



*A man who is not afraid of the sea
will soon be drowned, for he will
be going out on a day he shouldn't.
But we do be afraid of the sea, and we
do only be drowned now and again.*

—AN ARAN ISLANDER'S COMMENT
TO JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE

A SINGLE, twisting road leads through the eastern half of the Dingle Peninsula—the ancient barony of Corca Dhuibhne—in southwest Kerry, from the bustling, almost modern, market town of Tralee, over the Slieve Mish mountain range, through deep

glens, alongside the “wild” coastline, past low sand dunes and steep cliffs, ending at the sheltered bay of Ballybran. The central village of the parish is today but a double row of two-story stone houses, half of them shuttered and deserted—overlooking the bay with its last remaining *naomhóg** in a state of melancholy disrepair and tied idly to the quay. A primary-school, a chapel, a creamery, three pubs, four small dry-goods shops, the forge, a guesthouse house, two graveyards, and the ruins of three churches complete the inventory of public and social institutions of the community.

Most of the 461 parishioners of Ballybran do not live on the single paved street of the central village; they live in the eleven sister villages or hamlets scattered around and halfway up the sides of sacred Mount Brandon, site of pilgrimage in midsummer each year. The mountain villagers are a hardy,

*The lath and tarred canvas canoe traditionally used by fishermen of the Great Blasket Island and their mainland neighbors. *Curach* is the term used elsewhere in western Ireland.

long-lived race of shepherds, fishermen, and dairy farmers who claim ancestry and continuous residence in the parish as far back as the first settlement by seafaring Mediterranean Celts. Their physical type, however—long, lean, and finely sculptured—and their fair Norman complexions, belie their Celtic heritage.

The more “urbane” families of the central village provide for the educational, religious, and recreational needs of the resident farming and fishing population. Here reside curate, schoolteachers, publicans, postal workers, hackney drivers, nurse, auto repairman, shopkeepers, and housebuilders. Parishioners come to the central village from the surrounding hamlets and “townlands” to purchase canned goods, cigarettes, sugar, and tea, to gather gossip after Mass on Sundays and holy days, to bury the dead, to make telephone calls, and, on rarer occasions, to watch a television program in one of the four homes sporting a new antenna. Equality and classlessness are strongly defended ideals in Ballybran, but the children of teachers rarely play with the children of shopkeepers, and the children of shopkeepers even more rarely with the children of farmers, and almost no one plays with the children of shepherds. But, ironically, it is the shepherds’ children who know intimately and who “own” the holy mountain that gives the village its social and religious charter.

No public transportation leads to the parish today, with the exception of the school bus that carries a handful of adolescents to and from the technical school in Tralee each day. The railroad that once crisscrossed the peninsula, carrying villagers and occasionally their livestock to the open-air cattle and sheep markets of Castlederry and Dingle, closed down in the late 1950s after only a generation of service. Ten years later, the daily public bus to and from the parish to the county seat in Tralee was discontinued. With its passing, the temporary truce of Ballybran with the rest of County Kerry ended, and the parish was allowed to lapse once again into its historical mode of isolation. Yet, as I shall discuss in the following chapter, the isolation is of a psychological nature, for the economic and political structure of the parish is one of hostile and unwilling dependence upon the outside world.

So naturally secreted and difficult of access are the small communities of the Dingle Peninsula that the worst horrors of the Black Famine (1845–1849)

bypassed the hidden glens and hollows of Corca Dhuibhne, where the staple diet of spuds was ever varied with oats, turnips, milk, and butter, with salted mackerel and fresh salmon, with cockles and salty *duileask* (seaweed). The west Kerryman today, as then, is oriented primarily to his townland of two to twelve households, beyond that to his parish, and beyond that to the sea and to that other side of the Irish strand, where for generations the “Yanks” of the community have come and gone. For at least two centuries the streets of New York and Boston have been more familiar in anecdote and closer in experience to the Ballybran parishioner than have the roads to Cork, Galway, and Dublin. Central to the “mythology” of the proud community is the firm conviction that from the shores of its bay Saint Brendan the Navigator set sail across the stormy Atlantic to discover Tir na nOg (the legendary Land of the Young in the West) ten centuries before the birth of Christopher Columbus. To the imaginative minds of not a few of the villagers, America was once Saint Brendan’s Isle, only a colony of the mighty Kingdom of Kerry.

