

## Orality and Agency: Reading an Irish Autobiography from the Great Blasket Island

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### Introduction

The early twentieth century saw the publication of a singular group of texts in Ireland: the Blasket Island autobiographies. These texts were produced by members of the Irish-speaking community living on the Great Blasket Island off the west coast of Co. Kerry, c. 1850-1953. As a group, they have often been viewed as having greater ethnographic, rather than literary, significance.<sup>1</sup> Seán Ó Tuama's assessment regarding what has been the prevalent appraisal of the Blasket texts, reads: "From the Blasket Islands, in particular, has come a handful of autobiographies which by common European standards are *sui generis*. . . . The only vaguely comparable series of books known to me is that by Indian chiefs describing their ancestral life before the white man's conquest" (1995:203).<sup>2</sup> Ó Tuama's rhetoric serves to assert the degree to which the Blasket texts differ from other Irish-language literature. In so doing, he suggests that these texts owe more to the ethnographic or anthropological than the literary, and, in effect, he cuts them loose from a greater Gaelic literary tradition, leaving them as an island, so to speak, between ethnography and literature. As such, the author-subjects of the Blasket texts have been read as passive informants rather than as active authors. Furthermore, this type of reading has been buttressed by a view that sees oral tradition as static rather than dynamic. As a corrective, I offer a reading that pays careful attention to the ways in which both oral tradition and literacy are utilized in a Blasket autobiography to assert the agency of its author.

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<sup>1</sup> Beginning in 1929 with the publication of *An tOileánach* and followed closely by *Fiche Blian ag Fás* in 1933 and *Peig* in 1936, the Blasket autobiographies were a new development in Irish-language literature, as autobiography had not previously been a prominent genre. Like drama, autobiography was a genre that only emerged in Irish-language literature during the Gaelic revival, c. 1890-1940. An English translation of *An tOileánach*, entitled *The Islandman*, was published in 1934. *Fiche Blian ag Fás* was translated as *Twenty Years A-Growing* in 1933. And *Peig* was not published in English translation until 1974. Arguably, these autobiographies were the first time that self-representative printed texts had been produced by members of Irish-speaking communities located in the West of Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> Ó Tuama's suggestion is provocative in light of the subject and method of my continuing research into Irish and Native American autobiographies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g. Eastlake 2008; cf. Foster 1993:335-37).

In the discussion that follows, I advance my case for considering the Basket autobiographies as collaboratively produced texts, with particular emphasis on examining the manner in which they were produced. This examination raises several critical questions that will be addressed in turn. How can we best understand the various collaborators' roles in producing the text, particularly that of the subject-author, or native, of the text? It is of particular importance not to dismiss the native's agency in one's reading. In a consideration of how a particular type of critical reading has tended to suppress or misread the native's agency, I take into account how this error is buttressed by a misunderstanding of the theoretical construct of orality. When the individual's role in orality is suppressed in favor of a view that sees primary oral cultures as producing texts independent of individual authorship or agency, a further misreading of printed texts is encouraged. In the final segment of my discussion, I address how a reader might distinguish between two fundamentally different readings of the same text: the native as a representative type and the native as author.

### **Native Autobiography**

The category of native autobiography is fraught with complications, as it involves two words that flirt with genre while consistently resisting stable boundaries. Following Arnold Krupat's work on the problem of author in Native American autobiographies (1985), these autobiographies are more accurately typified by their "process of production" rather than by formal characteristics or genre (4-5; 30-31). While the Basket autobiographies might be read strictly in relation to the conventions of Western literary autobiography, a reading that is based on careful attention to the process of production offers greater insight into these texts. This process of production involves three roles (fulfilled by a variable number of individuals): the native who serves as the subject of the autobiography; the editor who instigates, structures, and collaborates both creatively and destructively with the native; and the translator, who may be interposed between native and editor, or between text and reader. The translator role also serves to transform the text into a global language. The native, editor, and translator are roles assumed during the process of production, and they are fluid by nature, often shifting between cooperation and resistance. The interaction of these roles during the process of producing a collaborative text is what distinguishes native autobiography from other acts of self-representation.

Krupat has suggested that American Indian autobiographies, produced from the type of process outlined above, constitute "the textual equivalent of the frontier" (1985:33). In David Brumble's words, they are "bi-cultural documents," since they result from collaboration not just between individuals, but also between two or more sets of cultural conventions regarding the production of self-representations (1988:11). As Kathleen M. Sands has commented, "Consciously or unconsciously, I think we have all assumed that the collector/editor is the key to unlocking these cross-cultural autobiographical texts because we assume he or she possesses the exclusive power to control the narrative presentation" (2001:138). Rather than read these texts only as extensions of the editor or translator's visions, we should read them as collaborations between individuals, giving full attention to the agenda of the individual who has been constructed as native. While "native" has often been assumed to mean "naïve," it is often the case

that any person entering into a collaborative project of autobiography has an agenda to which they are dedicated significantly.

