Introduction: unfolding the map

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Cartographic

Tim Robinson's *Connemara* trilogy is the culmination of a sustained effort of exploration and attentiveness that began when he and his wife Máiréad moved to the Aran Islands in 1972. Over the thirty years between their settling in Ireland and the beginning of this project, he produced five books and three maps focused on the rocky, layered realm that encompasses the Aran Islands, Connemara and the adjacent portion of County Clare known as the Burren. *Pilgrimage*, the initial volume of *Stones of Aran*, was published in 1986, while the second volume, *Labyrinth*, came out in 1995. These two remarkable books immediately assured Robinson of a permanent place on the shelf that holds the scientifically informed, speculative and at the same time highly personal narratives of such earlier masters as Gilbert White and Henry David Thoreau. In the first of them he recorded in a startlingly comprehensive way his circumambulation of the big island, Árainn (also commonly known as Inis Mór), while in its successor he related his quartering of its highly complex interior. Robinson's tenacity as an explorer and observer in these books was fully matched by the drama of his voice, in which eloquence and occasionally fervour contended with a grumbling scepticism about his own enterprise – and sometimes about the capacities of language itself.
Three shorter works of this period, Setting foot on the shores of Connemara (1996), My time in space (2001) and Tales and imaginings (2002), unpacked a number of the historical and personal themes incorporated into Stones of Aran—just as a bedrock map of the Aran Islands lays out the tectonic collisions and erosion that raised, exposed and then separated these ancient outcroppings. Indeed, mapping has been a complementary endeavour to his writing throughout Tim Robinson's career in Ireland. From his studies of Mathematics as an undergraduate at Cambridge to his latter-day fascination with the fractal theories of Benoît Mandelbrot, he has been intrigued by the geometry of irregular surfaces and boundaries. In his longer narratives, in the gazetteers accompanying his maps, and in those maps alike, he is also drawn to the dimension of time that inﬂects all our experiences of space.

In 1984 the Robinsons moved from the Aran Islands to Roundstone, the harbour-town of Roundstone Bay. During their ﬁrst two years in this new home, while synthesizing his adventures and researches on Árainn for the ﬁrst volume of Stones of Aran, he also completed three extraordinarily detailed maps of the mysterious hinterlands west and south of Galway. Published in 1990 by Folding Landscapes, the cartography studio and company established in Roundstone by Tim and Máireád Robinson, Connemara: a one-inch map, with introduction and gazetteer expressed the vast ambition compressed within his highly localized projects as a writer and artist. Indeed, such projects accomplished at the extreme edge of Europe, and on ground still showing the grievous effects of famine and emigration, could be characterized by the same quality William Hazlitt ascribed to Wordsworth’s Lyrical ballads—‘a certain proud humility’. In his writings and his maps alike, Robinson stations himself at the edge out of a desire to rediscover the centre.

A one-inch map is drawn at the scale of one inch to a mile. This means that, in depicting a peninsula of less than forty miles in extent (even including Connemara’s westernmost scatter of islands in that total) Robinson has still produced a map of over three and a half feet in width, over two and half feet
in height. He began in this case, as with all three of his maps, with the superbly accurate Ordnance Survey Maps of Ireland created by the Royal Engineers starting in 1839. Though precise in the contours of the shorelines, the course of rivers and the placement of townlands, these maps were seriously deficient in two other ways when compared with Robinson’s. For one thing, the military cartographers commissioned to map the British Empire’s Irish possessions were not as a rule proficient in the Irish language. Their best attempts to translate or transliterate Irish placenames often missed the mark, while in other cases they either recorded later names in English or simply imposed their own English names. In such a long-settled region it would of course be difficult to speak of any placename as original. Still, the pre-Ordnance Survey names that evolved over the centuries had in fact conveyed important mythic, cultural, biological and political information for dwellers in these demanding environments.

