

MAURICE O'SULLIVAN  
TWENTY YEARS  
A-GROWING

*Rendered from the original Irish  
by Moya Llewelyn Davies  
and George Thomson*

*With an Introductory Note  
by H. M. Forster*



*Geoffrey Cumberlege*  
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MAURICE O'SULLIVAN  
(MUIRIS Ó SÚILEABHÁIN)

Born 19 February 1904 in the Great Blasket Island,  
County Kerry, Ireland

Died 25 June 1950 in Galway, Ireland

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TWENTY YEARS  
A-GROWING

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## *Introductory Note*

THE best introduction to this autobiography is its own first chapter. If the reader laughs at the school-mistress and the matrons, and is moved by the dream of the butterfly inside the horse's skull—then he is assured of amusement and emotion to come. He is ready to go on to Ventry Races, and to make the great journey from Dingle east, where O'Connor and the girl were so unreliable. He is ready, furthermore, to make another journey: to steal out on Hallowe'en and catch thrushes above waves of the living and the dead, and see the Land of the Young in the west, and hear the mother-seal saying to the hunter, 'If you are in luck you will leave this cove in haste, for be it known to you that you will not easily kill my young son.' All this—both the gaiety and the magic—can be sampled in the opening chapter, and the reader can decide for himself quickly, so that there is no need to say to him "This book is good."

But it is worth saying 'This book is unique', lest he forget what a very odd document he has got hold of. He is about to read an account of neolithic civilization from the inside. Synge and others have described it from the outside, and very sympathetically, but I know of no other instance where it has itself become vocal, and addressed modernity. Nor is a wiseacre speaking for it; we are entertained by a lively young man, who likes dancing and the movies, and was smart at his lessons. But he is able to keep our world in its place, and to view it only from his own place, and his spirit never abandons the stronghold to which, in the

final chapter, his feet will return. 'When I returned home the lamps were being lit in the houses. I went in. My father and grandfather were sitting on either side of the fire, my grandfather smoking his old pipe.' With these words the story closes, and it is as if a shutter descends, behind which all three generations disappear, and their Island with them.

The book is written in Irish, and the original is being published in Dublin. As regards the translators, one of them is in close and delicate touch with the instincts of her countryside, the other, a scholar, teaches Greek through the medium of Irish in the University of Galway. I know the author too. He is now in the Civic Guard in Connemara, and though he is pleased that his book should be translated, his main care is for the Irish original, because it will be read on the Blasket. They will appreciate it there more than we can, for whom the wit and poetry must be veiled. On the other hand, we are their superiors in astonishment. They cannot possibly be as much surprised as we are, for here is the egg of a sea-bird—lovely, perfect, and laid this very morning.

E. M. FORSTER

1933

## *Preface*

THE Blasket Islands lie off the Kerry Coast, in the extreme south-west corner of Ireland. The largest of them, the only one now inhabited, is nearly five miles long, and for the most part less than half a mile broad, rising to not quite a thousand feet at its highest point,—a treeless ridge of bog and mountain pasture descending in the west to a wind-swept headland of bare rock. The village is huddled under the shelter of the hill at the eastern end, nearest the mainland, where there is enough soil to yield a scanty crop of potatoes and oats. There is no harbour, and the only kind of boat in use is the curragh, a canoe of wicker framework and canvas covering, light enough for two men to carry on their backs. The distance from the mainland, quay to quay, is two and a half miles—an easy journey in good weather, but impossible in bad. The present population of the Island is about a hundred and fifty. Before the European War it was two hundred. The decrease is mainly due to emigration to America. It is recorded that the population doubled during the Great Famine (1840–50) when the starving and evicted peasantry of the interior flocked to the coasts in search of food.

The other islands, similarly featured but smaller and even more exposed, lie to the west and north of the main island. The most fertile of them, Inish-vick-illaun, was inhabited till the end of the last century, and one house still stands, being used in the summer for the lobster-fishing. Inish-na-Bró is a rugged hog's-back with a remarkable headland perforated by the sea, like the arches of a Gothic

cathedral. Tearacht, the most westerly, is a pyramid of naked rock, about six hundred feet high, with a lighthouse on the seaward side. Irish Túiscirt, to the north, has the remains of an oratory of Saint Brendan, the patron saint of the district.

Some of the Islanders own cows and sheep, and the pasture yields delicious mutton. Turf is plentiful at the western end. The main industry is fishing—lobster in the summer and mackerel in the winter—a dangerous and precarious livelihood. The nearest market is the town of Dingle, twelve miles east of Dunquin, the mainland village opposite the Island.

