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A Land Without Shortcuts: Tim Robinson and Máiréad Robinson

The poet Moya Cannon has said, "I think of Tim Robinson, in his maps and in his luminous writing, as one of the great restorers, and one of the quite unravellers of imperium." The key word here is restorer. When the restorer completes his work, he does not retain the object that he has restored; instead, he leaves it where he has found it, and goes home. Everything that Tim and Máiréad Robinson restored remains in Ireland. On November 5, 2022, Tim's and Máiréad's ashes "bound in cloth and each tied with an Aran crios or woven belt" were scattered on the ocean off Roundstone Harbor, where they lived for many decades before being taken in the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in April 2020, Máiréad preceding Tim by only two weeks. The ceremony was attended by family and friends, including writers and scholars, and Michael D. Higgins, President of Ireland.

Though it is tempting to view Tim Robinson as a solitary man moving through the wild Irish countryside, Robinson's work is both a community effort and a community-building enterprise: he is guided by neighbors, experts from universities, people met along the road, and by many women and men who invite him into their homes who provide rest, tea, and brown bread. He observes as he walks and absorbs as he sits studying or listening—these are his building blocks. An official map brings with it canonical status, a sense of defining the world that it reviews, but it is a mere sketch of a world that is much grander and that can be but inadequately drawn while wielding the map-maker's limited tools. What's needed is amplification, an ordered cacophony of voices: the author's, the expert's, the resident's, the

cartographer's, the biologist's, the lyrics of songs and the stanzas of poems, and the many vital breaths of the nonhuman. Robinson's work has achieved success and is so moving because it has always been guided by such a spirit of openness to ideas of truth, methods of observation, and points of view. Always, Robinson is human, curious, and persuadable as he reminds us in *Connemara: A Little Gaelic Kingdom*, "Sometimes in this bicycle-powered world of roadside and hearthside conversations I felt I was inhabiting my own nostalgic fantasy of bygone Ireland." Patrick Pearse and John Millington Synge, two writers whose work Robinson explores and admires, often sought to invent an Irish West amenable to their own beliefs. Robinson is aware of their mythmaking, of the draw of the past he shares with them, while he is also as an outsider able to reveal to us both the visionary and the deluded. Though erudition and science often do battle with myth and fantasy in the in the Ireland that he describes, Robinson revels in the oral and the non-human; he never loses his "own nostalgic fantasy" because it has always been part of who he is, why he is here, and it is a much-recorded living aspect of rural Irish life in the West. Coming to Árainn as a younger man, newly married to Máiréad, was a romantic journey, one inseparable from the place they settled in, and one that never lost its luster.

> Writing of Connemara, Robinson admits:
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> I realize what a difficult terrain is south Connemara: multidirectional from every point, so complex in form it verges of the formless, disputing every step with stony irregularities, leachlike softness of bog or bootlace-catching twiggy heath. Often when visitors ask me what they should see in this region I am at a loss. A curious hole in the ground? The memory of an old song about a drowning? Ultimately I have to tell them that this is a land without shortcuts (*Connemara: A Little Gaelic Kingdom*)

In his foreword to *Unfolding Irish Landscapes: Tim Robinson, Culture and Environment,* Derek Gladwin's and Christine Cusick's essential guide to the Irish essayist Tim Robinson's work as a writer, cartographer, and artist Robert Macfarlane writes, "I was introduced to Tim's work eleven years ago, and I cannot now

imagine being innocent of it," and he follows with a report of a meeting with Tim Robinson when he admitted, "I have had an endless amount to say about Connemara. But the trilogy is finished, and with it a project that has taken me about forty years has come to an end. And at the moment I am trying to arrange my life so that I am facing a blank sheet of paper, once again—in physical reality and in my mind."

Readers familiar with Robinson's work will agree with all that Macfarlane notes and infers— we see Árainn-Inishmore, Connemara, and the Burren in greater depth and more luminously from engaging with Robinson's books and maps, and we have also been guided by his example, methodology, and practice to look at our own hinterlands with fresh eyes and to understand how superficially simple maps are and how complex mapping is. To discover our home spaces, we must learn how to walk them patiently; north, south, east, west. Melville and other writers have tasked us to distrust traditional maps because these are likely to conceal more than they reveal. In his work, Robinson relies on the Ordnance Survey maps as necessary and valuable guides as he sets out on foot or by bicycle to add what he can find to what have been overlooked, omitted, and misunderstood. The deracination process that Brian Friel traces in *Translations* is reversed though this is but one of Robinson's objectives.