The inhabitants of Ballybran share a stance, a worldview, and an ethos similar to other perennially isolated mountain and hill communities in Europe (see Bailey 1973) who fear and mistrust outsiders, are intensely familistic and tightly endogamous, who view their terrain as a holy geography, their past as a religious history, and their language as a sacred tongue. Although the lame, itinerant tailor of Ananalacken townland settled over thirty years ago into the parish and into his teasing role as village agnostic and iconoclast, his neighbors never let him forget that he is not one of them. “Sure, we should have stoned the man out of this holy village three decades ago,” comments the bedridden poet laureate of Ballybran, “for it’s himself is leading our young lads down the paths of wickedness and paganism.” Similarly, while every married woman who was rightfully born, baptized, and married within the parish goes familiarly by her maiden name, or by a pet nickname such as Nellie Tommy (i.e., Tommy’s Nellie), women who have made so bold as to marry into the parish from elsewhere are known ever by the distant and slightly contemptuous title of Missus.

In the highly personalized world of the villager every field and pasture, every spring and well, every rock, hill, and resting place is endowed with a

name, a personality, a story, and a lesson. On Mount Brandon alone can be found Macha an Mhil (the Beast's Pasture), Fail na nDeamhan (the Demon's Cliff), Com na Cailighe (the Hag's Recess), Loch na Mná (the Woman's Lake), and Cnoc an Tairbh (the Bull's Head)—names suggestive of myths and legends that recur as well in other parts of Ireland. Each semiautonomous rural community claims the legends as the social charter and true history of its own people. And so it is that the people of Ballybran can point to that particular bit of mountain, or that exact lake, or stone, or well, where it all began "long ago." Near the flat mountain bog of Comm an Áir, it is told, a great battle took place between the mythical Giant Fenians and the Tuatha de Danann, and the arrowheads from the battle are still to be found and collected for a quarter of a mile surrounding the locality. Older villagers attribute the postpartum wasting sickness of cows to these "fairy darts," which they believe find their way from Comm an Áir into their pastures by night.

Beside the river called Abha Mac Feinne is a huge boulder that the folk hero Florin Mac Cumhail is said to have hurled from Connor Pass to kill a giant who was terrifying the people of Ballybran. A neighboring cromlech, or circle of monoliths, is known locally as the Giant's Grave and is associated with this same legend. The small lake of Loch Geal at the base of Mount Brandon holds captive a wicked *piast*, a demon-serpent that Saint Brendan confined there during his stay in the parish and that demonstrates its continued presence by hurling all the fish onto the shore once every seven years. The now deserted townland of Saus Creek, an almost inaccessible cliff where three or four families lived on small shelves overlooking the water, carries the melancholy tale of the woman who died in childbirth because the midwife, who slipped into the sea on her way down the cliffs by night, never reached her. The midwife's body was not reclaimed from the

*Have not all races had their
first unity from a mythology
that marries them to rock
and hill?*

— W. B. YEATS
Collected Works

sea, and fear of her powerful curse as well as sadness over the triple death (mother, child, and midwife) caused the remaining townlanders to abandon their ancestral hillside homes. The lesson remains and is oft repeated today; it is wrong to isolate oneself too far from one's neighbors: "In the shelter of each other, people must make their lives." Saus Creek, because of its powerfully negative associations, is visited only by mountain-climbing tourists, despite the many warnings of villagers that the place is "unsafe." Peddler's Lake also carries a story and a lesson, for it was into that bit of water far below Connor Pass that an itinerant peddler was thrown by his companion following a money squabble on their return home from Dingle Fair: "Greed is the root of all evil."

An intense rivalry separates Ballybran from its larger, sister parish of "Castlederry" (i.e. Castlegregory). Until five years ago, Ballybran suffered the perennial humiliation of second-class citizenship, as it was tied administratively and ecclesiastically to the larger parish. Where Castlederry is English-speaking, Ballybran is identified as Irish-speaking; where Castlederry is oriented to the crowded, lively indoor cattle market of Tralee, where the language of hard cash is spoken, the inhabitants of Ballybran traditionally drive their calves and sheep by foot over the mountain pass into the sleepy little open market of Dingle, where barter and the "lucky penny" are still known. Where Castlederry is neatly divided into class, religious, and ethnic boundaries, sporting a few token Protestant residents, the people of Ballybran like to make the "proud boast" that there was never a "Black Protestant" to dig his heels permanently into their native turf. Finally, where men from Castlederry frequently contract matches with women outside their parish, the men of Ballybran feel that a match with a second cousin or no match at all is preferable to marriage with a stranger.

