Tomas Ó Crohan's Autobiography: A Cultural Analysis of Robin Flower's English Translation

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Abstract: *Tomás Ó Crohan's autobiography, An tOileánach, was translated into English by Robin Flower, appearing as* The Islandman *in 1934. It has been widely read ever since, perhaps more widely than the Irish original.*
A view that something is lost in the translation has persisted through the years. This paper seeks to examine this view by considering Flower's translation as both process and product and the context in which it was produced. It seeks also to consider what it was that Flower translated.

Tomás Ó Crohan was a man from the Blasket Islands who wrote in Irish during the second and third decades of the last century. At the time he was writing the society in which he lived was in decline, the language he spoke was almost dead in many parts of the wider nation and the island on which he lived was not many years from complete evacuation. During this critical period, many scholars visited the island, drawn there by the Irish language spoken there. They quickly recognised the cultural value of island lore and traditions and soon saw the community as a vestige of the old Gaelic order. At the national level, questions of Irish identity were being considered in tandem with a language revival movement. At the international level, the loss of the Irish language and cultural tradition was being viewed as a loss to European civilisation. As rare examples of modern writing in Irish, Tomás' books were enthusiastically received, his autobiography, *An tOileánach,* soon becoming a tale of the nation, a blue-print of Irishness that is still owned and read a certain way by many Irish people today.

Tomás' autobiography was translated into English as *The Islandman* by Robin Flower, an Englishman and frequent visitor to the island who had worked extensively with Tomás on matters of language and culture over a period of many years. This translation has always been more widely read than Tomás' original text and has been reprinted regularly since its first publication in 1934. Nevertheless, research in Ireland in 1999 revealed that there were some who had certain reservations in regard to this translation: they felt that Tomás' work is lost to a considerable degree on readers who do not speak the Irish language and on those who live outside the culture. I was told, in short, that within Ireland, the Blasket books are valued for their fine Irish language and for their expression of a culture, both of which are commonly deemed inaccessible as well as irrelevant to readers of the books in translation and that every sentence of Blasket writing contains a cultural load that is not apparent to such readers. I heard that there is something intrinsically untranslatable in the texts and that it is in this area of untranslatability that the essence of the texts is to be found. It was said that reading Tomás in translation would not give much of a picture of the Tomás that is accessible to readers of Irish and that it is through the Irish text he is best appreciated.

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The views of translation on which these attitudes seem to be based have been re-examined in the light of various kinds of literary theory in recent years. They hark back to the days when translation was thought of as the inferior product of a second rate literary activity which, at best, compared unfavourably with the writing of an "original" work (Bassnett 1996, 10). At worst, it was viewed as a betrayal of a pure source (11), itself a notion that has come under serious question. Considered mechanical and derivative, translation was always and inevitably subordinated to its superior original.

In a recent series of seminars, Maria Tymoczko discussed the impact of World War II on Translation Studies: the urgent need to gather and be able to interpret intelligence across many languages and cultures gave rise to two distinct philosophies of translation (IASIL Conference, Sao Paolo, 2002). The first concerned itself with "cracking the code", while the second, more broadly based school of thought recognised translation as an activity that brought about cultural refraction through language. At last, in the 1980s, the emergence of Translation Studies as a discipline in its own right (Lefevere xi) brought with it a shift in focus from the long concern with the methodology of translation to a concern with its location and significance within cultures. From this developed a recognition of translation as a mode of cultural politics that concerns not one, but two cultures at their point of contact (Mulhern, 164).

It is interesting, at this point to consider the etymology of the word "translate" which shows that to translate is "to carry across". The image of the translator, the one who "carries across", plying the borders while bearing his burden, happily accommodates both post-war schools of thought mentioned above, both the notion of "cracking of the code" and that of refraction of one culture through the language of another. It is the latter of these two views of translation that is most helpful when considering the genesis of *The Islandman*.

