

Kerry Tales of Italian Origin—a review article

MUIRIS MAC CONGHAIL*

James Stewart, **BOCCACCIO IN THE BLASKETS**, Officina Typographica, Galway 1988; pp. xxii + 149; ISBN 0-907775-35-7. Price: £6.50.

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James Stewart's book *Boccaccio in The Blaskets* is, as its title suggests, an examination of the evidence concerning the existence of tales from the *Decameron* in the oral and written culture of The Blasket Island.

The *Decameron*, written by the Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), is a collection of a hundred tales told by seven young women and three men who take refuge in a country house near Florence to avoid the dangers of the Black Death which then raged in the city. To pass the time as cheerfully as possible, each of the ten narrates one tale each day to the others.

Stewart in his account traces the existence of eight tales of which *Ser Cepperello* and *Melchizedek the Jew* are of the First Day, *Rinaldo d'Asti*, *Landolfo Rufolo* and *Andreuccio of Perugia* of the Second Day, *King Agilulf's Wife* of the Third Day, *Tancredi, Prince of Salerno* of the Fourth Day, and *The Reeve's Tale* of the Ninth Day. Eight tales in all. Two further tales are recorded as having been known in the island: *Masetto of Lamporecchio* of the Third Day, and *A Scholar falls in love with a Widow* of the Eighth Day.

Stewart examines how the *Decameron* tales came to exist in the Irish-speaking island of the Great Blasket and his story is an important addition to the literature about the culture of the island. Thus he records the manner by which the tales were introduced, the dating, perhaps to the precise year, and the name of the translator who worked in manuscript but who also narrated in the traditional storytelling genre at least three of the tales. One of these tales was also recorded from the translator's mother.

The importance of James Stewart's findings and the nature of the transmission process involved would have been all the more clear were he to have described the cultural context into which these tales of Boccaccio were brought. It seems that Mr. Stewart had originally planned to publish a decade ago, obviously when he first synchronised all the elements of his find and "to present the material without delay". It is unfortunate that Mr. Stewart did not have the opportunity of elaborating on his brief commentary written ten years ago, although he has taken some account of recent work by others in the field.

I have added some contextual and other items in this notice so that the nature of Stewart's work will be all the more clear.¹

The Blasket Islands lie off the south-west coast of Ireland in the barony of Corca Dhuibhne which forms the Dingle Peninsula, County Kerry. They are a small cluster of islands, now uninhabited. The largest island, The Great Blasket or An tOileán Tiar, was evacuated in 1953. The Irish language (Gaelic) was the everyday language of the island community and continues to be spoken by the surviving islanders on the mainland at Dún Chaoin.

*14 Ascal Ghairbhile, Ráth Garbh, Baile Átha Cliath 6.

¹I have assembled a general account of the Blasket Island and its culture, including a bibliography, in *The Blaskets: A Kerry Island Library*, Dublin 1987, and in a documentary film *Oileán Eile—Another Island*, Radió Telefís Éireann 1986.

In what must be a unique episode in the history of world literature and in the history of small islands, the Islanders produced a 'library' of books in Irish about themselves and their life on The Great Blasket. Tomás Ó Criomhthain (1855-1937) wrote *Allagar na hInise*—Island Cross-talk (1928) and *An tOileánach*—The Islandman (1929), Muiris Ó Súilleabháin wrote *Fiche Blian ag Fás*—Twenty Years A-Growing (1933), and Peig Sayers (1873-1958) *Peig* (1936) and *Machtnamh Seana-Mhná*—An Old Woman's Reflections (1939). The list doesn't end there, the 'library' books written by the islanders amounts to eighteen volumes with books by Robin Flower, Kenneth Jackson, George Thomson and others, including the book under review here, adding to the volumes of commentary on aspects of the Island's culture and history.

How was it that such a small island situated in a remote region on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean and populated by fisherfolk produced such a remarkable literary portrait of themselves? On the one hand we are talking about a community who represented one of the strongest outposts of the residual Gaelic culture and as Professor J. H. Delargy has said: it was "to the ultra-conservative character of such people aided by the peculiar circumstances of our historical and cultural development, we owe the preservation to our own day of tales, traditions, beliefs and customs, and certain features of the material culture as well of a civilisation of which there is no written record."²

On the other hand we are talking about people of whom many were literate and who had sense of themselves by which they created a literature in their own language and which has travelled in translation in English, French, German, Swedish and Czech.

As an island community, they seem to have been an open trading post in culture. It is probable, although some would regard this as controversial, that literacy in their own language came about in the first instance in the first half of the nineteenth century as a result of the activities of religious reformers who sent Irish-speaking Bible teachers and printed material, including Bibles in Irish, to the island. They also opened a school on the island in 1836 and used Irish as the medium of instruction.³

It was to be some thirty years later before a Catholic school was to open in which the language of instruction was English.