### **The Process of Production: *The Islandman***

An account of native autobiography in Ireland must begin with *An tOileánach* (1929). Its process of production involves the collaboration of the three roles laid out above (native, editor, and translator). Other native autobiographies produced after *An tOileánach* (*The Islandman*) were developed following—to one degree or another—the example set for them, including the other Blasket texts, such as *Fiche Bliain ag Fás* (*Twenty Years A-Growing*) and *Peig: A Scéal Féin* (*Peig: The Autobiography of Peig Sayers of the Great Blasket Island*). First published in 1929, *An tOileánach* is the autobiography of Tomás Ó Criomhthain, a Blasket Island fisherman. The origins of this book lie within the community dwelling on the Great Blasket, but the catalyst for the project was the great number of visiting scholars who were drawn to the Blaskets by their reputation for being an “untainted” Gaelic cultural area. John Millington Synge was one of the first visitors to the island when he arrived in August 1905 to explore the rich store of Irish language and culture preserved on the margins, far from the influence of Anglicizing forces (Mac Conghail 1987:132). The reputation of the Blaskets as a bastion of “pure” Gaelic language and culture also drew the Norwegian linguist, Carl Marstrander, in late summer 1907. He was directed to Ó Criomhthain for instruction in Irish by the King of the Island.<sup>3</sup> Marstrander studied Irish with Ó Criomhthain, and introduced him to some early Gaelic Revival literature, such as the novel *Niamh* (1907) by Father Peadar Ó Laoghaire (O’Crohan 2000:224; Mac Conghail 1987:135).

Marstrander, in turn, encouraged Robin Flower (1881-1946), an English scholar studying Old Irish with him in Dublin, to go to the Blaskets and Ó Criomhthain for lessons from “the master” (O’Crohan 2000:238). Flower arrived in 1910, ready to learn Modern Irish to supplement his study of Old Irish with Marstrander; he studied with Ó Criomhthain periodically over the course of several years (Mac Conghail 1987:137-38; Dew 1998:10). Nor was it a one-sided exchange, since Ó Criomhthain was able to utilize some of Flower’s knowledge of Irish and other literatures to broaden and enrich his own writing, and to go beyond the short articles that he had been writing on folklore for journals (Mac Conghail 1987:139; O’Crohan 2000:x). Flower would also serve as the translator of *An tOileánach*, informed by his studies with Ó Criomhthain, when he produced the English version of *The Islandman* (1934).

While Robin Flower played a crucial role in assuring Ó Criomhthain of the interest of foreign scholars in the culture of the Great Blasket and eventually served as his translator, as Mac Conghail notes (139), without Brian Ó Ceallaigh, Ó Criomhthain might never have

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<sup>3</sup> The King of the Island was Ó Criomhthain’s childhood friend, Pádraig Ó Catháin. The title of *rí* or “king” was used in several islands off the west coast of Ireland, usually for an individual elected to a position of responsibility and representation in that community. He was called on for local community leadership and served as the island’s postman. See Mac Conghail 1987:39; O’Crohan 2000:224.

undertaken the project of autobiography at all. It was Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha (An Seabhac)<sup>4</sup> who directed Ó Ceallaigh to the Blaskets to study Irish, and who also provided him with a letter of introduction to Ó Criomhthain (140). He studied with Ó Criomhthain for almost a year in 1917; before he left, Ó Criomhthain promised him a “page by page . . . account of his life on the Island and that he would supply also a kind of daily account of Island life” (142). In return, Ó Ceallaigh supplied Ó Criomhthain with paper and other supplies (including tobacco and money), and Ó Criomhthain posted journal accounts to him. These were eventually published by An Seabhac as the island diary, *Allagar na hInise* (1928) (published in English translation as *Island Cross-Talk* in 1986). Ó Criomhthain had finished with the journal project by the end of 1923, and began work on his autobiography, sending pages along to Ó Ceallaigh as he completed them through 1924. At this point, the manuscript was nearly completed, and Ó Ceallaigh was attempting to have it published with no success. He eventually left the country and handed the entire project off to An Seabhac (Mac Conghail 1987:142; O’Crohan 2000:x-xi).