The emergence of Translation Studies as a discipline has had a positive impact on the status of translation in both the academic world, where translation was long viewed as a menial intellectual task (Hope) and in the world of literature where it was too often considered an inferior or suspect product. Running counter to the old notion of translation as a secondary product is the notion that translation might in fact constitute a new original Susan Bassnett points out that Derrida and de Campos each concluded that the translation is indeed an original by virtue of the fact that it comes into being after its source text (Bassnett 1996, 22). The fact that the efforts of the translator extend well beyond an attempt at linguistic equivalence to embrace a complex tangle of ideological and poetic judgements offers significant support for such a view.

Translation is now recognised as much more than a linguistic exchange. It is a rewriting that involves at least two cultures, a complex procedure that involves two languages and two literary traditions (Aixela, 53). It involves an effort to match "like with unlike", "familiar with foreign", in Michael Cronin's words (Cronin, 4), in a long process that begins at "the very moment the Self looks at the Other" (Delisle, 223). In its functions and in judgements made about it, translation is doubly burdened in that it must not only be a text but must also represent a text (Aixela, 60). It needs to be considered of value in the receiving culture, while representing, in a way that might be called "faithful", an artefact that already exists in another language and belongs to another literary tradition. Thus, it is always subject to evaluation by two distinct and differing cultures (53).

The notion of the "death of the author" (Barthes, 167) allows fresh consideration of the status of translation, as many consider that it implies the death of the "original" (13). The death of the author and of the original strips the source text of its former authority and moves translation out of its old place in the shadows of literature. Susan Bassnett draws attention to the work of Octavio Paz, who writes of the world being presented to us as a growing heap of texts "each slightly different from the one that came before it: translations of translations of translations. Each text is unique, yet at the same time it is the translation of another text. No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation [...]" (Paz 1992, 154, quoted in Bassnett, 3). This is particularly so with Flower's translation of Tomás, whose work, we will see, was itself already a translation.

Michael Cronin writes that both the process and the product of translation are important in the construction of culture (Cronin, 140). We know that every translation is written and received in a context (Lefevere, 14) and offers a number of readings. Lefevere writes: "Translation, like all re-writings, is never innocent. There is always a context in which the translation takes place, always a history from which a text emerges and into which a text is transposed." Bhabha identifies translation as the *locus* of cultural meaning: "We should remember that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national anti-nationalist histories of 'the people'. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves (Bhabha, 38-9).

The foregoing discussion of developments in Translation Studies invites many questions concerning Robin Flower's English translation of Tomás Ó Crohan's autobiography, *The Islandman.* It would suggest a need to consider the translation as both "process and product" that reflect the cultural context from which it emerged. It also suggests the need to examine what it was exactly that Flower translated.

Robin Flower, an Englishman with Anglo-Irish grandparents, was a keeper of Irish manuscripts in the British Museum who first went to the Blasket Island in 1910 in order to improve his knowledge of the modern Irish language. He already had an adequate knowledge of philology, a good ability with linguistics and was an expert paleographer. He had a wide knowledge of Irish and Welsh literature and was well read in regard to contemporary English and Continental writers. His classical erudition was matched by his love of medieval studies, his knowledge of which encompassed the cultures of almost every country in Western Europe. With this first sojourn on the island, Flower began his twenty years of involvement with the people of the Blasket Islands, a period of grace which endowed him with "inspiration, poetry and vision, besides the most loveable of nick-names" (Ó Lúing 1981, 122). As a sign of their love for him, the islanders gave him the name *Bláithín*, meaning "little flower" (NiDhomnaill, 28).

Bláithín, the nick-name that has been longest remembered, was not the first Flower was given on the island: he was first known as *an garsúinín an bhainne* (the little milk-boy), as it was his daily chore to get milk for the tea from a neighbour. From the very beginning, he participated in the work of the island, doing any task he was asked, none too lowly for him. He worked alongside the men even though, by his own account, he lacked their strength and expertise: "I too worked on the road, wielding an inexpert pick amid the mockery of others, and taking long periods of rest to nurse my aching arms"(Ni Dhomnaill, 29). He left the island with bandaged hands after this visit. Whenever he was on the island, he would often join in, frequently helping those who went to the hill with the donkeys to bring back turf. He was known to like accompanying the men on their fishing trips and their journeys to the smaller islands, as well as his friend, the king's son on his journeys to Dunquin for the post and the newspaper. Unflustered by the hardships of island living, he is said to have shared the king's kitchen quite cheerfully and gratefully with the king's domestic animals and poultry (Bell, 364).