The houses are of the usual west-of-Ireland type—long, low, and narrow. Many of them are dug into the steep slope of the hill, for shelter from the wind. They contain a living-room, with a floor of boards or beaten earth, and an open hearth at the west end. The sleeping-room is usually at the east end, but in some houses there is another small room behind the hearth. There is a loft, but no upper story, and when an Islander speaks of going up or down in the house, he means that he is going towards or away from the hearth. The roof is of tarred canvas, the same material which is used for covering the curraghs. There are a number of spinning-wheels on which the women spin their wool, but the old local dyes are going out of use. There are no shops of any kind. The nearest chapel is at Dunquin, where the men of the Island go to hear Mass every Sunday when the sea is calm.

Only Irish is spoken and little English is known. Reading is a habit only recently acquired and seldom practised. The pastimes are singing, dancing, story-telling, and conversation. The literature,



which has been preserved entirely by oral tradition, includes ancient legends, some of them older than Beowulf, poems and songs dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and a wealth of folklore, still only partly collected. The people are fond of poetry and music. The art of impromptu verse composition in intricate metrical forms survived within living memory, and in recent years they have shown considerable skill in making and playing violins. The dances are the hornpipe, jig, four-hand reel, various country figures, and most popular of all, the 'sets', a descendant of the old quadrille.

The language, like the life, is largely medieval—vigorous, direct, rich in oaths and asseverations, and delighting in neat and witty turns of phrase which are largely lost in translation. In these respects it resembles the speech of other peasantries, but it also possesses an elegance and grace which is due to its peculiar history; for, when the clan system on which Irish culture was based finally broke down in the seventeenth century, the poets and scholars were scattered among the common people.

This book is the story of one of the Islanders, written by himself for his own pleasure and for the entertainment of his friends, without any thought of a wider public. In the first part of the book he gives an account of his childhood in the Island; in the second he goes on to describe how he left his native place and went to Dublin in order to join the Civic Guard, the new Irish police force. It is the first translation into English of a genuine account of the life of the Irish peasants written by one of themselves, as distinct from what has been written about them by the poets and dramatists

of the Anglo-Irish school. He was subject to only one literary influence. When he was a boy, a copy of Gorky's *My Childhood* found its way into the Island. He read it, and it made a deep impression on him.

A few words may be added about the translation. The English language, as commonly spoken in Ireland, differs considerably from standard English, and these differences are mainly due to memories, conscious or unconscious, of Irish speech. The new language has been twisted to fit the moulds of thought and idiom peculiar to the old. Hence we have freely used the Irish dialect of English as being the nearest to our original, and in this respect we are following the example of Synge, who of all writers in English had the deepest understanding of the Irish-speaking peasantry. But rich and highly coloured as this English is, its range is less than that of Irish, and since its literature is mainly in prose and entirely modern, it lacks the stamp of an ancient poetical tradition which is a marked feature of Irish. The range of vocabulary in the translation is less than that of the original, and there is not a word or phrase in the original which is not current in ordinary conversation.

With regard to the spelling of proper names, we have sought rather to help the English reader than to be consistent. Some Irish names have an English form, others have not; and we have used one or the other, whichever seemed the more convenient.

We have omitted some passages of the original.

MOYA LLEWELYN DAVIES  
GEORGE THOMSON

*Postscript*

THE reader will ask what happened to the author after the end of his story. The task of enforcing the law was not congenial to him. After the book was published, he left the Civic Guard, built himself a house, married, and settled among the Connemara peasantry. There he lived happily till he was drowned bathing in 1950, leaving a widow, son, and daughter. •

His hostess in Dublin, one of the two translators, is also dead. As for the Blasket Island, all the old people who figure in the story are gone; the school was closed many years ago; and the village is in ruins. The population has been reduced to five households, comprising twenty-one persons, with only one child. The mainland is being devastated in the same way. Nearly all the young people have emigrated. Everything seems to show that this corner of Ireland is destined to become as desolate as parts of the Scottish Highlands.

And yet it may be doubted whether this is so. The creeping paralysis of depopulation and decay is liable to be overtaken by other changes that are sweeping across the world today; and in that event there will arise out of the infinite suffering involved in the dispersal of this fine people a new Ireland, replenished by her exiles and their children returning from overseas.

GEORGE THOMSON

1951

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### *Note*

á is pronounced like aw in shawl, é like ay in bay, í like ee in bee, ú like oo in cool; ia and ua like the vowel sounds in real and truer respectively. The Irish peasant is usually known among his own people by his Christian name followed by that of his father or mother, whichever is the more notable character, sometimes by that of his grandfather (like Tomás Owen Vaun). Nicknames are very common.

# I

## *In Dingle*

THERE is no doubt but youth is a fine thing though my own is not over yet and wisdom comes with age.

I am a boy who was born and bred in the Great Blasket, a small truly Gaelic island which lies north-west of the coast of Kerry, where the storms of the sky and the wild sea beat without ceasing from end to end of the year and from generation to generation against the wrinkled rocks which stand above the waves that wash in and out of the coves where the seals make their homes.