An Seabhac reviewed the manuscript, set it in order, requested of Ó Criomhthain certain details to flesh out portions of the text, and solicited the final chapter of the book. He also acted as editor, eliminating portions of it for reasons of length and for “reasons of ‘taste’, in accordance with the fashion of the time” (Mac Conghail 1987:144).<sup>5</sup> The manuscript was completed in 1926, and the first edition was published in 1929. In 1973 a second edition was edited by Pádraig Ua Maoileoin, Tomás Ó Criomhthain’s grandson, whose edition both included and eliminated different portions of the manuscript than the first edition in an attempt to present a more authentic text (Ó Criomhthain 1980:8). A critical edition was published in 2002 from the original manuscript (barring the first chapter, which was lost and reconstructed from the first and second editions), and edited by Seán Ó Coileáin.<sup>6</sup>

Robin Flower’s translation, *The Islandman*, was published by Talbot Press in Dublin in 1934, and again in 1937. Oxford University Press has done a great deal towards popularizing *The Islandman*, publishing it first in 1951, and keeping it in print as part of its World’s Classics and Oxford Paper Backs series (Dew 1998:14; Ó Fiannachta 1983:44). In 2000, a complete set of the Blasket Island texts was reissued (Doan 2001:81). Although the consistent availability of *The Islandman* is appreciated, the presentation of the texts by Oxford University Press has perhaps contributed to the notion of the Blasket texts as constituting a completed set, a finished project located firmly in the past. The widespread dissemination of the work, in Ireland and elsewhere, has been in the English language, as *The Islandman*.

In the production of *The Islandman*, we have, then, a process of production that involved at least four individuals. Tomás Ó Criomhthain acted as native, providing his life story as the

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<sup>4</sup> An Seabhac (“the hawk”) was the pen-name of Ó Siochfhradha, who would later serve as editor for Tomás’ work. He was heavily involved in the activities of the Gaelic League. He worked as a civil servant, served as a senator, and was an ardent folklorist engaged in collecting, editing, and publishing materials from the oral tradition in Ireland. It was customary for those active in the Gaelic Revival, and subsequently the Free State government, to use pen names when publishing.

<sup>5</sup> For an accounting of An Seabhac’s editorial additions and excisions, see Stewart 1976, and Ó Coileáin’s “Réamhrá” (“Foreword”) in Ó Criomhthain 2002.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed comparison of the first and second editions with the manuscript, consult Stewart 1976.

subject of the text. Ó Ceallaigh and An Seabhac both acted as editors, shaping the manuscript during the process of production by making suggestions and requests of Ó Criomhthain as he was writing. Flower then served as the translator, and it is his translation that has been used as the basis for translation into other languages for global distribution. Flower is unusual, however: unlike the typical translator who may become involved only after the text is finished and proceeds with the job without any direct contact with the native or editor, Flower contributed to Ó Criomhthain's development as a writer before the text was produced. And even before he took on the role as translator of *The Islandman*, he had already begun collecting material from Ó Criomhthain that would appear in a volume of local history edited by Flower. Flower, then, is an important figure in the process of production, and understanding his role is essential to developing a critical reading of *The Islandman*.

### Understanding Robin Flower

Flower first visited the Great Blasket in 1910, and he returned regularly for the rest of his life, with a extended absence during World War I, introducing his wife and eventually his children to the Blasket. Flower's impetus for his journey of discovery came from his work. He had undertaken the task of cataloging the Irish manuscripts at the British Museum around 1906 (Ó Lúing 2000:97). Although he had already begun learning Modern Irish, he quickly felt the need for both Old and Middle Irish, and was granted a subsidy in June of 1910 to attend Professor Carl Marstrander's class in Dublin at the School of Irish Learning.<sup>7</sup> Marstrander sent Flower to the Blaskets and the hearth of Ó Criomhthain. As Flower's Irish improved, he began collecting texts from the oral tradition from Ó Criomhthain and other informants, ultimately enabling him to write his own account of the Blasket in *The Western Island* (1944), and to produce a collection of Ó Criomhthain's local history in *Seanchas ón Oileán Tiar* (published posthumously, 1956). Flower also drew on this material for his study, *The Irish Tradition* (1947). This collection of essays, originally delivered as lectures on the history of Irish literature, gave careful consideration to the influences and interactions between the Irish literary tradition and other European traditions. Along with other scholars, Flower "established . . . a climate for the Island community in which it would be possible for the Islanders to write about their lives and the Island in their own language" (Mac Conghail 1987:139).

Flower and Ó Criomhthain shared a friendship that was by all accounts remarkable. As Mac Conghail asserts, their connection was based upon shared "insights into literature, history and the very nature of man. . . . Flower's Irish had, over the period up to the first World War, so improved as to enable him to speak with Tomás on a considerable intellectual level" (1987:139). Flower's extensive training as a medievalist, and his study of Irish, were complemented by his studies with Ó Criomhthain on the Blasket, which introduced him to the medieval Europe of his imagination. As Flower put it, "The Blasket [was] the ultimate shore of the older world, where

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<sup>7</sup> "The object of the School was to train native Irish scholars in the scientific investigation, study and publication of unedited Irish manuscripts, thus making available their literary and historical content, so that a true picture of Ireland's past might emerge" (Ó Lúing 2000:98).

one forgot London and the world of the East.”<sup>8</sup> He was in the process of discovering evidence of a shared European tradition centuries old, and took great delight in uncovering Ireland’s interaction with and assimilation of external influences through oral and scribal traditions.