Just as he entered fully into the life of the island, he shared his life fully with them. To whatever extent he observed their lives whilst among them, he allowed his own life to be observed. He brought his young bride to the island for their honeymoon in 1911 and, in the years that followed, sent his children to the island school whenever circumstances permitted.

He also experienced the full measure of the temperamental sea that gave the island life its character. At its generous best, it allowed him one of the greatest pleasures of his life: "there is no greater pleasure on earth than to lie in the stern of a *naomhóg*, almost in the embrace of the water, as the strong rowers snatch the boat over the waves"(Flower 1944, 6). At less than its best, it could be mean and unaccommodating as it was on the occasion when Flower found himself in a *naomhóg* on "an unquiet sea" with a dictaphone he was bringing, as well as a goat and an internal combustion engine. It was meaner yet when its turbulence prevented Flower and his family reaching the little harbour of Dunquin, forcing them to land at the foot of a cliff, up which they were hauled to complete their journey to Dunquin in a manure cart (Bell, 364). He shared in full measure the penultimate misery of island life when, from the cliffs at Dunquin, he was forced to watch the sea's savage punishing of the *naomhóg* carrying his wife, which caused many present to despair for those on board (Ni Dhomnaill, 29). Thankfully, he was spared the common sequel to such an event.

Flower shared in more than the physical life of the island. He also shared in its communal life. Bell writes of him going among the people, roaming the island, talking with the men as they worked, and "taking down from their lips whatever of traditional lore they had to impart" (Bell, 364). However, he did not just collect from them, but swapped with them, often capping "their fine stories with equally good ones of his own, drawn from his treasure of medieval lore". For which, we are told, the islanders loved him (Ni Dhomnaill, 29), as "nothing goes down so well in this part of the world as a good story, skilfully told".

He gave back out of his own life when they exchanged life stories and thoughts with each other (Bell, 364). Conversations in the turf ricks could at times cover topics as diverse as the origins of the ogham stones and the war that was looming in the east (Ni Dhomnaill, 29). Flower's son, Patrick, recalls that his father enjoyed keeping the islanders informed of the doings of the macrocosm (Flower 1998, 26). Sims-Williams quotes an island woman, Mrs Nance O'Sullivan, as having said that Flower was always a popular visitor to the island because he gave them news of the outside world and talked about the British Museum. (Sims-Williams 1998, 78). His popularity was no doubt enhanced by there being, in NiDhomnaill's words, "no whiff" in his speech of the many hours he spent poring over dusty manuscripts (29). As she said, his learning sat lightly on him. He particularly enjoyed offering them interesting snippets of information about their own culture that they would not have known, such as the origin of the name of their island, in the Norse word, *brasker*, which meant "sharp reef" (Sims-Williams, 78).

He also delighted in sharing his pleasure when he detected connections with other literatures and traditions in island lore. He recounts one such moment in his preface to *The Western Island*, when the islanders were reciting a litany of proverbs provoked by discussion of the deaths that had occurred in Flower's absence. The litany ends with *Cá'il an sneachta bhí comh geal anuirig?* (Where is the snow that was so bright last year?), which Flower counters with François Villon's "Où sont les neiges d'antan?" (Flower 1944, viii). His pleasure almost leaps from the page when he tells of Tomás asking if Villon was a Connaughtman and remarking dryly that he would not put it past the French to have made this remark first.

Flower's deep respect for the man who became his friend and whose work he translated is evident in a passage he wrote about his arrival on the island with his new bride:

> But a sudden feeling comes upon you of a new presence in the room. You look up and see, leaning against the wall almost with the air of a being magically materialised out of nothing, a slight but confident figure. The face takes your

> attention at once and holds it. The face is dark and thin, and there look out of it two quick and living eyes, the vivid witnesses of a fine and self-sufficing intelligence. He comes towards you, and with a grave and courteous intonation, and a picked and running phrase, bids you welcome. You have indeed come home, for this is Tomás Ó Crithin, the Island poet and story-teller. (1944, 12).