I remember well, when I was four years old, I was in the town of Dingle in the care of a stranger woman, because I was only half a year old when my mother died, dear God bless her soul and the souls of the dead. So there was no one to take care of me. I had two brothers and two sisters, but at that time they had little more sense than myself. So, as I have said, my father sent me to Dingle to be cared for by a woman there.

Very great indeed was the control that was over us, for there were many others like me, and as everyone knows, whenever there is a crowd of young children together they do be troublesome and very noisy at times. We had a great dislike for school, but that is not one man's disease in my opinion. The schoolmistress teaching us was a woman who was as grey as a badger with two tusks of teeth hanging down over her lip, and, if she wasn't cross, it isn't day yet. She was the devil

itself, or so I thought. It was many a day I would be in terror when that look she had would come over her face, a look that would go through you.

I remember the first day I went to school. Peg de Róiste brought me, holding my hand, and it was with great plámás<sup>1</sup> she coaxed me to go. 'Oh,' she would say, 'it is to a nice place I will take you today.' 'Are there any sweets there?' 'There are and plenty and nice books full of pictures.' She was for ever coaxing me that way until I went in with her.

Shyly I sat on the bench alongside of Peg. There were many, many children there making a power of noise. 'Where are the sweets, Peg?' said I, and I had hardly said it when the mistress noticed me and beckoned me to go up to her. 'Go up, now,' says Peg, 'she's for giving you the sweets.'

Well, I had a drowning man's grip of Peg for fear of the mistress. 'Leave go of me,' said she. 'Come up with me,' said I. 'Come on, then,' said she, getting up and taking me by the hand.

Shamefaced I stood before the mistress. 'Who are you and what is your name?' 'They call me Maurice.' 'Maurice what?' said she sourly. 'Maurice,' said I again, my voice trembling. 'All right,' said she.

She went to a cupboard and took out a big tin and put it down before me. Then I saw a sight which put gladness into my heart,—sweets in the shape of a man, a pig, a boat, a horse and many another. I was in many minds, not knowing which I would choose. When I had taken my choice she gave me a book and put me sitting on the bench again. 'Be a good boy, now,' said she, 'and come to school every day.' 'I will.' 'You will surely,'

<sup>1</sup> Soft, coaxing talk.

said she, leaving me and going up again to the table. So there I sat contentedly looking at the book while not forgetting to fill my mouth.

Soon, hearing a very pleasant sound, I lifted my head, and what would I see but a bell in the mistress's hand and she shaking it: 'Playtime,' said she (in English). And so out with us all together.

'What are we to do now, Peg? Is it home we are going?'

'Not at all, but half an hour's ree-raa out here.'

(But one thing I must say before I go on with my story. There was not a word of Irish in my mouth at that time, only English entirely.)

When we were out in the field, the boys began kicking a football and myself tried to be as good as another. But faith, if so, I did not do well for long, for a big, long gawk of a lad gave a kick to the ball and hit me neatly in the face the way I fell on the flat of my back without a spark of sight in my eyes or sense in my head. As I fell I heard Peg crying that I was dead, and I remember no more till I awoke inside the school to see the boys and girls all round me and the tears falling from Peg.

'Good boy!' said she, 'sure nothing is on you. How are you now?'

'I am finely.'

'Maybe you could eat an orange?' said the mistress.

She brought me a big one and soon my headache went away, it is so easy to coax the young.

I was going to school every day from that out. But it was not long before the sweets and the gentleness began to grow cold. So I became disgusted with school—the seven tasks of the mountain on me as I thought, when I was carrying my bag of books, and obliged to learn this and that.



Before long it seemed to me there was nobody in the world had a worse life than myself.

Near the school was the poorhouse, full of people, each with his own affliction. There was one set of them we were always pursuing—the blind men. Many a fine evening we went up to play games on them,—games for our own advantage. They used to be given supplies of sugar done up neatly in bags and we would wait for the chance to snatch them, which came easy since they were unable to see us.

But the thief does not always prosper. One evening we went up—five or six of us—and got a good haul, filling our pockets, and then we darted away, thinking to be down in a ditch and swell ourselves out with the sugar. But we had not gone far when we saw the matron coming after us, a strap in her hand, the gate closed behind her, and a poisonous haste on her.

‘Och, God be with us, boys,’ said I, ‘we are done for now or never, what will we do at all?’

‘Faith,’ said Mickil Dick, ‘better a good run than a bad standing.’

‘But where will we turn our faces?’ said I.

‘To the Hill of the Cairn,’ said Mickil.

Off we went, one to the east, another to the west, the matron pursuing us. It is then there was a roaring among the boys who had no substance in them, getting it heavy from the strap whenever she got hold of them.

I was lithe of limb myself at that time and I was not long making the top of the hill. As soon as I was safe I stopped to look back, and whom should I see coming up the hill but Mickil, panting for breath. When I got my own breath back again I asked him where were the others. I got no answer.