

Prologue

Nineteen twenty-three was barely yesterday, a lot like today. People lived in suburbs and commuted to work. They traveled by tram and subway. They drove automobiles. They went to the movies, subscribed to magazines, looked up in the sky to see airplanes. Vaccines, flush toilets, best-seller lists, billboards, cameras, and power lines were part of their lives. Their memories were fresh with visions of a war that killed with industrial efficiency. Picasso, Stravinsky, and Virginia Woolf had taught them to see through fractured lenses. Telegrams, telephones, newsreels, and radios had shrunk the world. If you were part of the great and growing middle class and lived in a place like Chicago or Berlin, London or New York, life could be pretty fast. You had your ambitions, you wanted more, you lived a busy life.

In the spring of 1923, George Thomson, a nineteen-year-old English boy, finished his first year at King's College, Cambridge. He'd grown up in a suburb of London. His father was a chartered accountant who hoped his son would follow in his footsteps. He was smart, had won a coveted scholarship to King's, was destined for distinction. At the university, he was a student of the classics, and later, when he took its daunting Tripos exams, he'd earn first-class honors.

But had he been able to, George Thomson later said, he would have taken a different path. All through his last years of secondary school, while

studying Euripides and Plato, Ovid and Cicero, and then on into his first year at King's, he had been distracted by the events of the world. During his first two years at Dulwich College (a preparatory school), European armies still grappled along the blood-drenched Western Front. Yet it was not the Great War that compelled George's adolescent attention, but events in Ireland. Little rural Ireland, off the main stage of the world, had, beginning in 1916, endured seven years of rebellion and war—first against England, then in a cruel civil war that shed more Irish blood than had the British. It was Ireland, and all things Irish, that captivated young George Thomson.

Now, in August 1923, with the violence stilled at last, it could seem that the whole tortured recent history of Ireland had conspired to propel him across England, across the Irish Sea, across the breadth of Ireland, to a tiny quay at the foot of a precipitous cliff on the Dingle Peninsula. He was at the westernmost tip of Europe. He was in one of the wildest corners of Ireland, so forlorn, neglected, and poor that its people had been leaving it for America for almost a hundred years. George was bound for a tiny village perched on the eastern face of a great rock rising from the water three miles off the coast. Rowed by rough-hewn, wool-sweatered men across this unpredictable stretch of cold Atlantic to that tiny backward slip of an island, he would step from the modern world into what novelist E. M. Forster would call, with only modest exaggeration, a "neolithic civilization." When he left the island six weeks later, he would be close to tears. The island would grip his imagination, grant him friendship and love that would overfill his life, forever alter his ideas about what life could be at its sweetest, and about how the world ought to be at its best.

The Great Blasket island, or An Blascaod Mór, as it was rendered in Irish Gaelic, is the largest among a group of seven small islands just off the west coast of County Kerry. For at least two centuries before Thomson's coming, about 150 people lived there, in stone houses dug into the slope of the hill facing the mainland. Virtually all were fishermen who, with their families, wrested precarious livelihoods from the sea that washed the island's shores. They hunted rabbits, harvested oats and potatoes from mediocre soil. They had limited relations with towns on the mainland, which they rowed across open water in small boats to reach; evil weather sometimes kept them on the island for weeks at a time. They had no electricity, no plumbing, no church, no priests, no police, no taverns, no shops. They

spoke Irish, though few could read or write it. English was for most of them unintelligible.

One summer's day in 1923, the way he told the story later, an islander, Maurice O'Sullivan, was "looking after a sheep on the hill-side, the sun yellowing in the west and a lark singing above." On the path ahead he saw a man approach, someone in "knee-breeches and a shoulder-cloak, his head bare and a shock of dark brown hair gathered straight back on it. I was growing afraid. There was not his like in the Island."

"God save you," said the stranger, in English.

"God and Mary save you, noble person," said O'Sullivan in the Gaelic ritual reply.

The young men sat down for a smoke. The visitor "tried to say something in Irish," O'Sullivan recalled. He couldn't, and tried again in English.

The Englishman was George Thomson, and after six weeks with O'Sullivan, talking together as they tramped over the hills and across the beach, his Irish grew readier and more fluid. Year after year Thomson returned to the island, his friendship with O'Sullivan deepening. Bound for international distinction as a classical scholar, he would encourage O'Sullivan's exuberant memoir of growing up on the Blaskets, *Fiche Blián ag Fás*, and help translate it into English as *Twenty Years A-Growing*.

