrations are also unique to the translated version of the novel.

The “comic genius” (according to Newsweek) Flann O’Brien is praised by many, including, for instance, Thierry Robin, who wrote of *The Poor Mouth* as follows.

As for *The Poor Mouth*, it is probably the most comical novel ever published on the frail and aberrant nature of any given national tongue, though the Irish language comes out of this excruciatingly funny novel as not even superior to porcine

squeals, especially after chapter three. Paradoxically and conversely it is one of the most vivid, cogent, invigorating examples of literature in Gaelic.³⁴

2.3.4 *The Poor Mouth's* Illustrator

The illustrations from *The Poor Mouth's* 1996 English edition come from a brush of Ralph Steadman. Born in 1936 in England, he is known for his drawings and caricatures.

In the 1960s he first had his cartoons published in the *Manchester Evening Chronicle*. Later he created illustrations for *Punch* magazine and *Private Eye*. He also illustrated children's books, most notably *Alice in Wonderland*.

In 1970, he went to America and met with Hunter S. Thompson (1937-2005) with whom he founded the "Gonzo" journalism, a style of journalism in which the reporter writes in first person, making him the protagonist of said events.³⁵ The pair often worked together throughout their lifetimes. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971) is a 1971 novel by Hunter S. Thompson which Ralph Steadman illustrated and initially published in *Rolling Stone* magazine, which is among their best-known collaborations.

His solo work includes the books *Sigmund Freud* (1979) or *I Leonardo* (1983), and children's books such as *That's My Dad* (1986) or *No Room to Swing a Cat* (1989). During this period, he also illustrated the English translation of *The Poor Mouth* by Flann O'Brien.

After being approached by Gordon Kerr in 1987 to travel the vineyards of the world, he produced hundreds of wine-related artworks and two books (*The Grapes of Ralph*, 1996, and *Untrodden Grapes*, 2005). His joyful nature shines through his works, whose names are often puns themselves (*The Grapes of Ralph* are most likely named after *Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck). His career has always been diverse. He produced theatre sets and illustrated three books raising awareness on the wane of bird species. A film retelling his life story named *For No Good Reason* was premiered in 2012. It shows Steadman's lifework and influences. Among others it features Ralph Steadman himself, as well as Johnny Depp, and his life-long friend Hunter S. Thompson in archive footage.^{36, 37}

34 Robin, T. (2011). *Representation as a Hollow Form, or the Paradoxical Magic of Idiocy and Skepticism in Flann O'Brien's Works*. HAL CCSD. Review of Contemporary Fiction, pp. 34-35

35 Masterclass Staff. (2020, November 9). *Understanding Gonzo Journalism: From Thompson to Wolfe - 2021*. MasterClass. <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/understanding-gonzo-journalism#what-is-gonzo-journalism>.

36 Biography. (2020). Ralph Steadman Art Collection. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://www.ralphsteadman.com/biography/>

His net worth is currently estimated at \$8 million, with some of his auctioned pieces reaching price estimates up to \$4,000.³⁸



♣ *She took a bucket full of muck, mud and ashes and hen's droppings from the roadside, and spread it around the hearth gladly in front of me. When everything was arranged, I moved over near the fire and for five hours I became a child in the ashes—a raw youngster rising up according to the old Gaelic tradition. Later at midnight I was taken and put into bed but the foul stench of the fireplace stayed with me for a week; it was a stale, putrid smell and I do not think that the like will ever be there again.*

37 *For No Good Reason*. (2012). IMDb. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2112152/>

38 *Ralph Idris Steadman Paintings & Artwork for Sale: Ralph Idris Steadman Art Value Price Guide*. invaluable.com. Retrieved July 7, 2021, from <https://www.invaluable.com/artist/steadman-ralph-nk77645qre/sold-at-auction-prices/?size=50&sort=priceResult%2Cdesc>.

Fig. 5: An Illustration by Ralph Steadman from *The Poor Mouth*, p. 17

3 Evolution of Fictional Depiction of Country People over the 20th Century

Interest in the way of life of the Irish country people grew during the post-famine time, especially during the Irish Literary Renaissance. Among the authors who popularized this interest were, for instance, W. B. Yeats, John Millington Synge, George Russel, Isabella Augusta Gregory, or Douglas Hyde.

