Home Sweet Home

We'll take a little break from our memoirs to hear from some Munster natives about "home", both in the physical and in the cultural sense of the word.

BUILDINGS ON THE GREAT BLASKET

Houses on the Great Blasket were made to a very simple plan, with a single door facing south, in the majority of cases. There were generally one or two rooms, perhaps a loft at one end of the house, but one story, and very often there were no windows on the north side of the house. They were dark, often the open door being the main source of natural light, for they were built, above all, to defend against the weather.

Slopes are steep on the island, so many, many houses were built into the hillside, as you can see in the photo. When you think of how many people might be in a single family, they seem impossibly small.

There were never as many as 200 people living on the island, so outside of their houses, outbuildings, and a school, everything else was on the mainland. There were no shops, no church (they rowed to the mainland every Sunday), not even a consecrated graveyard.

The Congested Districts Board ("for Ireland", there was also one in Scotland, perhaps elsewhere) was created in the early 1890's to deal with poverty, especially in the West of Ireland. In the first decade of the twentieth century, they decided that some dwellings on the Great Blasket were uninhabitable, tore them down, and erected new homes, and some the changes that came with the new houses are described in our excerpt below. Many of these homes were two-story, with different materials, but perhaps not as good a defense against the climate.

In this photo, you can see some of the new homes to the right, and the walls of the old style homes to the left. One of the strange things about the new homes is that they were built to face to the east, rather than to the south, that is, they were aligned at a 90-degree angle to the traditional island home.

A LITTLE FOLLOW-UP

Some additional information on a couple of things:

- It appears that that famous shipwreck that provided all the oil may have occurred in 1850, which is a few years before Ó Criomhthain was born. It is clear that there was a series of shipwrecks in the 1850s which saved the islanders, and we may be getting a retelling, on that first one, of events the author heard about as a very young lad.
There was a school on the island, just about the only service available there, and about the only building that wasn't a home to people or animals. In 1848 there were just over 50 kids in the school. The school was finally closed in the 1940's. In this photo of the school and the pupils, taken sometime in the 1930's, the woman teacher in the scene is "Miss Fitzgerald", who was a native of the Great Blasket. In this she was rare, perhaps even unique as teachers were generally brought in from the outside.

SEÁN MHAIDHC LÉAN Ó GUITHÍN

Seán Mhaidhc lived in Dún Chaoin, and he was no doubt an old man when his memories of the houses in the region, including the Great Blasket, were collected sometime in the early 1990's. These excerpts are very basic, but they are his first-hand descriptions of the homes he remembers from the 1800's.

Lenár linn-ne anois, tithe peilte a bhí ann ach bhí tithe ceann tuí ann roimhe sin. Ba thighe ceann tuí a bhí ag Tomás Criomhthain go dtí gur thóg sé an tigh deireanach - chuir sé peilt air sin. Bhíodh na cearca ag dul in aird in aice na fraitheacha.


Croch adhmaid is mó a bhíodh ann. Adhmad a bhí agann féin, ach na tithe nua seo a thóg Bord na gCeantar Cúng le deir- eanas, croch iarainn a bhí iontu sin. Bhíodh iarta amach ansin os cionn na tine; d'héadáfá bróga a chur air. Tine oscailte anseo agus oigheann agus citeal iarainn, corcán trí chos. San oíche, nuair a théidís a chodladh, bhailídís amach an luaithe agus
na splancanna dearga ar fad ansin le sluasaid na tine. Chuiridís na sméaróidí dearga anuas ar an méid sin agus nuair a d'éireofá ar maidin bhídís ag spréachadh. Nuair a bhídís ag coigilt na tine, choisricidís iad féin agus deiridís:

Coiglím an tine seo,
Fé mar a choiglíonn Críost cáth,
Muire ina himeall agus Bríd ina lár,
An Dá Aspal Déag in aire i d'Talamh na nGráist,
Ag gardáil an tí seo agus gach a bhfuil ann go lá;
Ná dóitear ár dtigh, ná báitear ár ndaoine go brách brách.

Deiridís é sin i gcónaí nuair a bhídís ag coigilt na tine.

SEÁN Ó RÍORDÁIN

The famous Munster poet Seán Ó Riordáin was born in Baile Bhúirne -- Jim Flanagan's home town, for those of you who know Jim, and still a Gaeltacht area -- in either 1916 or 1917. There may not have been a lot of Irish spoken in his house, but it was the language in use at his grandmother's house. In his teens he moved to the outskirts of the city of Cork, and spent the rest of his days there, until he died in 1977.

Besides several books of poetry, published about once a decade starting in 1952, he wrote a column as Gaelainn for the Irish Times for some years. His poems are often quite philosophical and abstract.

In this one, we get a sense of home and belonging, perhaps, just from the rhythm of the local dialect.

Ceol Ceantair

Chuala sé an ceol i gcainteanna Dhún Chaoín,
Ní hiad na focail ach an fonn
A ghabhann trí bhlas is fuaiméanna na Mumhan,
An ceol a chloiseann an stráineár;
Ceol ceantair
Ná cloiseann lucht a labhartha,
Ceol nár chualasa riamh,
Toisc a ghirracht dom is bhí,
Is mé bheith ar adhastar ag an mbrí.

Ceol a cloistear fós sa Mhumhain,
Fiú in áiteanna 'nar tréigeadh an chanúint.