Flower was one of a series of visitors to the Great Blasket, most of whom found what they had hoped to find. J. M. Synge discovered a model of pre-capitalistic society, George Thomson discovered a window into the poetry and life of Homeric Greece, and Flower found the world of medieval Europe. This is a major theme of Flower’s *The Western Island*, which is preoccupied with linking the oral traditions of the Blasket with the (medieval) continent of Europe. He opened his book with the following anecdote of a proverb competition (1985:vii):

The talk inevitably took the form of a recitation of the rich store of proverbs accumulated in a folk civilization on the necessity of death and the consolations of religious faith. One by one, almost as though reciting a liturgy, men and women produced each of his or her contribution from that apparently inexhaustible supply. At last, however, a silence fell as they waited, visibly searching their minds for a fresh inspiration. Suddenly, an old woman in the corner leaned forward and said with an air of finality:

“Cá’il an sneachta bhí comh geal anuirig?” (“Where is the snow that was so bright last year?”)

I sprang up in excitement and cried out: “Où sont les neiges d’antan?” [“Where are the snows of yesteryear?”]

“Who said that?” asked the King, an expert in this lore.

“François Villon said it,” I replied.

“And who was he?” he returned. “Was he a Connaughtman?”

“No, he lived hundreds of years ago and he said it in French, and it was a proverb of his people.”

“Well,” broke in Tomás, “You can’t better the proverb. I’ve always heard that the French are a clever people, and I wouldn’t put it past them to have said that before we did.”

During his conversations with Ó Criomhthain, Flower discovered a Blasket version of the tale of the Trojan Horse. He also connected Ó Criomhthain’s story of a poetry competition and a story “which Laurence Sterne stole, by way of Burton of the *Anatomy*, from Lucian” (1985:17-20). In a newspaper article printed in 1931, he described the great number of traditions present in the oral culture of the Blasket: “I found traces . . . of a collection of tales which were told by Arabs to converted Jews,” “three old women . . . told me . . . the story of Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*,” and “I also found traces of one of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*” (1931).<sup>9</sup> When considering the life and ways of the Island poet, Seán Ó Duínnslé (Seán Dunleavy) so important in Ó Criomhthain’s narrative, Flower reflects (1985:95):

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<sup>8</sup> 1929; cf. Mac Congáil 2004:11.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Mac Congáil 2004:12.

[If] we find, as I have found on the Island, a tale which can be traced back, through the jest-books of the Middle Ages and the sermon-books of the preaching friars to the Arabs of Africa, and through Persian books to ancient India, it is by such men that it has been carried from extremist East to farthest West, to die at last by a turf fire within hearing of the Atlantic wave.

Flower goes on to develop these “last of the race” motifs: “With Seán Ó Duínnslé, and with others of his kind and generation, passed the latest examples of a type of poet with whom the whole of Europe had an uneasy familiarity throughout the Middle Ages” (102). His book tends towards the Romantic and the nostalgic in the majority of his representations of the islanders. He draws parallels between the disappearance of the wandering poets and other aspects of the intrusion of the modern world into rural Ireland (106):

They are gone now, and the fashion of the life they knew has gone with them. The people read newspapers, and, in the police barracks . . . a wireless set strikes wonder into the country people. . . . Perhaps they [the wandering scholars] had a secret of the light foot and the merry heart which is ill exchanged for a music that leaps sea and land to be trapped at last in a machine.

In this final line, Flower’s nostalgia becomes melancholy, acquiring the sense of a missed chance; after all, had he been born into a different age, would he not have been one of the wandering scholars, exemplars of a mode of learning that he found more satisfactory than the modes based on modern technologies? He saw the people of the Blasket as engaged with the continuation of oral traditions that stretched back into the medieval period and included Gaelic and continental elements. As I will discuss below, his perspective on Ó Criomhthain’s work was consistent with his emphasis on the continuity of oral traditions into the modern period.

Flower recounts that, while being ferried over the waves to the Great Blasket, the rower called out to him, “Say your farewell to Ireland.” In response, he said, “And I turn and bid farewell, not only to Ireland, but to England and Europe and all the tangled world of today” (6). The Blaskets were a space outside of time for Flower, or at least outside of modernity, where processes of cultural transmission begun in the Middle Ages were still unfolding.<sup>10</sup> While watching rabbits at play, he reflects: “It was strange to see them sporting unconsciously, as though in some Eden before the coming of man on the earth” (120). Flower needed Ó Criomhthain and the people of the Blasket to give him living examples of the medieval world of his imagination with its interactions between cultures and between oral and chirographic processes. His framing of *The Islandman* reflects his beliefs about the significance of Blasket culture and its role as an exemplar of pre-modern communicative processes.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Fabian 2002:27 for a diagram of schizogenic time/space, of which Flower’s description is a prime example.

