



The Blasket Island Writers (Dingle Peninsula)

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The suggested readings for this part of the trip are

O’Crohan, Tomas. *The Islandman*. 1937: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
ISBN 0192812335; ISBN: 978-0192812339.

Sayers, Peig. *Peig: The Autobiography of Peig Sayers of the Great Blasket Island*.
(Any edition).

The Dingle Peninsula is the westernmost point in Ireland, a place where “next parish, Boston” truly has meaning. At the very western end of the peninsula lie the six islands that make up the Blaskets (map on p. 4).

As the Gaelic language¹ and the old ways of daily life were starting to disappear from Ireland in the early decades of the twentieth century, scholars from Scandinavia and Britain, as well as from Ireland, traveled to the western islands to learn the language in what they believed was its purest form. The scholars who came to the Great Blasket Island off the Dingle Peninsula encouraged local storytellers like Tomás O’Crohan and Peig Sayers to put their stories on paper for the world to read. Other islanders also became writers, and a bookshelf full of tales, memoirs, and poetry emerged. O’Crohan prophesied the end of island life in his memoir: “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.” Though the island was abandoned in 1953, its literature lives on and has been translated into many other languages.

¹ When speaking of their language, the Irish use the terms “Gaelic” and “Irish” almost interchangeably.

On our trip, we'll read some of these wonderful works in English, explore the gorgeous Dingle coast where the islanders fished and traded, and visit the Blasket Centre, a museum and cultural center across the channel from the Great Blasket Island with views of its beach and cottages.

What follows is an essay introducing you to Tomás O'Crohan and the Blasket Island writers, some relevant maps and photographs, a few discussion questions for those who read either *The Islandman* or *The Autobiography of Peig Sayers*.

Tomás O'Crohan and The Blasket Island Writers

"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, by Tomás O'Crohan)

On the west coast of Ireland off the Dingle Peninsula lies a group of tiny, barren islands surrounded by the great swells of the Atlantic. Today inhabited by only a few sheep and sea birds, the Blasket Islands were once home to a population of nearly 200, most of whom lived on the largest island. Fishing was the main source of income, but the islanders also raised sheep and grew potatoes on a few acres of arable land near the village of thirty or so stone cottages. The island had no shops, doctor, electricity, indoor plumbing, school (most of the time), church, or amenities of any kind, and trips to the mainland—only three miles away—often had to be cancelled because of rough seas.

Life was hard in Ireland, even harder on the western islands, and emigration ate away at the community. In 1953 when the islands were finally abandoned by government order, only twenty-two souls had to be evacuated to Dunquin on the mainland, where their new government-issue houses looked out across the sound to their former home. But from this tiny population, over a period of only thirty years or so, came a remarkable literary outpouring of nearly fifty books, some of which have been translated into many languages and several of which have become classics of Irish literature.

The man who started the Blasket Islands literary renaissance was Tomás O'Crohan, who wrote his two autobiographical works, *Island Cross-Talk* (1928) and *The Islandman* (1929), when he was in his seventies. An Irish speaker by birth, O'Crohan did have a few years of schooling on the island and, as he grew to adulthood, earned a reputation as a great storyteller and user of words. But under British rule, Ireland's schools taught reading and writing and all subjects in English, so O'Crohan was illiterate in his own language until the visits of several foreigners who were interested in learning Irish prompted him to learn the written language in his sixties. With encouragement from

these outsiders and inspired by the reading of Maxim Gorky's autobiography, O'Crohan set about writing the story of his life.

O'Crohan's books make remarkable reading. They record a way of life almost untouched by the sweep of history and the advances of civilizations beyond his seabound home. Though life on the Baskets may have seemed primitive to outsiders, O'Crohan showed its complexity by recounting with insight and thoughtfulness daily activities such as killing and dividing a seal, settling a dispute among neighbors, reaping the profits from a shipwreck off the island's shore, or dealing with government agencies who came to interfere with island life. From O'Crohan we learn of Patrick Keane, the island's elected "king"; of cutting turf with the wandering poet Shane Dunlevy; of evenings filled with stories, song, and dance in one of the community's tiny houses; of island ways and the fatalistic philosophy interwoven with the Catholicism and Celtic mythology that underlay them

Though others have romanticized island life, holding the Blasket Islanders up as a model of "pure" Celtic virtue and of a lifestyle somehow superior to modern ways, O'Crohan saw his culture with eyes wide open. "Grinding toil always when the time of trouble comes," was his assessment of the Blasket way of life. He wrote of the early deaths of his wife and children with characteristic stoicism, even in his grief declaring that others had greater sorrows than his own. "There was no cure for these things," he wrote of his troubles, "but to meet them with endurance as best I could."