A magic materialisation more than a new arrival, no indication is given of how long Tomás might have been there. His self-possession and charisma seem unrelated to the slight figure he cuts, but stem from what is evident in his thin dark face: "two quick, living eyes, the vivid witnesses of a fine and self-sufficing intelligence". His unremarked arrival, the sudden awareness of his presence and the mention of his quick, living eyes puts one in mind of Synge sitting as silent witness among the islanders, but here it is the island man that is silently, and one guesses, shrewdly, observing the scholar. In contrast to the gravity of Tomás' courteous manner and carefully chosen words as he bids his visitor welcome, Flower expresses the fullness of his heartfelt response to the moment. He writes that his arrival on the island signifies a homecoming for him and that it is the presence of Tomás that makes it so.

We have a record from each man of the working relationship that existed between Tomás and Bláithín. Flower's account of their method (Flower 1944, 16) reveals that they decided between them that Flower should write down from Tomás' dictation island tales and the poems of the island poet, Seán Ó Duinnlé, which Tomás knew by heart. Towards the end of *The Islandman*, Tomás relates succinctly that Flower visited the island yearly, that they spent two sessions per day writing together and that a part of each year was given over to getting the material into good order.

Flower's description of their sessions is much less prosaic:

> And so, he sitting on one side of the table, rolling a savoury sprig of dillisk round and round in his mouth to lend a salt flavour to his speech, and I diligently writing on the other side, the picture of the island's past grew from day to day under our hands. At times I would stop him as an unfamiliar word or strange twist of phrase struck across my ear, and he would courteously explain it, giving parallels from the local speech or illustrating with a little tale, budded off, as it were, from the larger unit. (16-7).

Their shared endeavours reflected a mutuality of experience that was new in island dealings with visitors as this account reveals. One senses that the friendship between the two men grew apace with the picture of island life that was emerging from their labours. Each man had much to give and much to gain and was both student and teacher as their project progressed. While Flower was gaining much more than the mastery of the language he had originally sought, it is clear that Tomás was also gaining a great deal from his contact with Flower. Tomás enriched his mind considerably by drawing on Flower's wide knowledge of Irish and other literatures. Their discussions when together were diverse and wide-ranging and their correspondence when Flower was absent facilitated Tomás' writing on a range of topics far broader than the folklore he had become used to writing about (MacConghail, 139).

As Bláithín, Flower enjoyed an island identity as well as an island experience. In his writings, he asserts repeatedly his position within island culture in ways both subtle and unmistakable. The opening paragraphs of his two books, *The Irish Tradition* (1994 Dublin) and *The Western Island* (1978) provide two significant examples.

The opening paragraph of the former sees Flower eschew the customary detachment of the scholar:

> A visitor to Ireland familiar with Gaelic literature has his attention arrested everywhere in that beautiful island by many features, natural and artificial, which set him searching among his memories and clothing hill and river, rath and church and castle, with the lively and intimate colouring of long-descended tradition. And if he yields himself to the spell of that lure of recollection and summons back out of the past the kings and saints and scholars and poets whose names still cling about the places that they knew, he may be contented to recall that he is acting in the very spirit of those devoted scholars to whom that tradition owes its origins and survival (1).

We see in this passage that the visitor's response is not only strong and immediate, but also almost involuntary: his attention is "arrested", he yields to "the spell of the lure of recollection". His response to "that beautiful island" is personal and emotional. It triggers a response from the visitor, sending him to search among his memories to invest what he sees with his knowledge of "the long-descended tradition". At this moment, when his response to the place moves from emotion into intellectual activity, the visitor becomes an active player in the story, a late player contributing to the continuation of that tradition. Flower aligns the visitor with the "devoted scholars who brought the tradition into being in the first place and then nurtured it and kept it alive. Such a visitor is no disinterested, impartial observer, but one who has consciously yielded to the spell, and can be no other but Flower himself, his identity only faintly obscured by the thin veil of a third person narrative.