### Critical Errors

*An tOileánach* and *The Islandman* are texts that have been read and understood in a fashion that I argue is not only limited, but fundamentally incorrect. This reading may be summarized by Seán Ó Tuama's mastering statement: "*An tOileánach* is more the biography of an island community than of a single islander. . . . [It is] a majestic social document. . . . One senses this public masculine mind revealing itself everywhere in *An tOileánach*" (1995:205). This line of thinking follows closely Flower's own assessment of Ó Criomhthain's work in his "Foreword" to *The Islandman*: "The great value of this book is that it is a description of this vanishing mode of life by one who has known no other, and tells his tale with perfect frankness, serving no theory and aiming at no literary effect" (O'Crohan 2000:vii). Both of these statements elide Ó Criomhthain's individuality and his own personal choices as an author, casting him as a representative type, indeed as *the* Islandman of the title. Mark Quigley argues that Flower "dramatically circumscribes Ó Criomhthain's agency as a writer," and he demonstrates that Flower presents Ó Criomhthain only as "a perceptive recorder of events and traditions" (2003:388-9). Similarly, Ó Tuama's reading marginalizes Ó Criomhthain's agency and individuality, but this view is not supported by a close reading of Ó Criomhthain's exercise of agency within the text.

### Reading Ó Criomhthain's Agency

Thanks to the scholarship of James Stewart, Muiris Mac Conghail, and others, as well as the existence of multiple versions of the text, it is possible to assess the extent and nature of editorial collaboration, shaping, and interference in *An tOileánach* and *The Islandman*. While Ó Criomhthain was encouraged, even trained, to produce a certain type of writing, he consistently saw himself as the author constructing his own work, a process that he likened to the manner in which he built his own house—by himself, without any to hand him stone or mortar (O'Crohan 2000:189). This type of assertion must be interpreted carefully. It may prove impossible to evaluate its truth at a factual level, but it can be analyzed for its assertion and purpose in the text. By deploying this trope, Ó Criomhthain is asserting not only his competence as a builder of houses, but also his independence in endeavors that usually require assistance.

In a similar fashion, his encounter with the island poet reads as the explication of his own genesis as a writer, prior to any contact with outsiders. In introducing his first contact with the island poet, Ó Criomhthain begins with a statement of competence: "And, though no one has a word to say in favor of that sort of food nowadays, I was pleased enough with it then, for I had a mill in my mouth to grind it" (O'Crohan 2000:85). Although this statement is unrelated in subject to the following encounter, thematically it is part of Ó Criomhthain's repeated claims to independence and competence. Both his independence and his competence are threatened by the poet. Ó Criomhthain goes out cutting turf, expecting to gather a great deal of fuel, but is interrupted by the poet Dunlevy (Seán Ó Duinnslé). Ó Criomhthain remarks as follows (O'Crohan 2000:86):

I fancy that no poet has ever been much good at carrying through any job that had any work in it except only poetry. . . for, whenever I take it in hand to compose quatrains (and I often do) I shouldn't be much use in a gang of workers or in the field so long as I was engaged upon them.

Ó Criomhthain establishes the work-shirking character of the poet, foreshadowing the interruption of his labor on the turf. He establishes an equivalency between composing poetry and the effects of hard physical labor, an assertion that he will later generalize to include all writing. And he claims the practice of poetry for himself as well, claiming a certain competence in the poet's craft. The poet bids him to take a break from his work and sit down. Ó Criomhthain complies (*idem*):

I didn't care much for what he had to say, but I was rather shy of refusing to sit down with him. Besides, I knew that if the poet had anything against me, he would make a satire on me that would be very unpleasant, especially as I was just about coming out in the world.

The effects and fear of a poet's satire are familiar tropes in the Gaelic tradition, but also of interest is Ó Criomhthain's identification of himself as vulnerable during the liminal transition between adolescence and manhood.

The poet then recites the first poem he ever made, "The Black Faced Sheep," a satire composed against a neighbor he accused of stealing his prize sheep. Remarkably, the poet then requests that Ó Criomhthain write it down. "The poem will be lost," says he, "if somebody doesn't pick it up. Have you anything in your pocket that you could write it down with?" (*idem*). Even more remarkably, Ó Criomhthain fishes out his pencil and paper without any explanation of why he took them out cutting turf in the first place. And bemoaning his misfortune, he writes down the poet's work in an improvised spelling as he was not yet literate in Irish. "And that was one of the first days that I felt the world going against me, for the fact is, for one day that went well with me, five would go wrong for me from that day out" (87). As Mac Conghail has argued (1987:142), there is a link between Ó Criomhthain's genesis as a writer and his encounter with the poet: "Tomás used the only important creative figure he had known from within his culture in the writing up of his genesis as a writer." The increased awareness of hardship reflects Ó Criomhthain's alertness to the difficulties inherent in being a writer. Rather than a passive recorder of the community's biography, Ó Criomhthain constructs and develops an account of his own development as a writer.