The Islandman became an international bestseller during O'Crohan's lifetime and was an important milestone, marking the emergence of widely read literature in the Irish language as a stage in the literary renaissance led in English by William Butler Yeats, J. M. Synge, Lady Gregory, and others. And O'Crohan inspired a number of his fellow islanders to write their own stories for the world to read. The most famous of these were Peig Sayers (*Peig*, 1935; *An Old Woman's Reflections*, 1962), whose tales of island life and lore demonstrate even in translation her language's richness of expression, and Maurice O'Sullivan (*Twenty Years A-Growin'*, 1933), who most memorably captured the beauty of the bleak island landscape. Since that great literary flowering, many other Blasket Islanders and several of the Irish language scholars who studied among them have published stories, novels, poems, and other accounts of life there, creating a formidable legacy for Tomás O'Crohan.

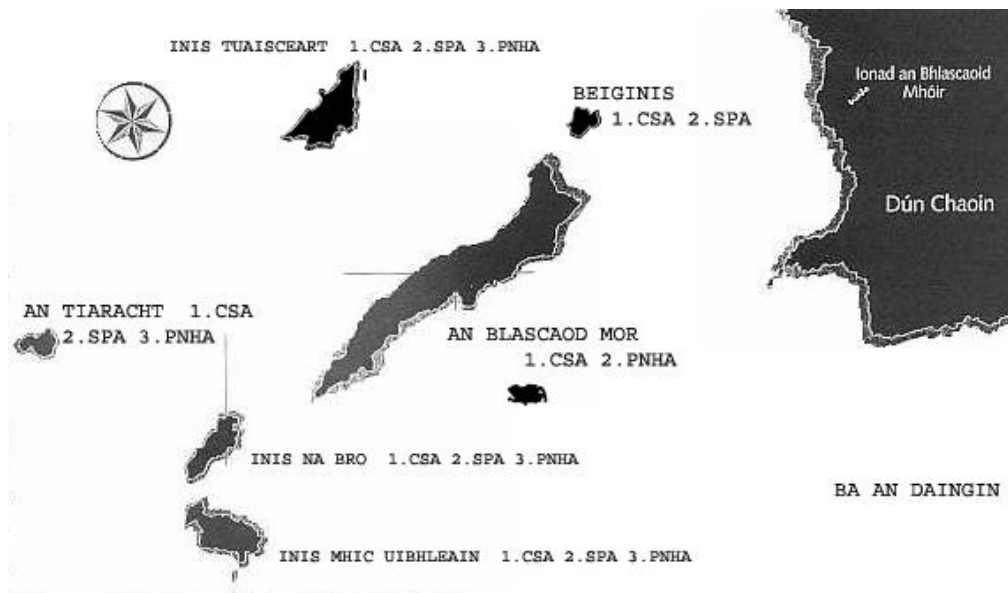


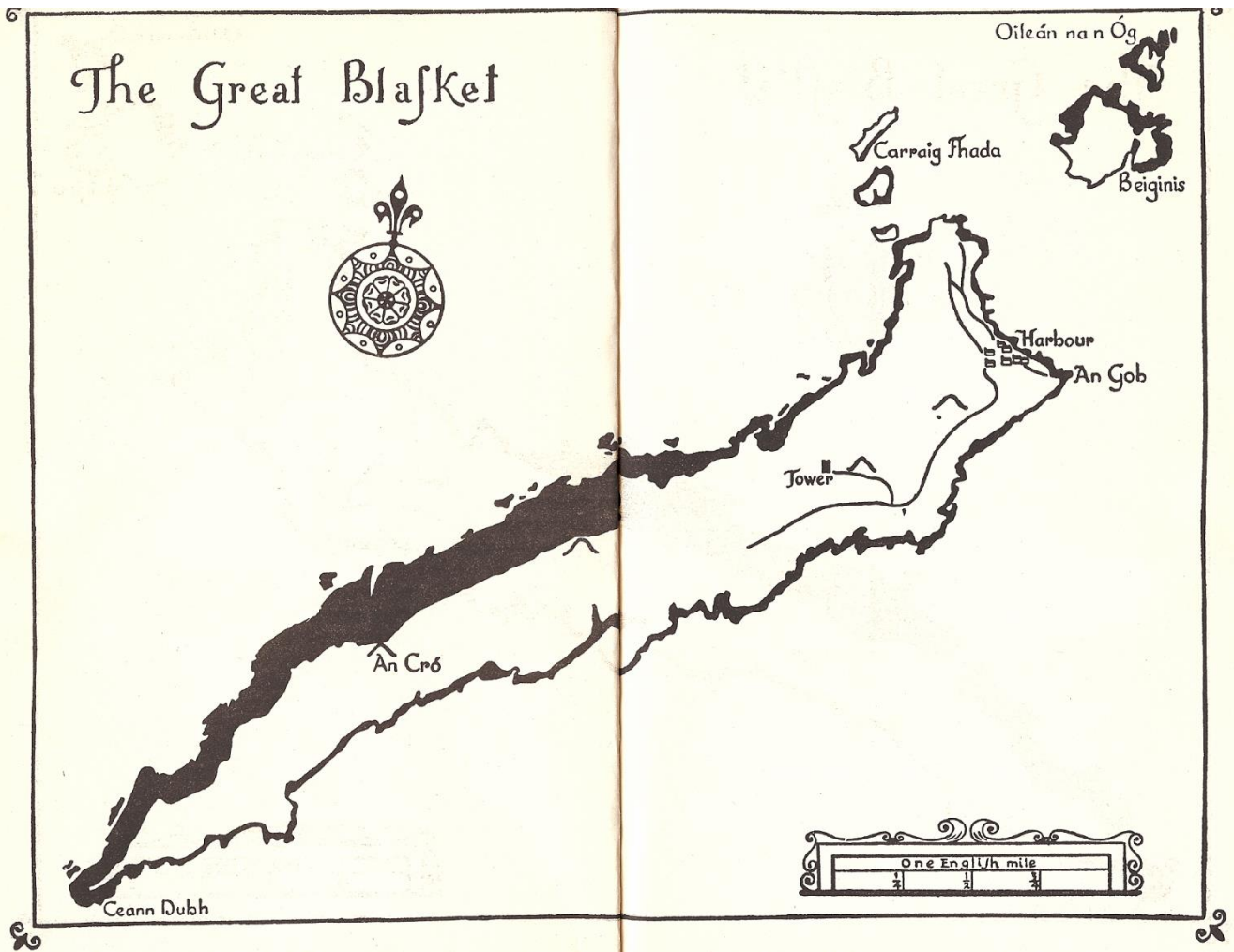
There's a marvelous photograph of O'Crohan, a profile that accents his sharp, aged features, his broad-brimmed black hat; he is standing outside his home looking out to sea with the island's edge silhouetted in the background, proudly holding a copy of *The Islandman*, the book that started it all.

The Blasket Islands, Co. Kerry



An Blascaod Mór is called The Great Blasket but was referred to by the Islanders as “The Western Island.” Tiaracht Island, the most westerly of the Blasket Islands, is Europe’s most westerly point (excluding Rockall), at 10 deg 40’ West.





The Village and Tomás O’Crohan’s House today



Questions for Discussion of *The Islandman* and *The Autobiography of Peig Sayers*

1. Though Tomás O’Crohan had only read one or two memoirs when he decided to write his own, memoirs are all the rage in our era. How is *The Islandman* different from or similar to memoirs you’ve read recently?