"There is no doubt but youth is a fine thing, though my own is not over yet and wisdom comes with age," O'Sullivan begins the story of his life. It's a high-stepping affair, brimming with energy, filled with youthful adventure, the inspiration for a film script Dylan Thomas left unfinished at his death. E. M. Forster wrote the introduction. It would be reviewed adoringly in Europe and America, appear in numerous translations, earn a permanent place in the Irish literary tradition. For Thomson, the companionship he enjoyed with O'Sullivan and the other islanders with whom he played, worked, danced, and traded tales reached deep into him. He'd remember always the bleak beauty of the Blasket, its conviviality, the warmth of his relations with the villagers. His friendship with Maurice was the most important of his life.

Even in stripped-down form this makes for a nice story. Yet, astonishingly, it was not the first time, or the last, that it or something like it had been enacted on the Blaskets. Eighteen years before, in 1905, the playwright John Millington Synge, a key figure in the Irish literary revival and friend of the poet Yeats, visited the Great Blasket; the island touched him, too. Anyone who'd lived with Irish peasants, he wrote in the preface to his most famous play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, "will know that

the wildest sayings and ideas in this play are tame indeed” compared with those heard in the Aran Islands, which he’d also visited, or on the Blaskets.

That’s how it was all through the first decades of the twentieth century: Thomson and Synge were just two in a line of scholars and writers who first came to the Blaskets to learn spoken Irish, influenced islanders to see themselves through new eyes, and helped spawn a remarkable literary flowering—a succession of books, originally in Irish, but later widely translated. First Tomás O’Crohan’s *The Islandman*, in all its dignity and grace. Then O’Sullivan’s joyful *Twenty Years A-Growing*, and Peig Sayers’s bleak and wrenching *Peig*. Though stylistically distinct, each told of a vulnerable, wave-lapped few square miles, breathing its own unlikely island air, aware of its historical fragility. “I have done my best” wrote O’Crohan, “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.”

With the success of these first books came other memoirs, collections of letters, works of history, linguistics, and folklore. All billowing up from a tiny, sea-bound community largely cut off from the twentieth century. “If we put them all together, side by side,” George Thomson said years later, “we have a little library of fifteen or sixteen volumes, the Blasket Library. And this is something unique. There’s no such collection in any other language, a collective portrait of a pre-capitalist village community, made by the villagers themselves, at the very moment of transition from speech to writing.” Several of the books achieved international renown. Many remain in print. One was required reading in the Irish national school system for three decades. Together, they represent a poor Irish-speaking peasantry, their hard lives close and cooperative, rich with story, song, and dance, cut off from the clamor of modern life—and, inevitably, reflecting back at us our own soft, technology-thick lives.

On an Irish Island tells the story of George Thomson and the other scholarly visitors to the island in the years after 1905, their impact on the island and its literary legacy, and on the islanders to whom they grew so attached. It tells of a dying language and what hope of its revival meant to Ireland in the early twentieth century; of the Irish oral tradition as it was lived on the Great Blasket and embodied in Ireland’s most famous storytellers, and in the lilting cadences of Irish and its stage-Irish imitators; of life on this stone outcropping in the Atlantic before it was abandoned, its residents dispersed to the mainland and to America, its life cut short by the irresistible forces of modernity.

I learned the rudiments of the Blasket story only in 2005, on my hon-

eymoon in western Ireland, where my wife and I had gone on the recommendation of friends. On our second day there, in the tiny sea-facing town of Dún Chaoin, we visited the Blasket Centre, established by the Irish government in the 1990s—on the mainland, just up from the sea, within sight of the island—to tell the Blasket story. And there, as it happens, Sarah and I had our new marriage's first, um, *tiff*.

We had been at the Centre for several hours, viewing a documentary, taking in images and artifacts from a vanished world, wholly absorbed. But enough is enough, and by now it was late afternoon. I was in the bookshop, irretrievably lost among the Blasket writers. But Sarah was finally ready to go—and by now a little put off by her new husband's seeming obliviousness to all but these books. Were we to spend our *entire* honeymoon in the Blasket Centre?

We left. We returned to America. But the Blaskets had gotten under my skin. And it wasn't alone the islanders who fascinated me, but the visitors—writers and scholars from Oslo and London, Dublin and Paris, city people all, who'd left behind their libraries and dusty archives, traveled across the breadth of England and Ireland, and found friendship, and sometimes love, in this harsh, remote, astonishingly beautiful place.