The Western Island provides us with Flower's account of his twenty years or so of island experience and reveals the depth, the complexity and emotion of his response to the island. Describing the progress of his journey into the island, he writes of the increasing spareness of what he sees. Of the little railway station at Dingle, he writes: "you forget London and Dublin, all the cities of the earth, and with Gaelic faces and Gaelic voices about you stand in the gateway of an older and simpler world." (1).

Imitating the ways of the traditional storyteller and demonstrating his knowledge of local lore, he offers several little stories about people of the island and soon enough draws himself into the word picture he has drawn of island life with a tiny personal anecdote: "'Wasn't it a great thought Columbus had', said a man to me once as we lay gazing out over the Atlantic, 'to find out America? For if there wasn't America, the Island wouldn't stand a week'."

With his last words in the first chapter of this book, Flower signals his entry into an entirely other world: "'Say your farewell to Ireland', cries one of the rowers, and I turn and bid farewell, not only to Ireland, but to England and Europe and all the tangled world of today." (6).

Each of these two passages discussed reveals as much about Flower as they do about the island. His deliberate lack of detachment is immediately and everywhere apparent in his writing, which is coloured throughout by his deeply personal, emotional responsiveness to the island and all that it contained. Though the Flower who enters the island is clearly a romantic, he is neither a fuzzy sentimentalist nor a scholar coming to gain the language quickly and leave. He has both the time to lie around in a field with his island friend and the knowledge of the "long-descended tradition" with which he can make a continuum of past and present. For him, the place is neither empty nor unknown, nor had it ever been.

In passages such as these, Flower recognises and asserts his own position within the tradition as the latest in a long line to whom the tradition owes both its creation and its continued existence. Participating in this tradition, he imitates local storytellers by weaving subplots into his stories and relating local lore about the places he passes through. He could eventually "embellish every turn of the road from Dingle to Dunquin with a snatch of legend or folktale" (O Luing, 1981, 122). What is more, he could eventually blend it "with stories of personal experience", thus adding to the spoken "canon" of the place from his own island life.

A further significant assertion of his own place within the tradition of the island is to be found in his discussion of Seán Ó Duinnlé, the island poet who came to the island as a *spáilpín*, or itinerant worker:

> In Ireland, as in medieval Europe, the tales spread among the people of the roads, the wandering harvesters, the tramping men and the beggars, the poor scholars and poets and migratory schoolmasters. Seán had graduated in this university of the road; and if we can 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 extremest East to farthest West, to die at last by a turf fire within hearing of the Atlantic wave. (Flower 1944, 95).

Once again, while seemingly discussing matters of island culture and without mentioning himself, Flower asserts his own cultural position. He and Seán have a lot in common. Each has spent his life collecting and disseminating the popular culture of Ireland. Flower is a traveller like Seán, carrying tales from one place to another, a scholar and a poet. Like Flower, Seán has "graduated", not from Oxford but from his university of the road, from which he has garnered "an immense store of knowledge, tales and poems and sayings, all that vast flood of popular tradition".

Flower is not the only one to observe that his cultural position was within the tradition, by invitation as well as by his own volition. Patrick Sims-Williams observed that Flower allowed himself to be absorbed by the culture instead of remaining outside it, that he became an "honorary insider" and even that he "went native" (Sims-Williams 1998, 90). Sean O Faolain referred to him wryly as "the king of the Blaskets" (Ó Faoláin, 134). These opinions would seem to be borne out by Seán Ó Lúing's description of *The Western Island* as "a book as Irish in its character as the *Acallaml na Senórach* (*The Colloquy of the Ancients*) (1981, 124), a twelfth century monastic compilation of Fíonn tales that glorified Ireland's legendary past (Welch, 5-6).

Flower discusses his approach to the translation of Tomás' autobiography in his Foreword to *The Islandman* (O'Crohan, ix, x). He begins with remarks about his long acquaintance with the author and the vivid picture of him conveyed in the book. In translating *An tOileánach*, Flower said he had been attempting to "convey this double image" of the man he knew and of the book in which he saw him so vividly pictured.