As a Yorkshireman arriving in Connemara after pursuing his calling as an artist in Istanbul, Vienna and London, Tim Robinson soon perceived the crucial role of earlier names in shoring up communities thrown out of kilter by the subtractions and accretions of Empire. Essential to his mapping was thus a kind of cultural and linguistic ground-truthing which relied upon local guides and storytellers. He wanted to participate in the recovery of Irish names not only for the townlands and rivers of Connemara but also for certain landforms and ancient standing stones that had never been named at all on the Ordnance Survey maps. One could also turn this collaborative impulse around, as Robinson does in The last pool of darkness, the concluding volume of Connemara, when he acknowledges parenthetically that the mapping was also a vehicle for meeting his new neighbours and making himself more fully at home: ‘(cartography for me being mainly an excuse to enter anywhere and question anyone)’. He rarely uses the language of reparation or truth and reconciliation in his books or gazetteers, but his desire to contribute to such processes as a writer and cartographer has always been clear. The extremely high regard in which his work is held, not only by other writers and artists in Ireland and abroad but also by his strong following
in the west of Ireland, reflects both the power and originality of his work and the authentic, respectful and dignified interest he takes in the corner of rural Ireland where he has sent down his own roots.

Beyond its emphasis on Irish names, Robinson's map is distinguished by the extraordinary precision with which he has drawn in the high and low ground, the high-water marks, shingles and offshore rocks exposed at low tide, the cultivated land, old woodlands, dried-up lakes and forestry land, as well as a variety of drumlins and other geological deposits. Unlike the topographical formats with which I am more familiar, Robinson's map of Connemara indicates shorelines, contours and elevations without recourse to encoded shades of green and blue. By restricting himself to fine black lines on an otherwise white map he is able to include an astounding variety of geological, historical, agricultural and linguistic information while also suggesting with all that blank space how much more remains to be added.

I have a framed copy of Tim Robinson's Connemara map on one wall of my study in Vermont. It hangs beside an old four-paned window looking into the canopy of a red-oak tree beside our house in the village of Bristol. In reading the three volumes of Connemara as they appeared over the space of five years, I often set down the books to walk over and peer into this map. I wanted to locate the paths Robinson had threaded and then described in writing. Gazing into the map I could envision Ireland, while looking out the window I returned to my own Vermont home. I gradually came to realize, however, that this map—horizontal to the window's vertical but similar to it in size—also illuminates certain aspects of Vermont's past and present. Ours too is a place in which nineteenth-century depopulation and social collapse set their seal on rustic loveliness now experienced as iconic by those from more crowded and prosperous places.

Artists who lavish their attention on landscapes and communities that might have seemed far from the mainstream hold open a door for kindred spirits in farflung regions. Ireland's Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott from Saint Lucia in the West Indies and Joseph Brodsky, born in Russia, have in this regard all
acknowledged their debt to Vermont's Robert Frost. Through his defiantly localized identification with the old-fashioned settlements and resurgent forests of northern New England, Frost confirmed for these poetic successors the value of their own particular settings and heritages, including neighbours' archaic utterances remembered from childhood. Similarly, Robinson's achievements have enormous value today for all of us who feel passionately affiliated with richly marginal landscapes. He offers a crucial resource for anyone seeking to assert the history and value of their homes far from the capitals.

In 1996, the year after *Pilgrimage* appeared, *Folding Landscapes* published *Oileàin Arann: a map of the Aran Islands, with a companion to the map*. It was followed in 1999 by *The Burren: a map of the uplands of north-west County Clare*. (Both build upon simpler versions produced while the Robinsons were still living on Aran.) The scale of these maps was even more extravagantly expansive than that of Tim Robinson's one-inch map of Connemara: two and a quarter inches to the mile for the Aran Islands map and two inches for the Burren. Such dramatic magnification was obviously facilitated by the considerably smaller areas now needing to be explored and catalogued – especially in the case of the Aran Islands. But they also anticipated a central theme in the *Connemara* trilogy to which Robinson was now turning. Namely, that the closer one looks, the larger any part of the world becomes. As he put it near the end of the volume entitled *A little Gaelic kingdom*, 'there is more space, there are more places, within a forest, among the galaxies or on a Connemara seasior, than the geometry of common sense allows.'

*Connemara: listening to the wind* was published in 2006, with *The last pool of darkness* appearing in 2008 and *A little Gaelic kingdom* coming out in 2011. (Tim Robinson has stipulated that *The last pool of darkness* should now be considered as the concluding volume, and *A little Gaelic kingdom* as the middle unit in the sequence.) The trilogy resembles *Stones of Aran* in important ways, foremost among them the shared impulse to weave the stories of geology, mythology, religion, history and current social and environmental challenges
into a narrative framed and unified by references to local topography. Because the meaning of a place is inseparable for Robinson from the history of that place, its name too is an essential part of its significance. As he writes in *The last pool of darkness*, 'Placenames are pedlars’ packs full of assorted items; only the placename itself holds them together. Time is the pedlar...'