The episode ends as Ó Criomhthain, having failed to cut much turf, discovers that his dinner has spoiled while working with the poet. Ending the episode on a note of exasperation has a comedic and lightening effect, but it also serves to underscore the sacrifice that being a writer might entail. By way of further reinforcement, Ó Criomhthain sketches a parallel episode. In the next chapter, his turf cutting is once again interrupted, this time by spirited girls. In this way, Ó Criomhthain draws a link between making poetry, writing as a substitute for work, and sexual activity. Like sex, writing is a potentially debilitating and dangerous enterprise (cf. Kiberd 2001:529). But unlike sex, writing is also a potential source of income, even in old age, which makes it productive in the same way that work is productive. Furthermore, any sort of work that

brings income is not to be scorned in *An tOileánach* and *The Islandman*, since the ability to work underlies all personal independence on the island.

Ó Criomhthain's relationship with the poet is a thread that runs through the bulk of the text. Ó Criomhthain shows himself in command of the poet's repertoire, apparently with some exclusivity. At a Christmas gathering, his Uncle Diarmid says to Ó Criomhthain (O'Crohan 2000:139):

“God's blessings on the souls of your dead, sing me ‘The Quilt.’ I've never heard the whole of it together since the poet Dunlevy let it out of his lips.” I didn't require much pressing, though ‘The Quilt’ tried me hard. I sang eighteen verses of it. “O, King of Glory! Eternal praise be to Him! How on earth did he put it all together?” said Diarmid.

In this way, Ó Criomhthain pushes the assertion that he had a special relationship with the poet, and in some ways positions himself as the poet's successor. Certainly, Ó Criomhthain puts forward no other candidates for the position in his text. Shortly after this demonstration of his command over “The Quilt,” he is out driving the cattle when he comes across the poet. Once again the poet detains him to write out another of his compositions. “Have you got any paper in your pocket? If you have, out with it, and your pencil, too. I shall carry all the songs I ever made to the grave with me if you don't pick them up” (140). By claiming the role of the poet's heir, Ó Criomhthain is making a bid for a powerful double status on the island. He is claiming both the prestige and authority of the Gaelic oral tradition contained within the poet's repertoire, and also a new tradition of island-writer or author of which he is the first (even if not the last).

Ó Criomhthain is well known for his singing and dancing. And, even though he does assert his claim as a respected singer, he argues his claim to poetry through his special relationship with the poet in a more strenuous fashion, suggesting, perhaps, that he might have been gainsaid on this particular claim: “Was I myself fated beyond all the people in the Island to have all my time wasted by the poet?—for I never saw him frequenting any of the others, but only me” (152). This grumbling is boasting, but also a concern about the inability of poetry to bring income. While “quatrains” are as exhausting as physical labor, they are not productive in the same way. Prose writing, however, is a different matter: it is his writing for newspapers and journals that provides him vital income in old age. In Chapter 22, Ó Criomhthain describes in detail some of the wake practices and customs of the island, and he also takes a moment to reflect on the life and work of the poet Dunlevy (215): “The poet had a great character when he was young. . . . I knew his character better than anybody else though he was old in my day.” By asserting his relationship with the poet as exclusive, Ó Criomhthain attempts to drive home his claim to both a poet's prestige and a unique position as the island's first author.

### **Reading Orality in *The Islandman***

There are moments in *An tOileánach* and *The Islandman* that reflect the shift in communicative technologies from orality to a type of literacy. These moments, so beloved of Walter J. Ong, are genuine occurrences; they are not presented in service of a theory of

communications, but they are not unconscious either. While many accounts of the Blaskets are at pains to emphasize the oral modality of communication on the island, Ó Criomhthain was literate, and in his work on *An tOileánach* and *The Islandman* he was operating in some sort of literate mode. As Ong has observed, the transition from an oral mode to a literate one allows for increased self-awareness and gives Ó Criomhthain a vantage point from which to survey his life: “technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness. . . . Writing heightens consciousness” (1982:82). The transition from an oral mode to a literate one allows for increased self-awareness and gives Ó Criomhthain a vantage point from which to survey his life.

Ó Criomhthain was educated in the island school, and there he learned to read and write in English. As noted in his first encounter with the poet, he was initially forced to improvise with the English alphabet in order to set down the words in Irish using the *cló Rómhánach* (Roman script), until he learned to write Irish in the *cló Gaelach* (Gaelic script) in his middle age (O’Crohan 2000:223).