Villagers divide up their history as they do their geography and their social world into neat oppositional boundaries: all before their patron saint, Brendan, is dark, pagan, and forbidding; all afterward is holy, enlightened, and Christian. With a similar passion for the dialectic, villagers view their generations of struggle and opposition against the encroaching, foreign, Protestant landlord. Yet one of the outstanding characteristics of rural Irish culture is its ability to survive through compromise and syncretization, and

perhaps nowhere is the pagan element in European civilization more distinctively alive than in the small villages of the western coast, and much of the heritage of the hated Puritan invader Cromwell remains in the sermons delivered and morality extolled from the pulpit of the parish church of Ballybran.

As the local tradition would have it, the “history” of the parish begins with the landing of Noah’s granddaughter on Dún na mBarc on the Dingle Peninsula. She was accompanied by fifty virgins and three young men, all seeking refuge from the Great Flood. Village mythographers point for evidence to the three prehistoric standing stones (*galláns*) occupying a central position in Tommy Murphy’s field, each with its odd lines, which storytellers say represent a prehistoric alphabet predating the more familiar ogham script of the early Celts. A literary source of this folk belief can be found in the ancient *Leabar Gabala*, the Irish “Book of Invasions,”¹ which was written by the monks of the early Christian period, and parts of which are still committed to memory within the oral tradition of Kerry.

Despite this venerable legend, there is as yet no evidence of the Old Stone Age period in Ireland, and modern scholars agree (see Chadwick 1970; Curtis 1970) that Ireland was first peopled by mesolithic men and women (circa 6000 B.C.), users of copper and bronze tools, builders of stone monuments, and worshippers of the mother-goddess Dana. The few remaining *scéalaí* of the parish (storytellers specializing in the old Irish sagas) can be persuaded to tell about this first semidivine race of Ireland—the so-called Tuatha de Danann—who were conquered in the great battle of Slieve Mish on the coast of southwest Kerry, only a day’s walk from Ballybran. The invading conquerors—a small, dark race of “gloomy sea giants” known as the Firbolg—landed on the coast of Kerry to spring a surprise attack. The wily Tuatha de Danann, however, persuaded the invaders that the attack was unfair, since their people were not prepared to meet it. In a gentlemanly gesture the Firbolg agreed to reembark and return “nine waves out to the sea” in order to give the Tuatha de Danann time to ready themselves for battle. The only gratitude the Firbolg received for their military fair play was a magical storm brewed up by the sorcerers of the coast; but the seafaring invaders were victorious in any case. Such is the legendary rendi-

tion of the arrival in Kerry about 350 B.C. of the original ancestors of the parish, the Milesian Celts of northern Spain. Fear of retaliation by the defeated tribe lingers on, however, in the still extant belief that the fairy forts, stone rings, and mounds to be found in every hamlet of the parish are the hiding places of the spirits of the angry Tuatha de Danann.

Although villagers shy away from discussing or venturing too near the prehistoric relics that abound in the parish—the monoliths (standing stones), souterrains (underground dwellings), *clochán* (beehive huts), and burial mounds—they are willing to grant religious validity as well as magical power to these monuments of their early ancestors. When in the course of general conversation with the wife of a village shepherd I had occasion to mention the three curious standing stones of the parish, I inquired of her, with

feigned naïveté, whatever were they for? The wife in her ready reply collapsed the two-thousand-year history separating the religion of her Druidic ancestors from the Catholic faith of her own times: “You mean those tall stones up in Inismore? Those were the kinds of altars we used to have before the priests made them flat.”

The prehistory of the parish also merges with modern times in the persistence of at least three ancient culture traits: the mortarless form of stone architecture called corbelling; the custom of heaping rocks over the site where death or burial took place; and the open-air mountain assembly at the top of Mount Brandon on the eve of the Celtic quarterly feast of Lughnasa. The first waves of Mediterranean Celts brought to Ireland the method of constructing stone beehive-shaped dwellings by placing rows of flat stones so that each row projects further into the preceding one until the sides meet the top, the roof being a continuation of the walls. O’Riordan (1965: 82)

Noah floated west after the flood until he saw the top fourteen feet of the Macgillycuddy’s Reeks above water. Then he stepped out of the Ark grumbling about the weather, and a Kerryman greeted him by saying, “What a fine, soft day it is, thanks be to God!”

