

## Remembering Tim Robinson

*The Festys, as they were known, used to cross the bog carrying hundredweight sacks of flour from the shop in the townland of Caladh an Chnoic, the harbour of the hill, two miles away down by the coast.*

*A Little Gaelic Kingdom* (p. 241)

Here I sit, remembering Tim Robinson, looking out at that same hill, upstairs in that former shop in the townland of Caladh an Chnoic in Connemara, now our west of Ireland home. When we first met, he told us he was working on volume three of his Connemara trilogy, to be published just two years later under the poetical title of *The Last Pool of Darkness*. He had borrowed the phrase from Ludwig Wittgenstein, who said of his time living in Little Killary: “I can only think clearly in the dark, and in Connemara I have found one of the last pools of darkness in Europe.”

He was writing about Wittgenstein’s problem of “seeing ... and the description of what can be seen”. An apt topic for Tim’s attentive intellect and concentrated gaze. However, since there was already just one volume in print, I expressed some surprise. He explained that a trilogy was more easily dealt with by beginning with the first, following up swiftly

with the last, and then returning at leisure to the middle section - as if to fill all the gaps in between. And so begins *A Little Gaelic Kingdom*: "Although it is the last part to be written... it takes second place in the Connemara trilogy".

Tim Robinson loved numbers. *Folding Landscapes*, the publishing company he co-founded with his life-partner Máiréad, once published a little pamphlet by John B. Cosgrave, a book that is easy to look at but difficult to read, beginning as it does with a list of all 325 prime numbers from 2 to 2153 and ending with a new prime, generated overnight by computer in January 1999, comprising exactly two thousand digits. This random number is printed on the book cover: *A Prime for the Millennium*.

Tim Robinson was a writer, a mathematician-turned-mapmaker, a concrete poet and conceptual artist, a renaissance man whose world travels, locally focused explorations and polymathic curiosity led him to reinterpret the man-made and natural landscapes of the west of Ireland.

Tim and Máiréad came to Ireland from London by way of Istanbul and Vienna, and then, finally, this time decisively, leaving London again, for the Aran Islands, in 1972. He had thought of abandoning the noise of the city, and the frustrations of his career as a visual artist, to begin again as a novelist in peace and isolation. The writing turned into a diary and the diary grew into a thirty-year mapping project. The novelist's imagination was redirected to result in a map and two books about Aran, a map of the Burren, a map and three books about Connemara; the ABC that gave us a new way of reading the Irish Landscape. And any number of essay excursions in between on time, memory, *Elsewhere* and other *Experiments on Reality*.

We became friends, the four of us. We used to come across Bertraghboy Bay in our *curach adhmaid*, tying up below their house in Roundstone harbour, calling in with friends for tea and cake, to keep the trade routes open across the bay. He used to call us “Plus” – *here they come again, the two architects. What are they up to now? And who have they brought with them?*

We first met when we were invited to participate in one of their occasional series of *Roundstone Conversations*. After that, Tim and Máiréad sometimes came to listen to our lectures in London, they joined us for social celebrations in London and Dublin, he contributed to our 2012 Venice Biennale *Vessel* and our 2018 Biennale installation was centred on his house. He wrote a little about our architecture and we read a lot of his writing. Congratulating us on what he called our “gongification”, he remarked that the triangulated folding planes of our LSE Student Centre had reminded them of the red sails of the Galway hookers we watched together from their flat roof, at the popular parties they held for the Roundstone Regatta. I said that image had never occurred to me while we were designing that building. Máiréad piped up – *then you must be bloody stupid!* In retaliation, I produced a faceted stone, a ridge-backed, longitudinal piece of rock that showed, I thought, some greater similarity to the geometry of our building. *I know where you found that stone*, he said, recognising from its geology the likely source location as the harbour of the hill at Caladh an Chnoic - and this was before he visited us here at this house.