2. How does O’Crohan handle time in the *The Islandman*? How is the book organized? Why does he use so many “flash forwards” in the telling of his story? Does historical time play a role in the telling of the story?
3. How would you describe O’Crohan’s world view? What are his values? What are the things and activities and who are the people he cares most about? How might his values and sense of right and wrong differ from those held by Irish people living on the mainland in a more modern society, at least in cities like Dublin or Cork?
4. What does O’Crohan mean when he says “the like of us will never be again”?
5. Discuss the importance of poetry, writing, and the Gaelic language to Tomás and the people he encounters. Why does he fear the poet he meets? Why is it so important to Tomás to teach and eventually write in his native language? You might find it interesting to do some online research about the status of the Gaelic language in Ireland today.
6. What role(s) does the supernatural—in all its manifestations—play in *The Islandman*? In *The Autobiography of Peig Sayers*?
7. Peig Sayers was a storyteller whose tales were written down and recorded by others. How is that reflected in the writing style of her autobiography? Compare her style to that of Tomás O’Crohan, who did pen his own works.
8. Many Irish people who went to school in the 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s were forced to read Peig Sayers and other Blasket Island writers as assignments, probably without much context or discussion. As a result, these writers—especially poor Peig—were much despised until recently, when scholars started taking them seriously again and people started reading them again as adults. What about these two books and writers might be resented or disliked by school-age children? What kind of an “Ireland” might the books be used to promote? Do these works speak to us across the ocean and across the century since their publication?