There is also a dramatic difference of feeling and organization between the Aran and Connemara books, though. The former are marvellously and essentially compact, maintaining a clear topographic and schematic structure to which the author's speculative and associative responses are firmly tethered. Upon setting foot on Connemara, by contrast, Robinson's writing becomes more improvisatory, his relationship with his own persona both more wry and more self-revealing. He seems at first to feel that his new home on Roundstone Bay is primarily a safe harbour from which to wrap up both the second volume of *Stones of Aran* and to fill in the significant details on his two-and-a-quarter inch map of the islands. Even when his attention as a writer does decisively shift to the trilogy's first volume, *Listening to the wind*, he seems psychologically to be in Connemara but not yet of it. In a powerful passage introducing that book he describes the 'shriek of sedge bent double out on the heath, grinding of shingle sucked back by the reflux, slow chamfering of a stone’s edge by blown sand grains', then goes on to say, 'Such vast, complex sounds are produced by fluid generalities impacting on intricate concrete particulars.' His remarkable gift for listening is at the same time a token of needing to take his bearings, of gathering himself before moving out into a new habitat.

In projecting where he, and his book, will go from here his language is notably deliberate. 'I am aware of the selectivity of my written responses to living in Connemara. I concentrate on just three factors whose influences permeate the structures of everyday life here: the sound of the past, the language we breathe, and our frontage on the natural world.' When he and Mairéad first fetched up in the Aran Islands that had seemed a transformative fact. As his titles for the two volumes of *Stones of Aran* reflected, it was a pilgrimage to be
completed, a labyrinth to be threaded. Connemara, sundered by no sea, seems to have felt both more contingent and more continuous with his life before and after – a choice that could at any moment be reconsidered.

Robinson relates a telling story midway through this first part of Connemara, about a proposal (just as he is preparing to plunge into the trilogy) to build a luxury marina right outside their window in Roundstone: ‘This shock almost determined us to leave Connemara – and in one way I was glad of it. After all, we had spent nearly thirty years in the west, and so perhaps it was time for another drastic change in our lives; it also appeared that I had made all the maps and written all the books I had in me about the little areas I had explored here, and that whatever I was to create in the future on the terrifying mental blank sheet that confronted me at that time, it would not relate to Ireland.’ However, the development scheme in question ended up being indefinitely deferred, and just a page later Robinson returns to the question of where they will now live in quite a different mood: ‘In the meantime we have become more philosophical about the proposal and less proprietary about peace and beauty; also, I have started on the present book, finding that there is still an infinity of material on Connemara for me to chisel literature out of to my heart’s content or discontent.’

Whereas in Stones of Aran Tim Robinson began by exploring the shoreline of Árainn and only then forged into the island’s labyrinthine interior, here he begins by walking directly into the soggy heart of the peninsula, Roundstone Bog. For a writer who can often be so cagey, his irony nearly as impenetrable as the twisted heaths of a bog, Robinson can also be breathtakingly candid and boyish. Near the beginning of Listening to the wind he writes, ‘The bog is not for me an emblem of memory, but a network of precarious traverses, of lives swallowed up and forgotten. I plan to revisit every part of it and rescue all its stories, and write them in this book.’ It is not that he expects to decipher or otherwise redeem this pandemonium of natural noises and historical voices. But he will at least register the lineaments of the land and the stories of its
inhabitants as fully as his own capacities allow: “Tell only happy hours” is an exhortation carved on old sundials, but I was happy to let the plantain, with its narrow leaves like a dozen or a score of old-fashioned watch hands, tell all the island’s hours at once, the bitter ones with the rest.’

Indeed, in this landscape where the Great Hunger was not an anomaly but rather ‘the keystone in a triumphal arch of suffering’, many of the stories Robinson reads are harrowing – as in the old potato ridges showing ‘in the green turf like ribs in a famished beast’. Even when climbing Errisbeg, the highest elevation of Roundstone Bog, he encounters what feels to him like a ‘self-scattering’ vista of fear: ‘The outline of each lake bristles with projections, every one of which is spiny; they stab at one another blindly. There is a fractal torment energizing the scene, which is even more marked in aerial photographs, in which the lakes seem to fly apart like shrapnel.’ The trauma of history and the menace of impersonal and sometimes indecipherable natural process are compounded in our own day by a commercially motivated assault on ‘the old, wild, weird places’ and a hunger for profit that ‘corrupts our eyes’.