What is certain is that the contact the islanders made in the first decades of the twentieth century with scholar visitors Carl Marstrander, Robin Flower, Kenneth Jackson, George Thomson, and particularly with Brian Ó Ceallaigh from Killarney, brought the island literature into being.

It is against this background that James Stewart's *Boccaccio in The Blaskets* has to be read. Central to Stewart's study is Mícheál Ó Gaoithín, known also as *An File* (The Poet), son of Peig Sayers. Ó Gaoithín (1901-1974) acted as amanuensis to his mother Peig when he transcribed, wrote or recorded her memoirs which were published in two volumes with a further memoir later. Ó Gaoithín also wrote a short autobiography, and a very fine collection of poetry. He was a primitive painter and a very fine traditional story-teller.⁴

The thread of Mr. Stewart's story is as follows:

Professor Bo Almquist, of the Department of Irish Folklore at University College, Dublin, was the first to record publicly that the *Decameron* was known on the Blasket Island in a lecture which he gave in 1974.⁵ Almquist collected Seán na dTubaistí

²J. H. Delargy, *The Gaelic Story Teller: with some notes on Gaelic Folk Tales*, London 1956, pp. 35ff.

³I have detailed some of the facts of this episode in my own book on *The Blaskets*: see note 1 supra.

⁴For a fine account of Mícheál Ó Gaoithín (*An File*) see Bo Almquist, "Beirt Scéalaithe i Scathán Scéil" in *Féilscríbhinn Thomáis de Bhaldraithe*, Dundalk 1986, pp. 134-146.

⁵Bo Almquist, *An Béaloideas agus an Litríocht*, Baile An Fheirtéirigh 1977.

(Seán of the misfortunes, *i.e.* Andreuccio of Perugia of the Second Day) in 1969 from Mícheál Ó Gaoithín which he first published in 1977.

Professor Heinrich Wagner collected "Scéal an Chliabháin" (Story of the cradle, *i.e.* The Reeve's Tale of the Ninth Day) from Peig Sayers in 1946 which he published in 1983.⁷

Mícheál Ó Gaoithín told Stewart "The Reeve's Tale" on two occasions in 1973 and "A groom makes love to King Agilulf's wife" also in 1973.

What must be recognised as a good literary find to the credit of James Stewart is his discovery in the Irish language manuscript collection of the National Library of Ireland of a manuscript translation from English of six tales from the *Decameron*.⁸ "While the actual translation (now comprising 52 sides of lined foolscap paper) is unsigned, language and style, as well as the context in which it preserved, proclaim it to be the work of Mícheál Ó Gaoithín." (p. xi).

There is evidence from the 1920s indicating that one story at least from the *Decameron* was known in the household of Peig Sayers (A Scholar falls in love with a Widow: Eighth Day). It was the late George Thomson, The Homeric Scholar,⁹ who provided this evidence to Stewart. Thomson also told Stewart that when he was in Muiris Ó Súilleabháin's house on one occasion after hearing the story he turned out the contents of a little cupboard in the wall, and amongst them he found a tattered copy of an English edition of the *Decameron*. Stewart's preoccupation with the identification of the source from which Ó Gaoithín made his translation limits the scope of his commentary on one important strand in the story: why did Ó Gaoithín translate?

James Stewart has made a very strong case for accepting the version of the *Decameron* translated by W. K. Kelly and published in 1855 as being the text from which Ó Gaoithín worked. However, Stewart points out that as Ó Gaoithín 'selected' the tales, the translation may have been based on a published selection of Kelly's work or a Kelly-type text.

How did the Kelly text come to the Island? James Stewart suggests, correctly I believe, that Brian Ó Ceallaigh "must be seriously considered in this connection." Ó Ceallaigh (also known as Bryan Albert Kelly) played an important rôle in the 'creation' of the Island's literary output.

The story of Brian Ó Ceallaigh's life is a complex one and I propose to confine myself here to the years of his primary involvement with the Blasket Community.¹⁰ Ó Ceallaigh came to the Blasket Island in 1917. Tomás Ó Criomhthain and Ó Ceallaigh established a personal and literary friendship which brought Ó Criomhthain's creative memoirs into being: *An tOileánach* (The Islandman) and *Allagar na hInise* (Island Cross Talk) are the two books from that process; both will, I believe, stand the test of time. Ó Ceallaigh persuaded Tomás Ó Criomhthain to write, what seems to me to be, a daily sketch book of life on the island and thereafter, episode by episode, an account of the main events of his life. The process involved the writing of regular accounts for Ó Ceallaigh of Island life and personal recollections. Tomás when writing, Brian when reading, both knew the landscape and the people involved: Tomás wrote for Brian.