He acknowledges at the outset the asymmetry of languages that Maria Tymoczko has been discussing in her seminar series at this conference, and discusses the impossibility of achieving linguistic equivalence between Irish and English, languages which are "so widely separated in their mode of expression that nothing like a literal rendering from the one language to the other is possible". Recognising that there is never just one way to effect a translation, he discusses his various options. He considers and rejects the use of the stage-Irish idiom then in vogue. He spurns the charm of such language and the ready applause it meets with, reacting against its lack of authenticity. He suggests that such a medium actually comes between the writer and the reader, impeding the reader's access to the authentic text. He sees "something artificial" in it and considers it a medium incapable of conveying "the forthright, colloquial simplicity of the original of this book". For similar reasons, he rejects the more sophisticated forms of literary English, choosing instead "to adopt a plain, straightforward style, aiming at the language of ordinary men [...]". Flower's choice of style is validated by Binchy's report that Tomás, stung by criticism that his language was difficult, replied that what he had written could have been understood by every child on the island (Binchy, 552). Flower's rejection of cheap applause and easy charm, his decision not to make Tomas and his companions quaint or cute or charming for an English readership is the foundation of the integrity of his translation. It indicates the translator's fidelity to his subject as well as to his text in that he chooses to represent what he saw as its essence rather than to strive for an effect. We need now to become a little more precise about what it was that Flower translated.

Flower translated the first edition of *An tOileánach*, written by Tomás and edited by Padraig Ó Siochfhrada, best known by his pen-name, An Seabhac who was a writer, a teacher and an organiser for the Gaelic League in Munster. He was a man of considerable influence, who went on to become the editor for the Educational Company of Ireland and the Talbot Press as well as a Senator in the government. An Seabhac entered the project of Tomás' work on the invitation of Brian Kelly who, having seen Tomás through the writing of most of *Allagar na hInise* and two thirds of the way through the autobiography, now had suddenly to leave Ireland. Kelly's many efforts over several years to arrange the publication of the *Allagar* had been fruitless. Before he agreed to take over from Kelly, An Seabhac secured Tomás' consent for the arrangement and, significantly, his agreement that An Seabhac should do what he thought best with the material.

In his Introduction to *An tOileánach* An Seabhac indicates that he used the power Tomás gave him to make certain changes to the text. He writes cursorily that the length of the manuscript necessitated some omissions but that nothing had been left out that would have lessened the truth of the story. He also writes that he altered Tomás' spelling system to conform with what was acceptable at the time and that the dialect could not be left entirely intact as the book was intended for a wide audience. In what appears to be a contradictory vein, he also writes that the author's grammar and idioms have been left intact.

An Seabhac's rationale for the changes are amplified in his article, *Tomás Ó Criomhthain, Iascaire agus Udar.* The freedom with which he made the changes to the text seems to derive from his reading of the man whose work he had taken charge of. His appreciation of Tomas' abilities seems grudging: he saw Tomás as a man indistinguishable from many other storytellers in the Gaeltacht who was set apart only by the fact of his taking to pen and paper. The strengths he recognised in this group from whom Tomás was indistinguishable were good memory, an ability to arrange words and thoughts, a polished expression, a personal philosophy and an empathy for his fellow man.

He saw limits to Tomás' abilities, writing that the author had no knowledge of the craft of writing, that he was in fact ignorant that such a craft existed, and that his only talent was to be found in his story-telling, his vocabulary, his logic and his personal experience. He attributed the lack of tedium in Tomas' text to his own editing. He stated his view that because Tomás wrote about people he knew and events he had witnessed, he did not write from the imagination and did not "compose". This he backs up with an anecdote that shows Tomás refusing Kelly's request to write a fiction about the island because it seemed to him to be a lie. An Seabhac saw *An tOileanach* as the book anyone who could write would have produced if he had lived that life.

