THE ARAN ISLANDS

By Tim Salmon

The Aran islands lie across the mouth of Galway Bay in the far West of Ireland: Inishmore, Inishmaan, Inisheer - in descending order of size from west to east. For fifty years I have looked at them across the channel of sea separating them from the Connemara shore: a low smudge on the Atlantic horizon, dotted on fine days with a few white dice of houses.

But I had never been there - until now - awed by the mystical charge of Irishness invested in them by Yeats and Synge and Patrick Pearse and other stars of Ireland's struggle for freedom from England. For even though I am not Irish myself, I fell under the romantic spell of that movement in my teens and I did not want to be disappointed, for I knew I would not find the red-petticoated girls carrying seaweed from the shore any more or the men in their black-tarred curraghs battling the gigantic waves or descending the fearsome cliffs in the pitch of night to strangle the seabirds, any more than the oil lamps, thatched cabins and turf-laden donkeys of my childhood memories of Connemara.

I took the boat, for although you can fly now, the sea is surely the only proper approach to the Aran Islands. My destination was Inishmore, the biggest and, for the casual visitor, much the most interesting and varied of the islands. It was a blustery, murky morning and to my surprise the boat was full of students, mostly American, French and Spanish girls. At first we glided along under a lee shore and the Americans climbed out on deck to watch. But as soon as we cleared the headland a black swell running from the north struck us beam on and the boat began to buck and wallow. Water streamed over the deck. "Like being in a car wash," someone said and the girls reappeared, drenched but laughing. Then silence fell, as people engaged in their private struggles with heaving innards.

"Does anything stop you sailing?" I asked a young crewman. "Not much," he said. I thought of Synge's descriptions of the curraghs riding these waves and reassured myself that the crewmen probably knew what they were doing. And then quite suddenly the seas quietened again as we came under the shadow of Inishmore. The sun came out. The Connemara mountains reappeared in our rear. Tiny Straw Island, that guards the entrance to Kilronan harbour, gleamed in the wind, its windmill furiously ratcheting up the power for the little lighthouse.

The first moments are a little disappointing. Kilronan, the main village, is no great shakes to look at and the interior, seen from a distance, appears a rather undramatic grey-brown slope rising to the silhouette of a tower at its highest point. On the quay, even in February, a line of minibus drivers touted for custom.

Get away from the place, was the advice I had been given. One way to do it, and it is indeed a good way if you are pushed for time and it is not peak season traffic, is to take one of these minibus tours. Better still, walk or rent a bike from the shop at the end of the pier.

Some of what makes Aran special can be seen in half a day's walk or bike ride: the stupendous cliffs of the south shore, the power of the sea, the enduring majesty of the ring forts - Dun Aonghasa, Dun Eochla, Dun Duchathair; the mesmerising beauty of the walls that pattern the whole island; and, in April and May, the wild flowers. Other things require more work.

I had booked a room in Kilmurvey, half way to the western tip of the island; an hour and a half's walk, they told me in the friendly tourist office just behind the beach. I stopped off at the Post Office to buy some cards. "If we go inland, is it less windy?" asked two American girls in front of me. "There is no inland," said the postmaster.

You quickly come to understand what he means. The island is barely 13 kilometres long and, at best, three wide. Of the fourteen villages, only Kilronan accounts for more than a score of scattered houses, and among them roofless walls and gables stick gauntly up against the sky. Some are testimony to the terrible poverty of not long ago: hovels abandoned in favour of more comfortable modern houses built alongside. Others tell a story whose shameful detail modern generations of English people are largely unaware of and the Irish too polite to remind us of, like the ruins of the former Protestant church, whose only congregation would have been the police, coastguards and other agents of what was then the occupying English power, whose principal function was to keep the natives under control and make sure they paid without a fuss the crippling rents exacted on their miserable plots of land.

The road climbs steadily past a rock-cut shrine to the Virgin Mary,and you begin to get a sense of what the island is made of: thick layers of limestone laid one upon another and, here on the north slopes, eroded away into little cliffs and ledges that step gently down to the shore itself. The road follows one such ledge and the villages take shelter in its lee from the prevailing winds.

Above the road crouch the grey stone ramparts of Dun Eochla, one of the island's ancient ring forts. Primitive structures, like the field walls and the stone huts called *clochans* whose ruins lie among the fields (there is a complete one below the road in Kilmurvy), there is little conclusive evidence of their age. This one provides a lovely view of the whole north coast of the island, fringed by surf beyond the chequerboard of fields, and away to Inishmaan and the distant cliffs of Co Clare. From any lower level, your view is blocked by the endless maze of walls, built not so much to enclose anything as to make room for the minute plots of pasture or, round the houses, the gardens where people grew their meagre crops of potatoes. And even then they had to "make land" by carting loads of sand and seaweed and wait patiently for it to rot down into a thin soil. Some enclose only the bare sheets of limestone, which the weather quarries at its precise and millenial pace.