In the house where I used to stay [on the mainland] the children were always going to school. The Irish language was being taught in the Dunquin school in those days—as soon as it was in any school in Ireland. The children of this house used to read tales to me all the time whenever I happened to be in their company until I got a taste for the business and made them give me the book, getting one of them by turns to explain to me the difficulties that occur in the language. . . . It didn’t take me long to get so far that I hadn’t to depend on them to read out my tale for me once I understood the differences. For my head was full of it, and, if I came across a limping sentence, all I had to do was to hunt for it in my own brain.

He describes this process as occurring before Marstrander came to visit the island. Unlike critical accounts of his learning to write Irish, which largely emphasize the role outsiders had to play in his progress, Ó Criomhthain, in a self-conscious manner, tells a story about teaching himself to read and write, and locates it before the arrival of the visitors, emphasizing his independence, resourcefulness, and overall competence. His account directly contradicts the critical viewpoint that saw the islanders as a primarily oral community in contrast to the visitors’ literacy.

After learning to read Irish, Ó Criomhthain reports: “Very soon I had a book or two, and people in this island were coming to listen to me reading the old tales to them, and, though they themselves had a good lot of them, they lost their taste for telling them to one another when they compared them with the style the books put on them” (*idem*). This does indeed call to mind some of Ong’s observations about the wonder that the practices of literacy instill when first encountered in a community that functions largely in an oral mode. Discussing the wonder of literacy, he observes (1982:93):

Scraps of writing are used as magic amulets, but they also can be valued simply because of the wonderful permanence they confer on words. The Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe describes how in an Ido village the one man who knew how to read hoarded in his house every bit of printed material that came his way—newspapers, cartons, receipts. It all seemed too remarkable to throw away.

While moments in *The Islandman* reflect the dynamics between orality and literacy, a reading focused solely on recovering the text's oral elements sets aside Ó Criomhthain's carefully constructed arguments for his own agency and independence as a writer. A reading focused exclusively on orality potentially undermines even the possibility of agency by portraying the native as being in the midst of a vast communicative shift over which he has no control. This type of reading tends to arrive at the conclusion that the native is merely an informant or mouthpiece, not an active and creative contributor to the process of production.

### Writing against Type, Reading the Individual

Understanding Ó Criomhthain as the mouthpiece of his community, as expressing only thoughts held in common with the other islanders, is perplexing in light of what he writes about himself, namely that he was engaged in producing literature. Partly the confusion seems to lie with critics' understanding of the dynamics of orality and literacy.<sup>11</sup> Ó Tuama's statement that *An tOileánach* (*The Islandman*) "is more the biography of an island community than of a single islander" foregrounds Ó Criomhthain's lifelong participation in the oral traditions of the Blasket, but overshadows his career as a writer, since he began writing during the later part of his life. Ó Criomhthain's work does retain many elements of what Ong identifies as the psychodynamics of orality;<sup>12</sup> however, it is a fundamental misunderstanding of orality to suppose that the individual has no place in it. It comes down to an unresolved, possibly irresolvable tension between Ó Criomhthain-as-individual or Ó Criomhthain-as-type. As an individual, he is an author, singular and unique, crafting a literary text. As a type, he is the islandman, a representative of a larger group, ironically also posited as unique. Furthermore, this island community is meant to represent the exemplar of Gaelic identity. This tension is embodied even on the cover of the current Oxford University Press edition of *The Islandman*. The photograph taken by Thomas H. Mason of Ó Criomhthain holding a copy of his book, *An tOileánach*, forms the background of the cover, and in white letters the text "The Islandman [/] Tomás O'Crohan" floats across the middle of the image. Here Ó Criomhthain is pictured as author holding his book. He is pictured in profile, wearing his iconic hat—a type of hat not worn in other pictures of the islanders included in the text. On the other hand, the title, *The Islandman*, refers to Ó Criomhthain as a representative type, which coincides with Flower's argument that Ó Criomhthain, while optimally skilled for the job, is nonetheless producing a text whose purpose is merely to record and represent the "vanishing mode of life" on the Blasket, not to record and represent himself. Ó

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<sup>11</sup> See Harris 1993 for a thoroughly considered analysis of the differences between texts collected from Ó Criomhthain's dictation and texts written by Ó Criomhthain. While Harris' analysis focuses on the use of triadic structures, he demonstrates that Ó Criomhthain was fully capable of realism in his writing, very much in a literate mode, not an oral one.

<sup>12</sup> Ong's further characteristics of orally based thought and expression are: 1) additive rather than subordinative; 2) aggregative rather analytic; 3) redundant or "copious"; 4) conservative or traditionalist; 5) close to the human lifeworld; 6) agonistically-toned; 7) empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced; 8) homeostatic; 9) situational rather than abstract (1982:31-56).