The account of the changes he made is more detailed than what he offered in his introduction to the published text. It is nevertheless still far from frank or complete. The first change he discusses is that he made to the spelling system Tomás had devised himself, not too difficult a task by his own account, as Tomás' system was not problematic for someone who read Tomas' dialect. A self-devised script such as this, coming from a newly-literate person in an oral community surely has its own intrinsic interest. Secondly, he got rid of material that seemed repetitive – more storms, more near-drownings, more trips to Dingle and so on, omitting a lot, he wrote, to avoid boring the reader. It seems he did not recognise that repetition or, if you like, tedium, inhered in island life and that by removing the artistic rendering of this fact, he was falsifying or, at the very least, distorting Tomás' record of island life. The third kind of change he instigated, by this account, was to ask the author to fill in what he saw as gaps in the text. To some of these Tomás agreed. To others, he did not. An Seabhac asked him to give more insight into the stories of the two women in his life, the girl from Inis Mhicileáin that he loved but forsook to marry according to his family wishes and the woman he married. He writes that Tomás viewed these very personal matters as "discretions of the soul" and not to be aired before the readers of Ireland. On the other hand, he acquiesced to An Seabhac's request for an ending to the book that was more substantial than the one he first offered. Tomás' original ending was in the style of the traditional storyteller and was only about a page long. Even though he acquiesced, and even though he repeatedly professed his deep gratitude to An Seabhac he did not hide his irritation about this particular change.. He wrote: "maybe it does not have such a short tail now. If there is a sentence in it which does not appeal you just leave it out." (Ó Coileáin, 255).

Finally, in this article, An Seabhac attempts to put to rest rumours that material had been cut from the text because it contained "immodest references" with the reply that anyone who knew Tomás, knew that there was no immodesty or corruption in him. He also denies that the government had issued a special school edition devoid of offensive material with the disingenuous statement that "every line of text they received from me they published".

We learn years later from Seán Ó Coileáin that, in regard to several pages of manuscript, there is even some confusion as to which text they actually belong, as the final parts of the *Allagar* were bundled in with the early parts of *An tOileanách.* We learn also that some of the text An Seabhac worked from had been reworked by Brian Kelly before he handed it over. To Ó Coileáin's eye, some of the rewriting looks bedraggled and silly, especially when compared with Tomas' easy to read style of writing. It seems that Kelly left out words he did not understand, came back to it and put in whatever he could work out himself.

An Seabhac's handling of Tomás' text comes under close scrutiny in a long study by James Stewart which confirms that what he published as *An tOileánach* was quite incomplete. Commenting on the omissions An Seabhac made, Stewart writes that "the cuts listed were made to save face rather than space, because, mistakenly, they were believed to show the islanders as either too punchy, too sexy, too sly or too slanderous" (235). Stewart observes that An Seabhac omits quite a bit concerning "human emotions", specifically material concerning the girl from the Inis, the very material that An Seabhac said he had tried without success to elicit from Tomás. He also excluded several accounts of fights between island people, one between some women quarrelling over eggs and another between some men fighting over a pot. He omitted some of Tomás' harsh judgements of his neighbours and of Father Clune who had failed to acknowledge Tomás' contribution to a work he had published. As Stewart points out, while the changes made in many cases improved the images of the protagonists, "it also leaves us with words and thoughts ascribed to the author which are not his" (235). In addition, details of the rituals of a wake were omitted as were some of the island songs Tomás included, omissions which, as Stewart rightly says, rob the reader of some of the rhythm and flavour of island life, rhythm and flavour Tomás had seen fit to impart.

Some of the omissions or substitutions of individual words reflect personal attitudes and preferences of the editor. Stewart gives the example of a whole passage omitted because it contained the word *mún* (urine), a word An Seabhac found too distasteful to use. For similar reasons, he substituted *bolg* (belly) for *bleadar.* Another word banned from the text is *smuga* (mucus, snot) while *tóin* (backside, bottom) could not be made to disappear entirely from the text but had its number of appearances cut.