In A little Gaelic kingdom and The last pool of darkness Robinson covers more ground than in Listening to the wind, both on foot and in his range of references, as he tries to find some consoling balance in this discombobulating world. In the former of these two works he traces the intricacy of Connemara’s southern shore, telling the story of revolutionaries like Patrick Pearse who were drawn there, as well as tracing the struggles, survival and recovery of the peninsula’s Irish-speaking regions, or Gaeltacht. It’s here that his evocation of fractals from atop Errisbeg is fulfilled, and just as the saga of Pearse frames the first part of this volume the ideas of the mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot preside over its conclusion. Mandelbrot applied the word fractal (from the Latin for ‘broken’) in describing the replication of certain forms over many different scales. As we look more and more closely at the manifold irregularities of a coastline, for instance, we discover that they ‘exhibit a degree of self-similarity over a range of scales and are therefore too complicated to be described in terms of classical
geometry, which would indeed regard them as broken, confused, tangled, unworthy of the dignity of measure.

Just as Mandelbrot's thinking about fractals informed the trilogy's second volume, the philosophy of Wittgenstein frames its third. Robinson begins his preface to it by writing: 'In 1948 Ludwig Wittgenstein fled the seductions of Cambridge, where he was the unchallenged star of the Philosophy Department, to a friend's holiday cottage in Rosroe, a fishing hamlet on a rugged peninsula separating the mouth of Killary Harbour from the bay of Little Killary. "I can only think clearly in the dark," he said, "and in Connemara I have found one of the last pools of darkness in Europe."' *The last pool of darkness* concentrates on the western reaches of the peninsula, just as its predecessor followed the southern shore. Not only was the west where Wittgenstein chose to hunker down and think, but it was also where two other remarkable episodes in Irish history played themselves out: the establishment of Marconi's research station from which the first trans-Atlantic radio signals were transmitted in 1907 and the nearby landing-place of the aviators Alcock and Brown in 1919 after their flight from Newfoundland. The problem occupying Wittgenstein as he undertook his own strategic retreat was one of which Robinson was highly aware as he too tried to manage his own landing in Connemara and to write accurately, comprehensively and unsentimentally about what he discovered there on the ground: 'the difference between seeing something and seeing it as something'. 
Tim Robinson devotes one chapter of *A little Gaelic kingdom* to a group of islands near Carna on the peninsula's southern coast. His narrative of being rowed to these formerly inhabited outposts, and of walking across the sands to some of them at low tide, is tinged with melancholy. The islands’ residents had led an austere and laborious life, made yet more challenging by the hostility of colonial officials and the difficulty of arranging schooling for the children. One window after another went blank, until a day came when all their houses were empty. When Robinson visited the island of Bior Mór or Oileán Bhéara, sixty years after its last inhabitant had departed, he found only a ‘settlement mapped out in fallen stone’. Such experiences were familiar during the many years he spent exploring, mapping and writing about Connemara. From Killary Harbour to Roundstone Bog, Ros Muc to Spiddal, ruins like these, along with other traces of foundered hope, proliferate in that windswept, rocky land.

Amid the collapse of walls and roofs on Bior Mór though, Robinson discovered dozens of wild leeks which had obviously been cultivated in order to enliven the hardscrabble diets of those long-ago islanders. And when he and his companion rowed across to take their tea and sandwiches on Bior Beag, the nearby little sister of Bior Mór, he was delighted to find ‘lots of tiny adder’s-tongue ferns at my elbow, and fat fluffy seagull chicks tucked in by stones here and there in the tufted grass.’ Loveliness persisted in the stony tumble, evoking the elemental beauty that had surely suffused those vanished communities too. Robinson quotes the last man to inhabit Bior Mór, whose words were recorded in Seán Mac Giolláin’s book *Mo dhúthaigh fhidín* (My wild native land): ‘We didn’t feel a bit of loneliness or distress, for we had the produce of earth and strand every day of the year. I had my boat to go to Mass on Sundays, for cutting seaweed and fishing and setting lobster pots. It was the boat that brought the turf in for me and took out the bags of winkles and scallops in the winter. I was the happy man out there.’
Tim Robinson concludes his chapter on these islands with a meditation on 'the ancient magic of the so/do (good/bad) prefixes in the Irish language. Solas/dolás, bright/dark; soileár/doileár, distinct/obscure; soineann/doineann, fair weather/stormy weather; solás/dolás; solace/dolour...I could map all my island findings and feelings in such twinned opposites'. Indeed such opposites organize all three volumes of his remarkable *Connemara* project. Sympathy for vanished or attenuated rural communities reaches so deep for Robinson as to become a painful identification with their losses. By the same token, though, in imagining so fully what their lives may have been and attaching those images both to the scattered objects that remain and to the local narratives and lore that continue to grow where they first took root, his impulse of compassion can also spark an experience of powerful longing. Despite Connemara's long history of oppression, plague, famine and massacre – which Robinson characterizes in the essay 'Space, time and Connemara' as 'a river of sorrows' – the living record of 'a singular culture' abides – 'not that of the provincial gentry, but of the humble farm- and fisherfolk – a culture which conserved ancient words and ways, and had its matted and tenacious roots in a sense, deeper than any economic or legal realities, of being in its own place'.