The initial romanticized figure of the Irish peasant created by the Revivalists has been since compelled to be demythologized by most of the writers whom this topic concerned. However, it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that the ideologized myth started to be systematically dismantled, as the glorification of the country people led to literary regress in Ireland.³⁹ (Hirsch, p. 1116)

Significant for this action were the *Crane Bag*, a Dublin periodical (publishing since 1977), and the Field Day Theatre Company (founded in Derry in 1980), among whose directors were people such as Brian Friel, Stephen Rea, or even Seamus Heaney (A Nobel-Prize winning poet). They contributed to this cause by analyzing established opinions, myths, and stereotypes. (p. 1117)

The image of the Irish peasant largely varied during its existence. Each of the Revivalists attempted to reimagine the portrayal of the Irish country people. Even Yeats' and Hyde's portraits rivaled each other, though they both aimed at overturning the stereotype inflicted by the British colonialists – the image of “Paddy,” a comical drunkard. Some Brits thought of the Irish rural people as subhuman figures, a “white Negro”, or even chimpanzees (Charles Kingsley). (p. 1119)

The figures depicted by the major Irish authors were mistakenly perceived by some readers and critics as historically accurate. However, most Irish writers shared a common belief in an entity called “the peasants”, which resulted in this group's aestheticization. A similar case of aestheticizing can be seen with Yeats' fishermen, Synge's wandering tramps, and more simplified groups of complex people. In reality, the Irish peasants were diverse. Some were economically independent, others were laborers, there were also itinerant workers and laborer-landholders. (p. 1117)

At the turn of the 19th and 20th century, Irish peasants were an important part of Irish identity. By idealizing the peasants, the writers were countering the hurtful British

39 Hirsch, E. (1991). *The Imaginary Irish Peasant*. PMLA, Vol. 106, No. 5 (Oct., 1991), pp. 1116-1130

stereotype. Rural life started to be connected with nature and ancient culture, whereas urban life was linked with mechanical and industrial development. (p. 1120)

A paper called *Irish Peasant* was published from 1903 until 1906 for middle-class Catholic readers. Despite the majority of peasants being Catholic, Revivalists were mostly Anglo-Irish Protestants. The middle-class Irishmen were usually at least partially ashamed of their rural background, whereas the country people never referred to themselves as “peasants” since they found the term derogatory. This example can be found in Seamus O’Kelly’s novel *Wet Clay* (1922) in which an American adult person returns to his “peasant roots” to Ireland. After telling his grandmother, she seems confused about the term, and his cousin explains that they call themselves simply “The People”. (p. 1123)

The Gaelic Dubliners associated the peasant figure with backwardness, but since they were almost always descendants of such figures, they liked to idealize their roots. These people were often left with a painful feeling of having no identity, as neither the British nor Irish country people accepted them as their own. This feeling is written about in Stephen Dedalus’ *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), where he expresses sadness over not acquiring English to the level of a native speaker. By many, Ireland was also associated with a dark and shameful female figure, whereas the colonizer was always portrayed as an invulnerable masculine man. (pp. 1123-1124)

In a 1906 pamphlet *Irish Plays*, plays like *The Countess Cathleen*, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, or *The Playboy of the Western World* were criticized for dramatizing the rural Irish life. By the Abbey playwrights, it was described as primitive, wild, graceful, and peaceful, giving such lifestyle a color that a more civilized place would not know. (p. 1125)

The five major Irish authors Yeats, Synge, Joyce, O’Brien, and Kavanagh opposed the middle-class Catholic ideologized interpretation of the Irish peasant. Each author satirized the country figures portrayed by previous writers. Yeats took inspiration in folklore. He refigured the image of the Irish peasant with which the following writers had to contend with. Synge defined the Literary Revival. Along with Yeats, he shared an ideology of romantic primitivism and fought the urban middle class’ portrait of the noble Irish farmer (*Playboy of the Western World*). He romanticized the peasants’ simplicity, paganism, and rich linguistic plentitude. Use of Irish legends and mythology was significant. (p. 1126)

Joyce was mainly interested in life in cities like Dublin, but he demystified the peasant figure and denied its uniqueness in *Stephen Hero*, his first, incomplete and in his lifetime unpublished novel. (p. 1127)

O'Brien is known for his linguistic skills of parodies and his fluent Gaelic. He despised Synge's peasant figure and set to overthrow it, as well as the British Paddy. His novel *An Béal Bocht* satirically deals with the gap between the Gaelic League's idealized peasant and the reality of rural Irish life. (p. 1128)

Kavanagh also despised Synge's image of the Irish peasant and destroyed it by criticism. In a 1942 work of poetry, *The Great Hunger*, he paints the harsh and oppressed life in the Irish countryside. He satirically depicts his main character as an illiterate peasant who works on "his little lyrical fields" with no worries. Following Yeats, Kavanagh is one of the most important Irish poets. His work *The Great Hunger* changed the course of Irish verse. He proved useful for following Irish poets like Seamus Heaney who emerged in the 1960s. (p. 1129)

These five writers were crucial for the reimagination of the Irish peasant. Each of them projected his own values, beliefs, and feelings into the peasant's character.