Taking no shortcuts, Robinson excelled at both cartography and mapping. Two American projects that stand alongside Robinson's and help frame it are Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island*, his remapping of the American West, and William Least-Heat-Moon's *Prairie Earth*, his deep map of Chase County, Kansas, both explorations of what Robinson has referred to as "geophany," a term he coined to define a language and a way of seeing the world that engages in "a secular celebration of the Earth, with the height and power of the religious tradition but purged of supernaturalism." Robinson has written of the difference between his education and his formation, the former in "maths and physics" at Cambridge and the latter "in the London of the late 1960s"; however, what was required after he had soured on the London art scene was a new space that would allow what he had absorbed and felt to grow and be tested upon. He found this in Ireland and in words, the country of his wife and partner Máiréad. Though he did not

publish books until after he had arrived in Ireland where he found his subject, it clear from the carefully-crafted letters he wrote home from Malaysia, where he was doing his national service during the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), that he was rehearsing for a career as an author. This material and other more autobiographical work is revealed in *My Time in Space*.

This past summer I spent two days on the Aran Islands (on Inishmaan and Inisheer), walking five hours each day, having taken the ferry out from Rossaveal. Following the injunction that Robinson provides in *Stones of Aran*, learned from the pagan and Christian traditions, I circled both islands clockwise, "the circuit that blesses is clockwise, or, since the belief is thousands of years older than the clock, sunwise."
I did not bring a map on either occasion; instead, though they can be a rarity in Ireland, I followed signs; the first visible on Inishmaan was for *Trá,* inviting me to take a left from the road onto a grass and slate pathway leading to low, grassy cliffs that concealed a beach, *Trá* in Irish. Strolling along, I looked across towards the Burren. The sun had come out, the karst was gathering up heat like a snake reclining, the day quickly blossoming. I had decided to come here rather than to Inishmore, the island that Robinson had written two books about, to avoid the crowds. I was on Synge's island, rather than Robinson's, though Inishmaan is a reference point in his work. The beach was empty. In fact, from the moment I disembarked from the ferry, I saw few people all day.

My last visit here had been made forty years ago, in another lifetime. I remembered this beach because I had gone skinny-dipping here. Standing outside myself, I imagined that I was walking alongside my younger self, and Tim Robinson. For the Aran Islands I had three sources; Robinson's *Stones of Aran* books, my own memories of brief periods spent here, and the flotsam and jetsam of my education. I was walking without purpose though as Robinson points out "on such occasions the basic act of attention that creates a place out of a location would be renewed, enhanced by whatever systems of understanding we can muster from the mathematical to the mythological, by the passion of poetry, or by simple enjoyment

of the play of light on it." I was held by the textures and complexities of grass, sand, and water, and I felt that deep sense of belonging to this part of Ireland that I share with many others, Tim Robinson included. But front and center was what I witnessed—sun lighting the Burren and the ocean, "the simple enjoyment of the play of light" on the coast of Clare.

The forty years that Robinson references in his meeting with Robert Macfarlane roughly accounts for his time in Ireland, both on Inishmore and in Roundstone, the block of time when he researched and wrote his books. In my life, four decades count my years spent in America. Walking along the deserted beach, windblown and alert, I was thinking of how Árainn and Connemara had shifted Robinson from the visual artist frustrated by the London gallery scene to the fulfilled writer and map-maker who found his voice in a new place among strangers who adopted him. Though he has often noted that he explored and wrote to satisfy his own curiosity, he also managed to return so much that had been lost to the places he had settled in, culture and heritage gifted back to people who had be-friended him. It was a fair exchange. Forty years is a long time to live in one region or country; nevertheless, considering the locations Robinson lived in in Ireland, he notes that "I have not put down roots in any of them. Roots are tethers, and too prone to suck up the rot of buried histories." Robinson did not want his own life to become entangled with those of older settlers who had dispossessed the indigenous residents though such an outcome seemed impossible in his case.