Mandelbrot's theory of fractals has helped scientists to describe the dynamic structure within clouds, currents and other non-linear phenomena, just as it also ratifies Tim Robinson's impulse to focus on the minute and specific phenomena that lend a place its character. Intricacy is essential to the world as he perceives it, and a little section of this windswept peninsula in western Ireland expands as one begins to pace off the undulations within the larger curves of the shore: 'over a large range of scales the length of a coastline increases as if it would never stop, the closer it is investigated.' In addition, Mandelbrot's theorem ultimately provokes Robinson to a compelling insight into the enduring significance of the traditional Celtic aesthetic and worldview: 'Perhaps one could claim that fractal geometry is to Celtic art as Euclid is to classical art. While the mainstream of European culture has pursued its
magnificent course, another perception has been kept in mind by the Celtic periphery...in a word, that a fascinating sort of beauty arises out of the repetitive interweaving of simple elements. The beauty of nature is often of this sort. In Connemara, which is pre-eminently the land of "dappled things"—drizzly skies, bubbly streams, tussocky hillsides—one recognizes the texture.

Beyond the fact that the photographs of Connemara by Nicolas Féve included in this volume are so arresting and memorable in their own right, they offer a valuable context within which to explore the significance of 'dappled things' in Tim Robinson's writing. Féve juxtaposes photographs with passages from Robinson's Connemara books and maps in ways that reinforce the author's descriptions and illuminate his implications. The image entitled 'Déjà vu' is a particularly striking one. It shows a twisted black double-strand of wire angling upward to the image's left, strung above the dark grey of a dead-flat horizon and silhouetted against the lighter, swirling gray of an overcast sky. Four tufts of dark wet wool have been snagged on the old wire's barbs. The long fibres curving to the left above and below each of those tufts register a steady wind that sweeps across this sodden world.

Early on in Listening to the wind, Robinson recalled 'the shepherds of old times for whom the bog was a familiar workplace, who strode out vigorously and climbed boulders to scan the levels, and shouted to each other...'. That boisterous era may have passed, but wool still clings to the wire, sheep still forage for grass among the sedges and farmers still turn them out under the blustery sky and gather them back into sheltering enclosures. Robinson's world is a flicker of light and dark, clouds moving in the same direction as the blowing wool, patterns emerging from what might have seemed an undifferentiated and incomprehensible vista, then either submerging again or being left behind as the solitary walker moves on. He is in the lineage of poets like Wordsworth who help us, through their tales of haunting, to register the persistence of the absent in the play of light and shadow. It suddenly shines out, enlivening the dull backdrop.
Many of Nicolas Fève's photographs capture apparitions of this sort that are so essential to Tim Robinson's writing. As Robinson forges across the landscape, he can seem burdened by the brokenness and suffering of rural communities lashed by indifferent powers, by the challenge of organizing and conveying all that he has learned in his conversations and researches, and perhaps also by the ungovernable and fractal intricacy of his own formidable intelligence. Then he glimpses the wild leeks that seasoned the meals of a community inhabiting a blustery edge, the seagull chicks tucked into tufts of grass between the sheltering stones. Fève for his part shows us slender white horsetails growing out of their own black shadows in the rippled shallows, a single white water lily floating on a dark pond beside the elegant cleft ovals of lily pads, water-skaters riding on bubbles, between pale over-arching brambles and their thorny reflections, the sun shining at low tide out of what the poet Richard Murphy called 'a spit of wet ribbed sand'. Light slides through the landscape and the world is renewed.