Turning the Irish peasant into a figure of writing meant to participate in a national and cultural discourse, making the Irish peasant a definition of Ireland itself. (p. 1130)

4 Conclusion

Works written in the Irish language, despite being translated into English later, did not receive much attention compared to some works written by Irish authors in English. Nowadays, this statement can be applied to Flann O’Brien’s works *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*, both written in English, and *The Poor Mouth*, originally written in Irish. The English written works currently have respectively over 11,000 and 19,000 ratings on goodreads.com, whereas *The Poor Mouth* only has over 2,000. *The Islandman* has over 700 ratings.

While Tomas O’Crohan’s autobiography is a reliable source of information, it should be taken with a pinch of salt. Over time, it became a symbol of rural Irish life, which is inaccurate, as life on the isolated Island must have been harsher than life on the mainland. It is natural that such life is prone to romanticization. Being cut off from the influences of the modern world, being self-sufficient, and forming a close and helpful community may sound idyllic to some people. In fact, in 2020, over 23,000 people worldwide applied for the position of caretakers of the Blasket Islands.⁴⁰

The Gaelic League was founded five years before Tomas O’Crohan decided to contribute to the preservation of the Irish language, which he mentions in his autobiography. The Gaelic League’s figure of the Irish peasant was important for breaking away from the derogatory term “Paddy” the Irish got from their British besiegers. However, in later years, the ideologized figure caused inaccuracy and regress in the Irish literature and most writers set to overthrow it.

One of the mockers of the figure of the Irish peasant which the Gaelic League praised was Flann O’Brien whose work was well-received by literary greats such as James Joyce and magazines such as *Newsweek*, *Evening Standard*, *New Yorker*, or *Boston Globe*. Even in the English translation, some references to O’Crohan’s autobiography were clear. For instance, O’Crohan’s cultivated way of speech, or the hardships the Islanders went through. O’Brien also utilizes hyperbole greatly.

As *The Poor Mouth* is not satirizing *The Islandman* only, but apparently more of the Gaeltacht autobiographies, for the recognition of all references one would need to read works by other Gaeltacht writers such as *Peig* (1939) by Peig Sayers, *Fiche Blian ag Fás* (1933) by Muiris Ó Súilleabháin, or perhaps *Nuair a Bhí Mé Óg* (1942) by Seamus

40 Mac an, S. 2020, Jan 20. *Couple inundated with applications for Blasket Islands jobs*. Retrieved from <https://www.rte.ie/news/munster/2020/0120/1108621-blasket-islands/>

Ó Grianna. According to the reviews of *The Poor Mouth*, the book also lost its sparkle due to the translation. Robin Flower, the translator of *The Islandman*, also expressed his problems with conveying the speech of *An t-Oileánach* into English and expressed sadness about it losing the untranslatable charm of Irish idiom. If further research were to be carried, reading the works in their original form would reveal a countless number of new finds. Interesting additional research regarding this topic could be a questionnaire aimed at Irish-speaking people and their relation to O’Crohan’s autobiography and O’Brien’s satirical novel.

5 Bibliography

The analyzed works:

O’Crohan, T. (1977). *The Islandman* (R. Flower, Trans.). London, England: Oxford University Press.

O’Brien, F. (1996). *The Poor Mouth* (P. C. Power, Trans.). Dalkey Archive Press.

Other sources:

A collection of testimonies/memories of the great famine which can be found on:

<https://www.duchas.ie/en/tpc/cbes/4427742?con=GA>

Ager, S. *Ogham alphabet*. (2021, June 1). Omniglot. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from

<https://omniglot.com/writing/ogham.htm>

Biography. (2020). Ralph Steadman Art Collection. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from

<https://www.ralphsteadman.com/biography/>

Bourke, A. (2003). *Legless in London: Pádraic Ó Conaire and Éamon A Búrc*, Éire-Ireland, Vol. 38. No.3/4, Page 54

Breathnach, D., Ní Mhurchú, M. *Ó GRIANNA, Séamus (1889–1969)*. (2016). ainm.ie. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=203>

Brendan Behan. (2015). Britannica. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Brendan-Behan>

Carroll, S. (2017). *The 4 Cycles of Irish Mythology | Irish Myths & Legends*. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from

<https://blog.carrollsirishgifts.com/the-four-cycles-of-irish-mythology/>

Connolly, S. (2011). *The Oxford Companion to Irish History (2nd ed.)*. OUP Oxford. Chapter “Literature in Irish”

Dallán forgaill m. eirc. (2016). *Saints in Scottish Place-Names*. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from

<https://saintsplaces.gla.ac.uk/saint.php?id=84>

de Bernardo Stempel, P., Slocum, J. (2019). *Introduction to Old Irish*. The University of Texas at Austin Linguistic Research Center. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://lrc.la.utexas.edu/eieol/iriol>

Dorgan, T. (2003). *Twentieth-century Irish-Language Poetry*. Archipelago. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <http://www.archipelago.org/vol7-3/dorgan.htm>

Francis Keane, "Report on the Present State of the Irish Language and Literature in the of Munster," and "Report on the Present State of the Irish Language and Literature in the of Ulster" [1874-75], Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, MS 12 Q 13, Pages 98, 128-131.