⁶ *Béaloides: The Journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society*, Vol. 42-44, pp. 325-338.

⁷ Wagner and Mac Congáil, *Oral Literature from Dunquin, County Kerry*, Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen's University, Belfast 1983, pp. 47-53.

⁸ NLI Ms G 1021.

⁹ Thomson was Professor of Greek in Birmingham, and he encouraged Muiris Ó Súilleabháin to write *Fiche Blian Ag Fás*.

¹⁰ See a biographical note by the present reviewer on Ó Ceallaigh in "Brian Ó Ceallaigh: Páirtí Thomáis Chriomhthain", in *Oidhreacht An Bhlascaoid*, Dublin 1989.

Brian Ó Ceallaigh in setting up this activity also introduced Tomás Ó Criomhthain to the writings of Gorky in *In the World, My Childhood*, and Pierre Loti's *Pêcheur d'Islande*.

In time Tomás Ó Criomhthain assembled a collection of books sent to him by Ó Ceallaigh and other visitors, and these were lent in turn to island neighbours, but particularly to Muiris Ó Súilleabháin, to his sister Eibhlín and to Mícheál Ó Gaoithín. There was, for a small community, quite an amount of literary activity in progress. Tomás Ó Criomhthain was busily engaged in his autobiography and had already completed his island sketch book *Allagar na hInse* (Island Cross Talk). This activity caused Mícheál Ó Gaoithín to undertake a similar venture, and both he and Eibhlín Ní Shúilleabháin (a sister of Muiris) kept diaries for Brian Ó Ceallaigh for the year 1923. Thereafter Mícheál seems to have started on the translations from the *Decameron*.

Why did Mícheál Ó Gaoithín translate the *Decameron* material? James Stewart is less clear about this decision. He does suggest that Ó Gaoithín translated it "possibly at Brian Ó Ceallaigh's behest." I don't believe that Ó Ceallaigh would have encouraged Mícheál Ó Gaoithín to translate, nor was his introduction of the Gorky or Loti texts intended to encourage Tomás Ó Criomhthain to translate either.

Ó Gaoithín, writer and poet, was also an entertainer for the Blasket Community.¹¹ I believe he saw his rôle as a public one in which his stock of tales and stories was a very important ingredient in that rôle. He collected and 'edited' for island use a range of material from all sorts of sources, including newspapers (*The Weekly Freeman* and *The Kerryman*). When presented with the *Decameron*, or a selection from it, Ó Gaoithín recognised the attractive nature of the material. As he had already been writing a diary for a year, it would have been a natural choice for him to have continued in the writing vein, and besides which he saw himself as a scholar.

Stewart has provided parallel texts from the English translation and the Ó Gaoithín text which when examined in the context of the subsequent oral recensions recorded from Mícheál Ó Gaoithín and his mother, Peig Sayers, give an important clue as to the nature and transmission of story telling in the Blasket Island. It was, I think, Professor Bo Almquist who first noticed the sources of some of Mícheál Ó Gaoithín's stories. On one occasion some years ago when Almquist was first working with *An File*, Ó Gaoithín recited a story which on completion sounded like a version of a Grimm fairy tale. Almquist questioned Ó Gaoithín as to who had told him the story. He replied that he had heard the story from Mícheál de Mórdha of Baile An Ghleanna, Dún Chaoin. Excited by this answer, Professor Almquist went to Baile An Ghleanna to meet this important story-teller only to discover a young boy with a copy of Grimm's Fairy Tales in English which he had borrowed from the library. The young Mícheál had told the story in Irish to Ó Gaoithín!

Because of the long delay in publication it would perhaps have been better to have rewritten *Boccaccio in The Blaskets*, not only to take account of more recent scholarship on the Island Culture, but also to provide the necessary critical apparatus to evaluate the texts and positively to examine the nature of the transmission of the tales from written to an oral form. We look forward to that detailed commentary from James Stewart, although it may well be that Professor Bo Almquist's own forthcoming major work on the stories of Peig and her son Mícheál may pip him to the post.¹²

¹¹ This view arises from a long discussion with Breandán Feiritéar, the Head of Radió na Gaeltachta. Feiritéar is a native of Dún Chaoin and has acquired, through his broadcasting, important insights into the nature of the transmission of stories including those first heard by the Dún Chaoin community on radió.

¹² Bo Almquist, *Féilscríbhinn Thomáis de Bháldraithe*, p. 145.