From the fort I scrambled across to the old lighthouse and signal tower built in the Napoleonic wars to warn of French invasion. But it is impossible to travel far like this, for the walls are five or six feet high and there are no gates. You need to find the paths or *boreens* that wind between them. That is how the cows are moved, whose occasional lonely faces you see, apparently immured in this labyrinth of grey. You push the wall down to let them into a field, then build it up behind them. I began to notice that everywhere there were curious heaps of stones, with one end built up into a rough slope and the other hollowed into a trough: Aran's solution to the problem of watering these poor imprisoned beasts.

These are the things in Aran that come to fascinate quite as much as the more obvious monuments. A patch of ground so long inhabited, so tiny and so ill-favoured that every poor resource has of necessity been worked and reworked like an old palimpsest, not by the portentous script of kings and generals, but the humble writings of ordinary people. Some of these marks are hard to read today and it helps to read one of the classic cribs: either Synge's *The Aran Islands* or Tim Robinson's fascinatingly detailed and contemporary two-volume study, *Stones of Aran*.

Back on the road, a sign points to the church of Ceathrar Alainn. There is not much to see beyond ruined walls, a spring and some slabs of stone said to be the beds or graves of the Four Beautiful Saints. It is one of many holy places on the islands, which were once known as Aran of the Saints, often associated with tales of visions and miraculous cure that were as much a part of island lore as the tales of the fairies and their ways. A story about this particular spring gave Synge the plot for his play, *The Well of the Saints*.

The most famous of these sites was the monastery at Killeany built by St Enda, one of the founding fathers of Irish Christianity, around 500AD and now vanished almost without trace. Of the survivors, the most evocative is the Seven Churches just beyond Kilmurvy, its ruins and crosses prettily framed against the shore.

But, for me, the highlight of my stay was Kilmurvy and the walks I did round about. The B&B I had booked turned out to be the cottage built by Robert Flaherty as the set for his 1934 film. *Man of Aran*. It stands just above the crescent beach where in the old days the brown-sailed hookers landed turf from Connemara. Nowadays, the fires you sit by, like my landlady's, Mrs Wolfe's, are all of Polish coal. She is a native of the island, returned after many years' exile in England. Her father was the man who rowed supplies to the lighthouse-keeper off the island's rocky western prow, where seas the size of houses are a commonplace affair.

Half an hour's walk to the south, past the melancholy Kilmurvey House, seat for many years of the island's little-loved gentry, is the Bronze Age fort of Dun Aonghasa. A kind of Celtic Mycenae, with two outer walls and a massive inner rampart guarding nowt but a horseshoe of air, it stands right on the rim of the cliffs, here nearly 100 metres high. The sea boils and fumes at their base, sending columns of spray 30 or 40 metres into the air, which are caught by the

wind and hurled upwards over the rim, like the cliff-face springs which in their turn are slung back on to the land they came from.

You really need to have the Dun to yourself to appreciate its daunting magnificence to the full, especially the approach from the west, where a screen of menacing rock stakes impedes your advance as they were designed to snag a foe's. In season this means an early morning or evening visit. The cliffs, however, you can more easily have to yourself.

I would strongly recommend the walk I did from the village of Gort na gCapal below Dun Aonghasa, where Liam O'Flaherty, novelist and founder of the Irish Communist Party, was born, to the equally dramatic but remoter Dun Duchathair or Black Fort. It takes three to four hours and begins on the tarmac lane leading up to the barren heights around the Eochla signal tower. At the first grassy *boreen* crossing the lane, I turned down to the cliffs. There was no sound but the crying of the wind in the walls. Fine-veined ivy, dog rose and bramble crouched low to the ground. Mosses and hart's tongue ferns grew round the little grotto of a spring. The first primroses were out. "They do be coming up early... oh, they do... they do," said the only person I met, an old man with the long face and fine brow described by Synge and the nineteenth-century anthropometrical scholars who came to record the islanders' racial characteristics.

The landscape is extraordinary. Gullied and fissured tables of limestone, here partly covered by a thin turf of close-woven flower and grass roots, there scoured clean by the wind but harbouring dense little gardens of plants in the shelter of its crevices. Walls, whose texture seen against the backdrop of sky is as open as lace, reach right to the cliff edge; and it is as well, if you must look over on a windy day, to do so lying on your stomach. Sunlight flares on a distant patch of sea and all down the coast to Inishmaan you can see the breakers riding in with flying crests to fling themselves against the headlands. The clouds darken and a stinging shower turns suddenly to hail. These are forces and rhythms that make human endeavour merely puny.