— VILLAGE ANECDOTE

points out that whole villages built in this manner are still to be found in the heel of Italy. The best example of the beehive hut in Ireland surviving from the early Christian period is the Gallarus Oratory on the western side of the Dingle Peninsula. It is still intact, fifteen hundred years after it was constructed, despite the ravages of Atlantic wind and rain storms, testifying to the architectural genius of the early Celts. This same architectural technique continues to be employed by a few elderly farmers of the region (as it is nowhere else in Ireland) in their construction of stone outhouses for livestock. The ancient pan-European custom of marking the spot where a death occurred by a pile of stones or sticks to which each passerby adds a bit likewise survives in the village practice of adding a stone over the grave of a loved one on each visit to the graveyard.

The historical period of the parish begins in the fifth century with the introduction of Christianity into the village by Saint Brendan the Navigator. According to the most important origin myth of the community, Brendan with his small band of holy and ascetic monks spent the winter in Ballybran on the pinnacle of the mountain that is consecrated to his memory, and later converted by trickery the despotic local pagan chieftain, Crom Dubh. Although the remains of Brendan's oratory atop Mount Brandon attest to the historicity of the monk's visit to Ballybran, the earliest written record of the life of the patron saint comes from the eleventh-century manuscript the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*² and the somewhat later medieval *Vitae*,³ and it is apparent that by this time much that is legendary had already crept into the life history of the patron saint. Serious scholars, however (see M. MacNeill 1962), accept that Brendan was born during the last quarter of the fifth century—in 484 if one is to accept the *Vitae*—near Tralee in County Kerry, that he belonged to the then ruling tribe of the Ciarraighe (from which Kerry derives its name), and that he traveled at least as far as Scotland, Wales, and Brittany before his death in 557.

As a monk and a self-designated “wanderer for Christ” (*peregrinator pro Christi*), Brendan belonged to that particularly austere early monastic tradition in Ireland that demanded of its followers silence and solitude, celibacy and seclusion, fasting and self-mortification. It was a tradition that has left its imprint on the character of Irish Catholicism as well as on the ascetic per-

sonality of the Irish countryman.⁴ Sea voyages for the discovery of new lands and conversion of pagan peoples were central to the disciplined life of these early monks and were a means of prolonging the necessary periods of isolation from the world and the opposite sex. In between voyages Brendan and his monks built a series of monasteries—clusters of beehive-shaped stone cells—on almost inaccessible rocks off the western coast, such as that of the famous Sceilig Mhichil, or on mountain peaks, such as the one in Ballybran. Here the monks pursued the early scholarly tradition of Ireland, producing the first national poetry.⁵ When they were not fasting, the monks lived on fish and snared seabirds as well as on donations of oats, bread, and milk, which they received from fishermen and peasants eager to win the blessing of holy men such as themselves.

Legend has it that while Brendan was praying and fasting on top of Mount Brandon, he received his divine commission to sail westward, where he would be led to discover a Promised Land, which was called alternatively Hi-Brazil and Saint Brendan's Isle. News of Brendan's discovery of a New World spread the monk's fame to all maritime districts around the Irish coast and to as far away as Portugal and Spain, and soon Brendan became the patron saint of sailors. It is part of the folk tradition of west Kerry that Christopher Columbus on his maiden voyage across the Atlantic paid a visit to Galway in order to research the manuscripts of Brendan's *Navagatio*, which were kept in a monastery there. Interestingly, Brendan's logbook describes land and vegetation that can be matched along Columbus's route.

Throughout the Dingle Peninsula, Brendan occupies the place reserved elsewhere in Ireland for Saint Patrick—that of the champion of Christianity over paganism. However, what is most interesting about the saint is his role as mediator of the dual pagan and Christian traditions in Ballybran. Wherever possible Brendan used and Christianized—or, as local people are wont to say, “baptized”—the essential aspects of pagan Celtic worship that survive to this day: the rounds at holy wells, the assembly for sun worship at sacred mountaintops, the devotion to sacred rocks. In fact, the monasteries of Mount Brandon, Sceilig Mhichil, and Reask⁶ on Corca Dhuibhne most certainly served as a meeting ground between the early Christian monks and the Druidic priests, themselves occupied with the sacred task of preserving the law and

legends of the Celts. The meetings between the two cultures, pagan and Christian, bore fruit: Church Latin mixed with the vigorous phrasing of the Celt to produce a rich literary tradition famed for centuries throughout Europe and winning for Ireland the title Isle of Saints and Scholars.