For No Good Reason. (2012). IMDb. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2112152/>

Hindley, R. (1990), *The Death of the Irish Language: A Qualified Obituary*. London, 15-19.

Hirsch, E. (1991). *The Imaginary Irish Peasant*. PMLA, Vol. 106, No. 5 (Oct., 1991), pp. 1116-1130

Mac an tSithigh, S. 2020, Jan 20. *Couple inundated with applications for Blasket Islands jobs*. Retrieved from <https://www.rte.ie/news/munster/2020/0120/1108621-blasket-islands/>

Introduction to Old Irish. (2019). The University of Texas at Austin Linguistic Research Center. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://lrc.la.utexas.edu/eieol/iriol>

- Irish Literary Renaissance*. (2018). Encyclopedia.com. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/literature-other-modern-languages/miscellaneous-european-literature>
- Jarzab-Napierała, J. (2019). *Irish Native Autobiography: Tomás O’Crohan’s The Islandman*. In *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*.
- Lucchitti, I. (2009). *The Islandman*. Peter Lang.
- Mac Donnachadha, (2020). P. *The Forming of the Gaelic League*. Your Irish Culture. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://www.yourirish.com/history/19th-century/the-foundation-of-the-gaelic-league-1893>
- Mac Mahon, M. (2007). *Clare’s Gaelic Bardic Tradition*. Clare County Library. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from https://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/literature/bardic/micheal_o_coimin.htm
- Masterclass Staff. (2020, November 9). *Understanding Gonzo Journalism: From Thompson to Wolfe - 2021*. MasterClass. <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/understanding-gonzo-journalism#what-is-gonzo-journalism>.
- Movement to Know: The Irish Middle Ages*. (2018). Ireland Lit Guide. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://irelandlitguide.com/movement-to-know/the-irish-middle-ages/>
- Notable periods in the history of Irish literature. (2019). Ireland Lit Guide. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://irelandlitguide.com/resources/notable-periods-in-the-history-of-irish-literature/>
- O’Flaherty, L. (1996). *The Letters of Liam O’Flaherty*. Kelly, A.A. (ed.). Wolfhound Press. Page 206
- O’Kelly, K. (2014). *Folklore review: The Island Man by Tomas O’Crohan*. Heritage Project at the National Print Museum. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://heritagenpm.wordpress.com/2014/11/24/folklore-review-the-island-man-by-tomas-ocrohan/>
- O’Mahony, O. (2019). *The Four Cycles of Irish Mythology*. Shamrock Craic. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://www.shamrockgift.com/blog/four-cycles-of-irish-mythology/>
- O’Sullivan, S. (1999). *Folktales of Ireland*. University of Chicago Press. Pages 270–271
- Ó Tuathail, É. (November 1943), "Meath Anecdotes," *Éigse* 4, no. 1 10-11.
- Paor, L. D. (2016). *Leabhar na Hathghabhála. Irish-English Bilingual* (ed.). Bloodaxe Books. Page 20
- Ralph Idris Steadman Paintings & Artwork for Sale: Ralph Idris Steadman Art Value Price Guide*. invaluable.com. Retrieved July 7, 2021, from <https://www.invaluable.com/artist/steadman-ralph-nk77645qre/sold-at-auction-prices/?size=50&sort=priceResult%2Cdesc>.
- Robin, T. (2011). *Representation as a Hollow Form, or the Paradoxical Magic of Idiocy and Skepticism in Flann O’Brien’s Works*. HAL CCSD. Review of Contemporary Fiction, pp. 34-35
- Stará, J. (2012). *The Deirdre Legend in Irish Fiction*. Theses.cz. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://theses.cz/id/a2slm4/?lang=sk>
- Tale Foundry. (2017). *Why isn’t Irish mythology more popular?* — Irish mythology series. On Youtube. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxLtDNGq1A4>
- Thurneysen, R. (1946). *A Grammar of Old Irish*. Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. Page 4
- hÓgáin, D. Ó. (1991). *Myth, Legend & Romance*. Prentice Hall. Pages 296-297
- Wolf, N. (2009). "Scéal Grinn?" *Jokes, Puns, and the Shaping of Bilingualism in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*. JSTOR. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25482962>, Page 53