Though I am now a US citizen, homeowner, voter, father and grandfather, and someone who has put down roots in America, I have never been able to see myself as a fully rooted American. Instead, I am something different. I am a man who does belong while standing to one side. I may well leave though it is unlikely that this will happen. Partly, this is an affectation because I can also be so enthused, ecstatic, bemused and angry at America and Americans depending on the occasion, day, or mood. This pose has helped me to negotiate between belonging and being on the outside: it has kept alive in me the deep sense of curiosity about the US I brought with me from Ireland forty years ago that has grown into a love. I

believe that this pose underlines the rootlessness that sustained Robinson, the kind that helps to keep the person alert.

Robinson saw himself as a writer rather than a settler, though one can be both. The writer remains rooted in his/her material only for so long. A project completed; the writer moves on to another. In my case, America is both the place where I have put down roots and a text I read as an immigrant each day. To read, I must step outside, or walk into another room, where I will find quiet, and absorb. Robinson cares deeply about the people and the places they inhabit, and so do I. Neither of us pretend to be something we are not. Both of us have been made welcome and been loved in foreign countries.

On the beach that day last summer, I cursed realizing that I had forgotten my swimming togs and towel. Undeterred, I strolled like an arthritic peacock close to the water's edge, removed my clothes, and walked briskly into the ocean, part Mark Spitz, part Lord Lucan. The water was as cold as it always has been in Ireland; that was why I spent so little time getting wet as there is nothing as painful in this life as the slow step-by-step progress into the Atlantic; feet to groin, water cutting skin, inch by inch. I am sixty-seven years of age, past my peak for sure, though much less self-conscious of my body now than I was in my "prime." I am no longer rooted in the anxieties and imperatives of young adulthood. My own purpose that day, other than re-visiting Inishmaan might be summarized by a sentence from Robinson's *Connemara: A Little Gaelic Kingdom*, "the one thing on earth that always gives one solace is a solitary walk on a mountain road." There was no mountain here, and no prospect of finding one.

The solitary walk can have a desired end to it, as most of Robinson's did as I suspect; however, the walk can equally be an end in itself, a way of involving oneself in the world by moving slowly across it. For me, such walks are part of my lifeblood. Unlike myself and many others who walk in this fashion, Tim Robinson resisted the transcendental; nevertheless, it asserts itself in his work from time to time, once in a quote from Renë Dubos in *My Time in Space,* "Ecosystems possess several mechanisms for self-healing … they undergo adaptive changes of a creative nature that transcend the mere correction of damage," a

process that I believe ecosystems can also gift to the walker. The ecosystem of the Irish West played a role in healing Tim Robinson of the anguish and frustration that had built up in him while trying to negotiate the London art scene, one predicated to money rather than distinction. At the back of my own mind was the thought that this was my first summer in Ireland without my mother to visit: she had recently passed away. I found the days walking around the two islands to be a great solace. There is irony in this: my mother was no fan of the outdoors and did not have much regard for the Aran Islands, or other "wild" places. I feel certain that she would have considered Tim Robinson's methods of doing field work through rain and hail a kind of madness.

My own favorite out-of-skin moment in Robinson's work can be found at the end of *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth* when he describes a wild dash towards a lighthouse, one evening when he was assisting a neighbor in a search for sheep that had escaped:

> We decided to split up; he went down towards the shore, I moved sunsetwards over the great shoulders of rock below Bun Gabhla. The golden eye of the lighthouse was opening and shutting. I became elated by the vast level tide-race of sunshine streaming around me, a light so palpable it might have been imagined by someone blind from birth, a warm liquid pressing in at the eyes, carrying sharp exciting crystals. I began to run, crossing the areas chopped up by shadow-filled grykes as easily as the great burnished rock-sheets, and leaping down the scarps from terrace to terrace as if the light were dissolving them and I could plunge through them like waves. If sheep were the goal of the quest, they hid themselves from my ecstasy and left me free to exult in the miraculous surety of my footfalls.

As it must, movement underlines Robinson's work because what he seeks must be found, it can't be brought to him. In this respect, his work is very physical, the body must play many roles—transport and thought, to name but two. In this passage, the body is ascendant, thought following. Like a sponge, Robinson's body opens to absorb the whole experience, and the result is a feeling of pure ecstasy.