Despite the historicity of his person, it is the mythical quality of Saint Brendan that invests him with power in the community, and his “life history” reads as a continuation or fulfillment of the ancient Celtic sagas. According to the *Vitae*, Brendan’s father’s name was Fionnluigh, which Máire MacNeill (1962: 102) interprets as a joining together of the names of two important divine heroes of Celtic mythology—Fionn the warrior, and Lugh the sun god. Brendan’s own name may be a fortuitous reworking of the name of the Celtic sea god, Bran, of whom Robert Graves (1961) has written so eloquently in *The White Goddess*.⁷ The fact that Saint Brendan the Navigator was, like Bran, a divine messenger of the sea, makes him an appropriate Christian replacement for the pagan water god. An elderly publican of Ballybran, well versed in local mythology, argued one evening in his shop that the rock promontory at the edge of the parish, now called Brandon Head, was really a misinformed translation of the original Irish place-name Bran’s Nose.

Máire MacNeill (1962: 104), in her detailed study of the survival in western Ireland of the pagan harvest festival called Lughnasa, suggests that Brendan may be identified with the sun god Lugh in whose honor the festival and mountaintop pilgrimage at dawn was originally celebrated. Support for this theory comes from the villagers of Ballybran themselves, who explain that in “the old days” people climbed the mountain to worship the sun, but that ever since Brendan outwitted the pagan chieftain Crom Dubh, the pilgrimage has been made in honor of the Christian saint. And ever since the conversion of the village to Christianity, it has rained on the day of the pilgrimage, hence giving annual testimony to the victory of the gloomy and ascetic Brendan over the pagan sun god. The chieftain, Crom Dubh, who occupies so central a position in the mythology of Ballybran, and whose stone head carving is to be found in the ancient cemetery of the community, is in fact an important god in the Gaelic pantheon and a son of Lugh, the Father-Creator and sun god. The essential origin myth of the parish—the

defeat of Crom Dubh by Brendan — told to me in many of its variant forms, bears retelling since it demonstrates so well the syncretism between the two opposing religious traditions of the parish. The following version was given to a representative of the Irish Folklore Commission by the father of a villager upon whose land stands the ruins of the very church built by Brendan in the tale. As owner of the field, the narrator was undisputed heir to the true version of the story.

The date of the Catholic Church being built is unknown, but a miraculous incident happened during the course of its construction. A pagan named Crom Dubh lived in the parish at the time. The monks in charge of the building approached him for some help. He first refused but afterwards told them that he had a bull in Glenahue about three miles distant if they wished to take him as his donation. The beast was known to be wild and mad and nobody dared to come near him. St. Brendan sent for the beast, caught him and brought him like a lamb to the slaughter. His flesh was used as food and his blood used in the mortar. When Crom Dubh heard that the beast was captured and slaughtered he was furious with rage and demanded payment in cash for the beast. Nothing else would satisfy him. However, he consented to have the flesh weighed and the value given to him. St. Brendan procured scales, put the flesh on one side, wrote the “Hail Mary” on a slip of paper and placed it on the other side. The slip of paper with the “Hail Mary” outweighed the carcass and Crom Dubh was immediately converted to the Catholic Faith. A Pattern [i.e., a patron saint’s day] to Crom Dubh’s honor is held in the village of [Ballybran] on the last day of July ever since. It is called in Irish Dómach Crom Dubh (Crom Dubh Sunday). (Irish Folklore Commission Archives, MS 202: 177–181)

Some villagers add in the telling that the “pattern” (patron saint) day of the village is celebrated to honor the baptism of Crom Dubh, signifying, as it were, the acceptance of the mythical pagan god into the Irish Communion of Saints. Other variants of the tale make mention of the stone head of Crom Dubh found in the cemetery and add that “long ago” the pattern-day festivities took place in the graveyard around the head of the pagan. It was

believed that those in the parish suffering from a toothache could be cured by kissing the stone head on that day. Márie MacNeill (1962: 426), who photographed the stone carving, attests to its antiquity as a third- or fourth-century representation of the god Crom Dubh. She surmises that the stone was part of the pagan ritual and was possibly carried to the top of Mount Brandon for the harvest festivities of Lughnasa, which took place then, as the Christian pilgrimage does today, on Crom Dubh Sunday—that Sunday on or closest to the first day of August.