Other changes made by An Seabhac speak directly to the politics of culture that have always surrounded the Blasket texts. The people of the Blaskets had for some time been championed as the last speakers of an uncorrupted Irish language. It seems quite likely that it was to maintain the myth of cultural purity that had grown up around the islanders that he got rid of loan words from English that he considered insufficiently "naturalised" (239), words such as *lumpaí, compás* and *pob.* He deleted most references to "the appurtenances of royalty" such as crowns and palaces, drawing the line at *cúirt* which he let remain. Significantly, according to Stewart, he altered references to the English language that Tomás had made, minimising both the islanders' abilities with the language and their need of it (240). The adjective *binn* (sweet, melodious) that the author uses to describe *Béarla* (English, ie language) is omitted by the editor. In this matter he is at odds with Flower who is said to have reiterated at every possible moment his belief in an Irish culture that had always assimilated foreign influences easily and seamlessly (Sims-Williams, 77).

While a reconstruction of the complete text is to be hoped for, it is not going to be a straightforward task. As already noted, the opening chapter survives only in the hand of Brian Kelly. The last four pages of the first chapter are no longer to be found in the manuscript. The ending of the wedding chapter is missing as is some material on the poet and on religious practices. The need for sensitive editing cannot be overstated.

Stewart sees An Seabhac's edition and its successor as two stages in a journey towards the publication of the actual book that Tomás wrote. On this topic, he writes: "for those of us who have loved and lived with this book since student days, it had assumed something of the character of a sacred text, sacrosanct and immutable. It was therefore with an increasing sense of disillusion that the realisation grew [...] that what we had taken for a sacred text [...] was no sacred text but a surrogate, which in content and phrasing owes not a little to arbitrary editorial decision and whim" (252-3). What we have in An Seabhac's edition of Tomás' autobiography is, in Maria Tymoczko's terms, a refraction of one culture by another, a refraction of Blasket Island culture through Irish eyes, a translation in effect.

But what An Seabhac edited was already a refraction, a translation. In the act of writing, Tomás had become not only the island's first writer but its first translator as well. A man straddling two eras that met in his person, he translated the island's orature into literature, its voice into text, in order to preserve self first for its own sake and then to make it known to the Other. He turned the events and the surroundings of his life into the stuff of literature: as An Seabhac himself wrote in his article, Tomás "made an enduring book of the story of his life". And, a translator in its most basic sense of being one who "carries across", he bore his story to safety with some urgency just before the culture from which it arose succumbed.

Flower's translation can thus be seen as only one of many refractions of the culture in which Tomás lived and about which he wrote. There is much that can be said about the creativity of Tomás' enterprise which was called into question by An Seabhac. All that needs to be said here is that, even if one is in agreement with An Seabhac, the fact remains that Tomás chose to record certain events and not others, that he used certain words, not others, and thus offered his own refraction of his culture. A second refraction was commenced by a well-intentioned Brian Kelly, according to his own imperfect understanding of Tomás' language, a refraction mercifully cut short by his sudden departure from Ireland. It was further refracted through An Seabhac who used the control he was given by the author to bring the text into conformity with what he thought should have been written and, more often, what should not have been written. So we see that Flower's translation is much more than a negotiation between two languages and two cultures. Here we have the culture of the Blasket Islands refracted through the culture of Ireland, its conventions and its needs and refracted again through language, and to some degree, the culture of England. We also have, in An Seabhac's editing, peasant culture subject to the agendas of Irish academe and Irish politics.

If we consider the final two refractions of island culture, that of An Seabhac and that of Flower, we see that one offers a correction of the author, the other an expression of the author. If the modern reader of Tomás has his approach to the author obscured, it is not only or mainly because of Flower's translation. The reader who approaches Tomás through the Irish faces many of the same impediments as the reader in English: what Tomás wrote is yet to be published.

A denial of the bridge between cultures offered by Flower's translation would see Tomás and his book islanded forever, growing more ghostly as years go by. This is something that Tomás himself would have regretted. It should be remembered that he was not translated against his will or in his absence; that he was impatient for Flower, who was delayed by illness, to finish the task; that he was pleased with the result. It should also be remembered that Tomás himself wanted his book to be widely known: he sent his book abroad, an autographed copy to his son in America. The fact that it was indeed his life that was at the heart of the text is evident from his inscription which is translated thus: "I send you this book which your father has written on his own life. Perhaps every father is not in a position to do this and he being an Islandman."

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