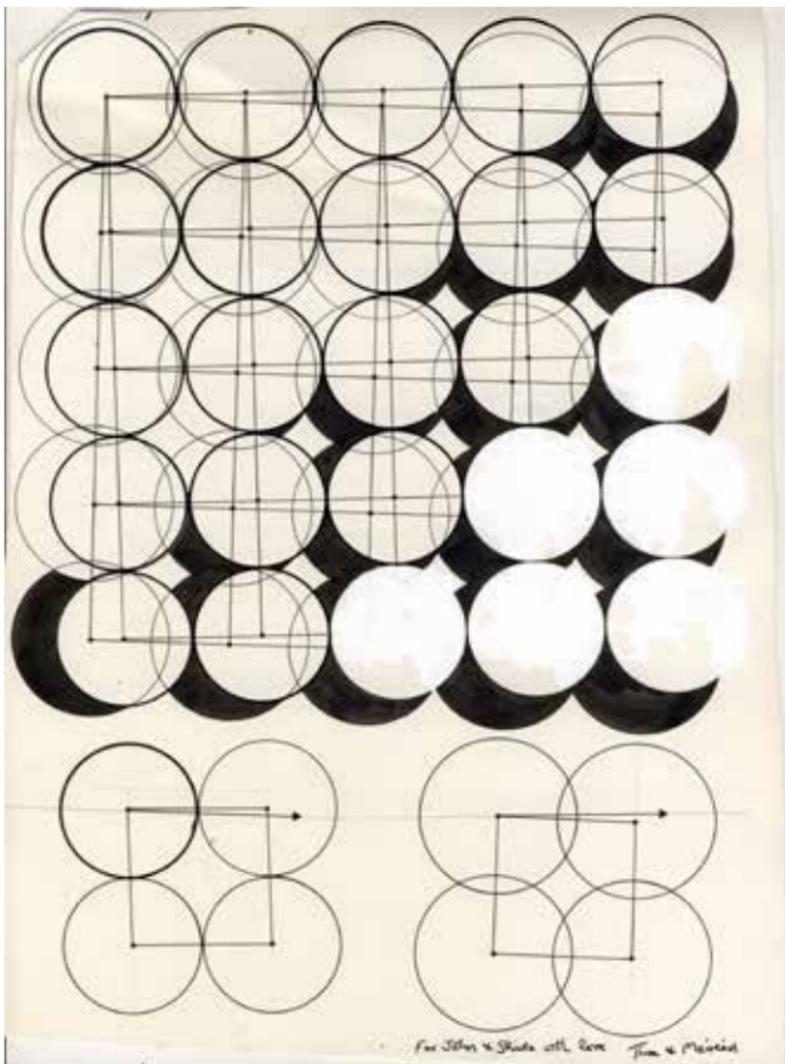
Another day, we drove together to revisit our sadly unfinished campus masterplan for the Furniture College at Letterfrack. He was interested in the overlapping imprint of glaciation, famine farming, Quaker settlement, Industrial

School hardship and the intended transformation of the former institution within a community development initiative. We were feeling a little depressed, because of the scope the project had been abandoned mid-way through. *I'm sorry for you*, he said, gently mocking our wounded pride, *but don't you see, it makes the story so much more interesting for me to write!* He published this account as *Unfinished History*, a chapter in *The Last Pool of Darkness*.

He had a distinctive voice. Of course, there was the gifted writer's voice displayed in his impeccably dense and contemplative prose style, but here I mean his speaking voice, which had a precisely articulated musicality of tone. He was a Yorkshireman, descended from the Drevers on his mother's side, who came down from the Orkneys. He walked, or should I say stalked, the land like a stick-thin standing-up boney-faced wings-folded heron. I thought of him as a non-marauding introverted Viking, never quite belonging, not tied down by any roots, and, on these edgy terms, settling easily into his adopted home, more Irish than the Irish themselves.

*Máiréad Robinson died in London, on St Patrick's Day, 17th March 2020.*

*Tim Robinson died in London, less than three weeks later, 3rd April 2020.*



Original drawing  
by Tim Robinson.