Simultaneously, to convey this powerful feeling, discrete aspects of the experience are detailed slowly and carefully to create a fine tension between action, diction, and structure. For readers, magic is only believable when we can see it in a clear light, as we do here. Linked to the body of the author are the many bodies of knowledge that Robinson gathers in his work.

After my swim, because I had no towel, I jumped up and down to shake off the water, and then whiffed at my body with my fleece to make myself as dry as I could before dressing. Like Robinson after his charge toward the lighthouse, I too experienced intense exhilaration though I also felt a bit foolish. For certain, I had not become my younger self though neither was I that burdened man who earlier had alighted from the ferry. My skin tingled, my hair tossed about but my vision was clear and my gaze light as though I had stepped into a warm, sun-lit place after a long absence. I thought of bodies of work and bodies of writers and interchangeability. I was suddenly ravenous for food.

I left the beach, regained the road, continued clockwise, viewed the airfield ahead, seeing everywhere the stone walls that define the islands:

> These crooked dry-stone walls, about a thousand miles of them, are of all the islands' monuments the most moving, an image, in their wearisome repetitiousness and tireless spontaneity, of the labor of those disregarded generations.

A précis of the history of a colonized people in a sentence. On its surface is the postcard picture of the Aran Islands, one that Robinson invokes in the title of his two Aran books, and one that adorns the cover of the paperback edition of *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth*, the second of the two volumes. Robinson reveals how artful these walls are while also referring to their monotony, the inescapable sense that they define, at least in part, lives passed on a small island located very much at the margins of civilization. They describe the landscape they adorn. Simultaneously, there is a richness to be found here among people who embrace spontaneity. The walls though fixed are deeply moving. Visitors, though not everyone, will be hypnotized by them. The walls took a long time to build and here, at least, go on forever.

Tim Robinson could also view time differently; a setting out point he shares with Gary Snyder and other writers who liked to look far back beyond the anthropologic to the geologic. *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* begins with this:

> If it is true that Time began, it is clear that nothing else has begun since, that every apparent origin is a stage in an elder process. Those three hundred and twenty million years are the time elapsed since the limestone of which Aran is formed was being laid down as layer upon layer of sediment in a tropical sea. But that sea was already ancient and full of intricate lives, the heirs of a previous three thousand million years of evolution.

What is often referred to as deep time marks both Robinson's own stint on Aran as well as the work that he has done as a "signpost on one particular crossroads of reality," one, like the rudimentary marker I noticed as I walked, that is meant as a guide for others, a drop of colored water floating in the great pool of time. As Robinson understood, his work provides one set of markings on an ancient place, the interaction of one mind on one space. One mark, but an indispensable one. While my markings on the beach have been erased by the tide, Robinson's endure. My walk across Inishmaan is a private one, it will pass unobserved, and this is a joyful thought to embrace. I am climbing up the hill toward the pub, sure in my memory that I have walked this road before, and then making a right I see it in front of me, largely unchanged except for the espresso machine in one corner. I order in Irish; I converse in Irish; I give thanks in Irish. I sit outside at a picnic table with my sandwich and beer. I eat and drink in Irish. I think of my family in America in Irish. I give thanks to my mother in Irish. I ask questions of Tim and Máiréad Robinson in Irish.

Robinson's work disrupts our received notion of time, one that foregrounds historical events at the expense of everything else. When I was growing up in Co. Wexford, walking to school each morning in the shade of Vinegar Hill, I lived under the illusion that there were two ages—the one that was there before the 1798 Rebellion and the one that followed it. If you engaged with both morally and

philosophically, you understood how the world worked and how to make your way in it. Our town was at the center of everything, and I embraced this binary in all its majesty, tragedy, and color though I was sure that it was not true. Such thinking allowed me to cloak the past with the present, the good with the bad, and so on. Later, I understood that such a mode of invention underlined a deep malaise, a willful unknowingness, a way to cut off inquiry. The Irish experience is something we revere, it is a river that flows through us all, native-born and part of the diaspora, but it is also much grander, more complex, and more deeply conflicted than we think it is—grander than Brian Boru and Granuaile, and older than Oisín and Leo Varadker. Like Macfarlane, none of us should be innocent of Robinson's work. It complicates our ideas of the past and present and makes us engage with our world in more nuanced ways.