Tuama praises *An tOileánach* in contrast to other Blasket autobiographies for being a “factual autobiography” and not at all an “autobiographical novel” (1995:205). Here is the bias against Ó Criomhthain as an individual and as a subjective author: his text is valued because he merely reports objective facts unaffected by his own position.

By way of contrast, Ó Criomhthain’s account locates his genesis as a writer during his youth, and his acquisition of literacy in Irish as occurring before Marstrander came to visit the island. Ó Criomhthain tells a story about teaching himself to read and write, and situates it before the arrival of the visitors. He emphasizes his own skills and accomplishments when he describes his first meeting with Marstrander: “he had observed that the best Irish was here. He asked the King who was the best man to teach him Irish. The king explained to him that I was the man, for I was able to read it and had fine, correct Irish before ever I read it” (O’Crohan 2000:224). In the penultimate chapter, Ó Criomhthain writes, “I have been twenty-seven years hard at work on this language, and it is seventeen years, since the Norseman, Marstrander, came my way” (241). He specifically establishes that his literacy has preceded Marstrander’s arrival by ten years. While *The Islandman* is the result of a series of collaborations, Ó Criomhthain makes a sustained bid for his status and role as a writer and author.

John McGahern has argued that Ó Criomhthain’s “view of reality is at no time a personal view and it is never at variance with the values of his society as a whole. In fact we find him boasting that never once in a whole lifetime did he break a custom, and custom was the only law of that civilization” (1989:55). It might be more correct to say that Ó Criomhthain sees himself as the ultimate arbitrator of community values, and that if he never breaks a custom, it is because he is the judge. Rather than viewing himself as a typical member of the group he sees himself as the exceptional member of that group. The tendency to equate orality with faceless and undifferentiated community is not sustained by a close reading of *An tOileánach* and *The Islandman*. Ó Criomhthain’s bid for agency as the author of the text, even though working in collaboration with others, runs through the length of the text. Moreover, he carefully represents himself as acquiring the skills and technologies of writing as a process of self-development, independent of aid from visiting scholars. Even if this is not entirely accurate or consistent with other accounts of Ó Criomhthain’s development as a writer, a critical reading must at least consider his claims of independence.

## Conclusion

Most discussions of *An tOileánach* and *The Islandman* end with a meditation on Ó Criomhthain’s own oft-quoted conclusion to his book: “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” (244). Frequently read as an icon’s elegy for a pre-modern culture, dovetailing with “last of the race” tropes that resonate on both sides of the Atlantic, this conclusion is also Ó Criomhthain’s assertion of his own greatness. In words not included in either the first edition of *An tOileánach* or consequently in Flower’s translation, he writes: “Rud eile, níl tír ná dúthaigh ná náisiún ná go dtugann duine an chraobh leis tar chách eile.

Ó lasadh an chéad tine insan Oileán so, níor scríbh éinne a bheatha ná a shaol ann. Fágann san an chraobh ag an té a dhein é” (Ó Criomhthain 2002:328).<sup>14</sup> In *The Islandman*, this passage is reduced to: “Since the first fire was kindled in this island none has written of his life and his world. I am proud to set down my story and the story of my neighbours” (O’Crohan 2000:244-45).

Ó Criomhthain takes a great deal of pride both in being the first writer from the island, and in being the exceptional individual representing his community in print. This sense of self-worth and pride is expressed carefully to avoid the appearance of boasting. As he says of his singing: “If there were two better than me, there were three worse” (O’Crohan 2000:108; cf. Ó hÁinle 1993:137). Even while observing some of the conventions of modesty by acknowledging the impossibility of recording his life in isolation from the community in which he lived, he still lays claim to a victory over his peers. But in *The Islandman* (which does not include Ó Criomhthain’s claim to victory over his peers) his achievement of being the first author from the island is dropped, and what is left is a more modest statement about his pride in his work as a writer. This serves, in effect, to place Ó Criomhthain back among the crowd from which he has written himself into difference. In short, An Seabhaic and Flower’s contributions to the shaping of the text present him as a type, a very good example of a type, but still of the same type as all his peers. Reading the conclusion of the text as an active assertion challenges what has become the conventional reading. In this light, “the like of us will never be again” takes on the meaning of a boast: no one has ever been the like, or equal, of the people of the Blasket, and among them Tomás Ó Criomhthain stands out as the first Blasket writer. He has written himself as a writer, asserted his own agency in the text, and laid claim to both the inheritance of the oral tradition and to a new tradition of written literature.

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<sup>14</sup> “Another thing, there isn’t a country, district, or nation in which one person doesn’t exceed all others in accomplishments. From the lighting of the first fire on this Island, no one has written about his life nor the Island’s. That leaves the achievement with the one who has done it” (translation mine).

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