In effect, the parish honors two patron saints on its “pattern day,” the pagan god Crom Dubh and Saint Brendan, founder of Christianity in Ballybran. The ambiguity of the tradition puzzles a few of the parishioners, and a village shopkeeper once remarked after completing the tale, “It’s hard to understand why we celebrate our ‘pattern day’ in honor of that black pagan, Crom Dubh. He was a nasty fellow really, from the likes of the story: a kind of ‘false god’ if you like.”

Not only does the most important ritual event of the parish—the annual pilgrimage up Mount Brandon—commemorate the Christian reinterpretation of a pagan custom, but also the pilgrim to the summit follows many of the same prescriptions adhered to by his Celtic ancestors. He stops midway for a drink at the holy well, leaving behind perhaps some piece of ribbon or red cloth; once on top, he encircles the peak in nine “rounds” from east to west, imitating the course of the sun in the sky and dropping a pebble marker at each round; finally, before making the descent, the pilgrim knocks his back three times against the holy rock called *Leac na nDrom* (Rock of the Backs) in order to ward off backaches for the coming year. The Church, of course, has long since Christianized the old symbols, and the curate patiently explains that the holy well sprang magically from a rock that Brendan struck with his rod; that the pagan “rounds” are followed today in imitation of Jesus’ ascent up Calvary; and that the knocking of the back against *Leac na nDrom* is a penitential symbol whereby the pilgrim renounces the desires of this world.

But elements of both traditions are held concurrently by the hundreds of pilgrims who make the arduous climb, fasting and many of them barefooted, up the rough eastern ascent of the 3,127-foot mountain. They do it,

in their own words, “because Brendan went up there, didn’t he?” “for the *craic* of it”; “to do penance”; “for a kidney cure”; “to fulfill a promise”; “for the view”; “because Brendan is our patron and we ‘have right’ to honor him”; “for fair weather for the hay”; “to give example to the children”; “for a safe mackerel season”; “for a special intention”; “for God to take me before another winter”; “for peace in Ireland.”

The villagers of today, like their Celtic ancestors, have a healthy respect for the vagaries of the sea and sky, both of which still dominate their livelihood and well-being. An appeal for fine weather and calm seas can most auspiciously and dramatically be made on the summit of a mountain closer to the heavenly home of their patron and overlooking the vast Atlantic, which their sailor saint conquered so many centuries before. Brendan is the apex of the villagers’ account of their history. He represents all that is *right* about themselves and their austere lifestyle. Brendan and his monks, like many of themselves, were celibates and bitten by the same wanderlust that carries today’s villagers on periodic peregrinations to England, Scotland, and America. And, like themselves, Brendan had that chameleonlike quality that allowed him to adapt easily to the cultural milieu of strangers, taking and borrowing what seemed useful, and yet able to return home seemingly unscathed and thoroughly Irish at base.

Predisposed as they are to stories of trouble, persecution, tragedy, and death, the remaining ethnohistory of the parish falls into five historical periods: the blood-bath that crushed the rebellious earl of Desmond; the Penal Times and the persecutions of Oliver Cromwell; the Black Famine; the “Troubles” and horrors of the English Black-and-Tans; and the shipwreck in Brandon Bay of a California frigate, the *Port Yarok*. The stories for each are associated with particular times of the year, and certain villagers are known to have the whole or “best” version of the tale, ballad, or poetry through which the history and its moral lesson are communicated.

The Dingle Peninsula witnessed one of the bloodiest deeds of Queen Elizabeth I, who charged Lord Grey and later Sir Walter Raleigh with the task of crushing the rebellious Irish earl of Desmond. In November 1580 some six hundred Italian and Spanish troops came to the aid of the Catholic Desmonds, and all were besieged by the English in the tiny cove called Dún

an Oir, near the tip of the Dingle Peninsula. Over six hundred Irish resisters were slain, and the despised Sir Walter Raleigh was awarded by the queen a grant of forty thousand acres in Ireland in gratitude for his “brave deeds.” The following centuries saw the Irish of Corca Dhuibhne, as elsewhere, persecuted by brutal English oppression. Irish lords were dispossessed, and the Irish poet and scholar was banished to wander in exile. His ragged verses survived, however, on the nimble tongues of the cottage storytellers, the *scéalai*.