Here is one of my favorite passages from *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage*:

> The pale shinglebacks of An Gleannachán frame a dark half-oval of shallow and seaweed when the tide is low. Sometimes one sees a man moving slowly to and fro out there, stalking and stooping just like the shore-birds that come in clouds to pick over the sea's leavings. Perhaps he is collecting periwinkles for bait before going to some taller shore to fish, but if the season is late spring or summer he may be gathering carraigín or "Irish Moss," which he will spread to dry on the short grass of some field by the shore, and sell to a mainland wholesaler through an agent in Cill Rónáin … Next to whiskey it is the Aran people's most trusted cure for coughs and colds; they simmer a few sprigs of it in milk or water and after straining out the insoluble bits drink the resulting bland and soothing essence of rockpool. We have occasionally used a thicker brew of it as the basis of a sort of blancmange … but so far the picking and drying of it have afforded us more health and pleasure than the eating. (131)

Though his work can become complex and dense when the subject requires it to be, this passage is quite simple while, at the same time, being elegant and erudite. It begins with a description to draw us in to the place. I note that he starts with place rather than with person. Lightly, Robinson introduces many subjects/

topics/commonplaces including languages (Irish and English); aspects of the natural and built environments; food; commerce; folklore and herbal medicine; work; interiors and exteriors. The voice is quite detached while being appreciative, and the point of view of the speaker is even. This is a good guide to his work, in my view. I believe that one effort made much possible for Tim Robinson: he learned Irish. Without acquiring the language, he would never have been able to do achieve the insights that he did. Irish is a hard language for an adult to learn. I feel sure that the people of Aran and Connemara understood his efforts to learn Irish for what they were: acts of modesty and respect. In return, they opened their doors and hearts to him. Máiréad helped build this trust. Tim Robinson is a master stylist and his efforts to learn Irish guided him to a deeper understanding of his own first language; he slowed to a walk and learned. The passage also reveals his mastery of compression and clarity, two guiding points of his work, both oiled by style.

After lunch, I set out to complete my walk, the circuit that would bring me back to the pier. I recalled as I walked, taking "adequate steps" as Robinson would phrase it, an afternoon having tea with Máiréad and Tim in their home in Roundstone. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Bronte* came up. Máiréad's eyes opened wide, she declared it to be one of their favorite books, and I said that it was also one of my own. I think that she admitted that she and Tim read this book, and many others, out loud to one another on winter evenings. While we were enjoying a lively discussion, I caught Tim's face from the corner of one eye and later on, thinking back on it, I knew that he not only agreed with what Máiréad was saying but that she was saying exactly what he would have said had he spoken. As a couple, they were that close, that much in tune. Different but reading from a shared script. Like an accordion, they pushed in close to be one, retreating slowly to be separate, always connected. One might be quiet while the other spoke but never silent, energy flowed between them. The communion I observed brought home to me the certainty that while Tim was out walking or cycling Árainn or Connemara collecting material, he was simultaneously

walking or cycling home to Máiréad, taking the pagan/blessed route. To call Máiréad a sounding board for Tim's thoughts and findings is to offer a mere starting point in any discussion of the role she played in the development of Tim's ideas and books and in their publishing initiative, Folding Landscapes. Of course, Tim Robinson's work is an account of a love story with Ireland though, first and foremost, it an account of a love story with an Irishwoman. Without Máiréad there would have been no Ireland or no maps or books.