I didn't just then think about writing about the Blaskets myself; that came some months later. I'd been reading a book on quite a different subject, one with no trace of Irish content. It was called *Wrapped in Rainbows*, Valerie Boyd's fine biography of the legendary African-American novelist Zora Neale Hurston, author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. During the 1920s, when Hurston was a graduate student in anthropology at Columbia University, her adviser sent her to America's black rural South to collect folklore—songs and stories and old ways of knowing—from her own people. There, a world opened up to her, unseen, unknown, disappearing, that her city friends could scarcely have imagined.

Reading Boyd's book, I was struck by how similar it seemed to the vanished world and culture of the Great Blasket. And on both sides of the Atlantic, in Hurston's black South and at the edge of West Kerry, and at almost the same time, people realized that it was only so long before the lore of the people, their old rural community life removed from the clamor of the city, was gone entirely; that in its disappearance something precious was being lost; that vanishing with these slower societies were just those sweet, simple satisfactions and deep human relationships that modern life seemed to elbow out of the way. The Blasket story, I came to realize, wasn't only about one little corner of Ireland. In telling it, I could

get at a bigger, more urgent story, as central to this century as to the last, about how we live now, what we've left behind, and at what cost.

Gifted as they were, the Blasket writers would not have reached the rest of the world with their life-tales and sagas were it not for the superbly educated men and women, so different from themselves, who visited their island. George Thomson and the others came from the great intellectual capitals of Europe, looking for something. But what they found, it turned out, meant more to them than what they had come to find. And it is this surprising, almost freakish collision between two worlds that lies at the center of my story. It is a story of friendship, fellowship, and love across a great cultural divide—between a bare speck of village and the great world of literature and learning; between peasant fishermen and scholars mostly still in their impressionable twenties who, before coming to the island, led bookish lives cloistered in seminar room and library, caught up in a twentieth century that sometimes seemed too shallow and too fast.

The word “friendship” is not entirely unproblematic, or without irony. Money sometimes changed hands between visitor and villager. Favors were traded. But whatever they exactly were, these relationships forged in work, song, and talk around the fire blossomed again and again on this enchanted isle, and often proved lasting, deep, and loving. That's about how it was for a tall, imperious Norwegian who'd go on to become one of the world's leading linguists, Carl Marstrand, twenty-three when he visited the island in 1907; for a Yorkshireman more at home in the Middle Ages than in his home in London, Robin Flower, twenty-eight on his first visit in 1910; for a lonely Irishman with a wild heart from Killarney, Brian Kelly, twenty-eight; for a charming and brilliant Frenchwoman, product of Paris's elite academies, Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, twenty-three; for Synge, thirty-four; and, particularly, for George Thomson, twenty.

It would be hard to imagine a coterie of people more brilliant, more adventurous, more deeply interesting than these. Brian Kelly's short life is shrouded in mystery. Marie-Louise Sjoestedt's, too, ends prematurely, in tragedy, in German-occupied Paris. Each is unforgettable in his or her own way. But it would be useless to deny that Thomson holds a special place among them for me; his story touches every facet of the Blasket saga and ranges across this book from end to end.

His innocuous, overfamiliar name might suggest a white-bread sort of Englishman; he was anything but. He had enormous spirit and integrity. He was moved by the injustice he saw around him; he would become a Marxist, visit the Soviet Union, later serve on the Central Committee

of the British Communist Party. Arriving in Ireland deficient in modern Irish, he would come to speak a Blasket Irish the equal of any of the islanders'. He was a passionate, caring, loving man, would write to his wife that Irish had thirty-nine ways to express "darling" and bestow on her a bountiful sampling of them.

Thomson's fascination with all things Irish was stirred and enriched in the Blaskets, but began earlier. His father was an Ulsterman. Both parents showed Irish republican leanings. While a student in prep school, he followed with revulsion accounts of the Black and Tan massacres, when British mercenaries, apparently picked for their brutality, laid waste to Irish homes. Come Monday afternoons, he'd tear off his school uniform and take the train into London for classes in Irish at the Gaelic League. And long before being rowed across to the Great Blasket that day in 1923, before even going up to King's, he gathered books of Irish verse and grammar and, at age seventeen, inscribed them with his name in Irish: Seoirse Mac Tomáis.