Sean Og, the parish clerk, has the stories of Penal Times and the ruthless persecution of the priests. Since the tradition of house masses, or “stations,” originated during Penal Times, Sean Og finds a receptive audience for his stories at the breakfasts following stations each fall and spring. In the days of the Black Protestant Cromwell (circa 1649), tells Sean, there was a five-pound bounty on the head of every Catholic priest. At this time there was a much beloved curate in Ballybran who was captured and beheaded by one of Cromwell’s men. His headless body is buried outside the graveyard and under a mulberry bush in the space once reserved for unbaptized babies. Late one night, about ten years ago, himself (says Sean) and old Father Boyle were late coming home from a sick call in Drom when they heard a terrible racket—a rumbling and banging like metal barrels rolling over the ground. The pair ducked for safety into the home of a villager, who said not to mind the noise, that it was nothing but the warning of the “beheaded priest,” who comes up from his grave in search of his head each year on his anniversary. Other village legends about Cromwell tell how he died in Ireland, but that his body could not be disposed of: Irish soil refused to receive it, and the corpse bobbed atop the Irish sea until it finally sank to the bottom, causing the waters to be rough and angry ever since.

When the potato famine struck in 1845, Cork and Kerry were among the hardest hit counties, but the little fishing villages of Corca Dhuibhne served as a refuge for many fleeing even worse starvation and disease in the inland parishes. Mag, one of the oldest parishioners, “has the famine stories,” since her own mother lived through those times (1845–1849). Mag is most inclined to tell these stories in the spring when there is a vestigial anxiety about the rapidly diminishing supply of potatoes in every villager’s barn or back kitchen. In her at first halting and gentle voice she will tell of the

stranger her mother met dying by the wayside, his mouth hanging open and the juice of the stinging nettle dripping from his blackened lips. Mag's voice rises into quivering anger as she tells of the hunger that forced men, women, and children to the roads and to a diet of the spiny nettles. The man died before Mag's mother could find help, and because he was a stranger and his religion and state of soul unknown, the man was buried in the common grave in the sandbanks of the bay, making his soul's entry into heaven all the more difficult. Years later, Mag's mother once again encountered the old man at the same spot upon her return from Mass on All Soul's Day. As he raised his hands in supplication, the old woman realized that he was the poor forgotten soul let up from Purgatory on the Day of the Dead to beg a prayer from the only friend he had in the parish.

Summertime, as the Ballybran crews are being selected for regattas and mackerel fishing, is also the "proper time" for the telling of the 1896 wreck of the *Port Yarok* and the drowning of its crew in Brandon Bay. The story has several versions, some narrative, others in ballad form, but the underlying message is the same: no salvation for those like the crew of the *Yarok* who die suddenly, unprepared and unshriven ("It's not a death without a priest").

The "war" for Irish liberation was particularly savage in southwest Kerry and Cork. Heroes were made and burned alive in Tralee. A Dingle man, Thomas Ashe, became one of the period's greatest martyrs, fighting in the Easter Rising of 1916 and then dying during a hunger strike while a British prisoner. The Anglo-Irish patriot, Sir Roger Casement, was captured by the Royal Irish Constabulary during an abortive attempt to smuggle twenty thousand German rifles to members of the IRA on a beach not far from Ballybran. No village gathering would be complete without the soulful singing of the ballad "Banna Strand," immortalizing the event. The period of "the Troubles" and the brief occupation of the parish by the hated English mercenaries, the so-called Black-and-Tans (circa 1920), is told most eloquently in verse, and the shepherd Dermot upon urging from his pub mates can be persuaded in summertime to launch into the forty-minute recitation of the trials and tribulations of the folk hero of the day, "Seamas O'Brian," without a single pause or a stumble.

In the light of their sacred history villagers have traditionally interpreted

the present. If the rural Irish are a spiritual people, they are equally pragmatic and are well seasoned in the survival arts of adaptation and change. Their lives have often depended on it. As folk Catholic philosophers they know that “forms” can change while the essential “substance” remains immutable. Yet the past three decades have witnessed the most profound changes in the western countryside, not only in the “forms” but in the very “substance” and meaning of village social life: in the disintegration of familism; the devaluation of farming and rural trades as an acceptable way of life; and in the growing acceptance by the young of the alien ethos of urban capitalism and secularization.

Peter Tuohy shakes his head with disbelief as he watches the rented bulldozer cover over the remains of Saint Flan’s holy well so that the foundations for a modern tourist “singing pub” can be laid on the main road of Ballybran. “Yerra,” he says with a shrug of his shoulders, “we must go on with the world, even when it takes a bad turn.”