The Gaskell/Brontë conversation with Máiréad has stuck with me through the years and gestated. Tim Robinson was born and bred in Yorkshire and was as attracted to the wild spaces of the earth as were the Brontë sisters, the wildness they shared was formed by the landscapes of Yorkshire, the Dales and the Moors. Of the sisters, Tim Robinson resembles Emily the most. At five-feet and ten-inches, she was the tallest of the sisters and known as the one who walked the farthest and braved the worst weathers. As Robinson has revealed in his reasons for withdrawing from the London art scene and coming to Inishmore, he, like Emily Brontë was fiercely independent and determined in the ways that Yorkshire people are known and admired for. When I recall some of the word pictures made famous by Elizabeth Gaskell, I can think of Tim and Máiréad in tandem with the three sisters. In the evening, the sisters gathered at their dining room table to read aloud the drafts of their great novels (*Agnes Grey*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*) while their father composed sermons in his study. Outside the parsonage were the Moors while in Roundstone, as Robinson wrote in *Connemara: Listening to the Wind*, "the sea was our nearest neighbor." Did Tim Robinson read drafts of his work aloud to Máiréad on Inishmore and in Roundstone? I don't know, but I fancy that he did. If I am wrong, I am guilty of the sort of mythologizing that Elizabeth Gaskell has been accused of. To say that the Brontë sisters supported one another's efforts would be a great understatement. Equally, to cast Máiréad in a supporting light would be to underestimate her importance in a shared project. If Tim Robinson resembles Emily Brontë, then Máiréad is closest to

Charlotte, the sister who took on the responsibility of getting their books into print and negotiating with the world beyond Haworth.

I have one great regret regarding those few brief visits I made to their house in Roundstone. It was not until both Tim and Máiréad had passed away during the Covid-19 crisis that I learned that Máiréad hailed from Co. Wexford and had grown up in New Ross. I would have loved to have talked to her about our native county; however, Elizabeth Gaskell got in the way. Having only been in company together on our brief visits to Roundstone, we did not know each other well enough to explore correspondences in our personal lives. Both Tim and Máiréad followed the political news from America with great interest and were eager to talk about policies, shenanigans, and politicians that were making the news. On one occasion, they engaged in a spirited and most entertaining discussion regarding Bill Clinton's life and legacy with my wife Dru. Both were quite censorious of the Clintons while being aghast at the many lesser alternatives available to American voters. Their minds ranged freely, and they could never be pigeon-holed. In some ways, following the argument that Lucasta Miller makes in *The Brontë Myth*, Haworth and Roundstone are twins, both being solid towns on the edge of wild places though never quite as wild in reality as they have been made out to be in books. The wildest places are often close to us, often within us, and always in free play with the urban. Neither is definitive.

When I first met Tim, near the end of his time in Ireland, he also told me that he had completed his Irish project and, like Robert Macfarlane, I was initially disappointed to hear him admit to this. He asked me for suggestions about what he might do next and I wondered out loud to him if there might be some shorter and more fugitive pieces he could take on. I said that I was certain that there were topics and ideas floating about in his head. Could he write about towns or cities? Could he reinvent himself like Pessoa by assuming other literary personae, I asked jokingly? Joining in, Máiréad suggested that he return to his paintings. Tim did admit that he was at a loss now that the major project of his life had been

completed. I was heartened to read his comment to Robert Macfarlane regarding the blank sheet of paper providing him with an invitation to continue to write. My sense of writers is that there are most happy when caught up in a project and lost when they are idle. He was preparing for another beginning. Robinson had deliberated carefully and called an end to the Irish period of his writing life or, the books having been written and the maps drawn, there was nothing else to be done in Ireland. At any age, though perhaps more likely when older, a writer will wonder if there is another project in them. This is a terrifying moment that Robinson turned away from by, instead, facing the empty sheet of paper. He might write or draw.

In 2006, Tim and Máiréad donated their archive and their Roundstone home to the University of Galway for use by scholars and students. They hoped that individuals would come to the university's library to explore the archive, and to Roundstone to think, explore, and write. The university accepted the archive but refused the house. The archive is currently being digitized, Tim Robinson - University of Galway (nuigalway.ie). As Nicholas Allen has revealed, a voluntary collective was formed in 2020 to save the property. Sheila O'Donnell, a member of this group, writes that "the priority is to save the Robinsons' house from commercial development and hold it for cultural use in accordance with their wishes." Saving Tim Robinson's Roundstone home, his last gift to the Irish nation – The Irish Times. As Tim has pointed out, he and Máiréad arrived in Ireland with little, and having completed their work here, returned to London with little. It suited them to return to London on a semi-permanent basis to be closer to doctors and absent from the draughty house during wintertime. They left with the swallows and the tourists. What a mark they made.