All that has been scoured away in Connemara by history and the wind has opened a space for more penetrating vision, as physical and emotional exhaustion may also do. Wordsworth spoke of such instances as 'spots of time', a convergence of the spatial and the temporal so unexpected and dramatic as to hold 'a renovating virtue'. The possibility for such incandescent experience is fostered not only by the observer's hunger for significance but also by startling circumstances or relationships in the outer landscape that provoke what Wordsworth called 'visionary bleakness'. Seamus Heaney has acknowledged his own affinity, as an Irish poet, with Wordsworth, just as he has with the New Englander Frost. In introducing a collection he edited called The essential Wordsworth, Heaney roots that poet's achievements in 'uncanny moments' from his childhood. He writes that Wordsworth 'managed to force a way through literary convention and established modes of feeling to find in such moments not only the source of his emotional being, but the clue to his fulfilled identity'. 
'Uncanny' is also the word used to translate Freud's term *das Unheimliche* (literally 'the unhomely') in *The interpretation of dreams*. It describes the mixture of familiar and unfamiliar aspects that can make a dream-image feel at once surreal and deeply meaningful. In our waking life, too, such glimpses of heightened reality can occur when common objects or events appear in a surprising setting. An artist intent upon experiencing and conveying such juxtapositions will seek a way of living and working that makes them more likely. Robert Penn Warren once said that being a poet meant 'to stand in the rain every day'. And sometimes lightning strikes. Robinson's method is to trace the incalculable complexity of Connemara's inlets and spits within the simple, if wavering, lines of his own daily outings. As he writes near the end of *A little Gaelic kingdom*, 'To make sense of it all - but no, to make sense of it would be to belittle it; let me say, to avoid total bewilderment and paralysis at its innumerable crossroads - I must follow a simple topographical trend, and thread any temporal diversions, whether into personal reminiscence or geological millennia, onto that one spatial continuity.'

Robinson's 'topographical trend' recalls that double strand of wire, a vector intersecting with the meanderings or simply the itchy backs of a world of sheep. 'Following' such a line, with its premeditated outcome, creates occasions for colliding with a tangled and unpredictable world. Such uncanny visions offer a portal through which the fractal reality of perpetual, unruly renewal can temporarily be perceived. Through them a walker, a viewer or a reader may gain access to a luminous wholeness within the dappled world. In a photogram (or botanical contact print) of bog cotton its tufted top is smeared upward in the soft focus so that it appears to be a flame above a sinuous wick. This image prepares the way for another of Fève's photographs in which a field of bog cotton blows to one side, like a collection of fluttering flames, as the last, nearly horizontal rays of the sun add their own illumination to that dense world of sedges and heaths. Such play of light across the world of bog and ocean directs a viewer's gaze to the sweep of clouds overhead in a
pair of Fève’s photographs depicting the ‘fractals that pass...over there...over there’. In a fractal world the eye naturally flickers from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven. One of my favorite connections in this photographic portfolio (though they are separated by almost twenty pages, in fact) is between Nicolas Fève’s image of mackerel skies and his close-up of one side of a grey Connemara pony, its densely dappled coat resembling a mass of clouds that swirls from withers to haunch.

Tim Robinson’s capacity for singlemindedness has kept him on track in writing about and mapping western Ireland over almost four decades. An equally essential skill, however, has been his ability to detach himself at any moment from his premeditated itinerary and timetable. One crucial technique in this regard is his dead-pan humour. Such breaks from a more serious tone are effectively prepared for, in fact, by the staggeringly extensive detail into which he sometimes goes. An example of such comprehensiveness would be his sustained attention to all those offshoots of the O’Flahertys and the O’Malleys. Whenever Robinson turns his attention once again to the flamboyant genealogies of these Connemara families, a sense of incredulous delight rises in me as a reader and I never want him to stop. A similarly droll effect arises when, in A little Gaelic kingdom, he solemnly pauses to devote two pages to a recipe for distilling an excellent pótín. In the same vein, one of my favorite sentences in the entire trilogy comes near the end of The last pool of darkness: ‘— and here we need to know a little of the nineteenth-century technology of flax, the basis for linen’. The word ‘indefatigable’ comes to mind.

There are also many occasions for more overt humour as this determined outsider investigates sites now unknown except by a few elderly inhabitants of this long-settled but severely depopulated terrain. He needs to get rescued when high tides strand him on abandoned islands, to talk himself out of trouble with enraged landowners who find him wandering where he shouldn’t be — then hear his English accent. My favorite of Robinson’s misadventures occurs in A little Gaelic kingdom when he is searching for a strange P-shaped
pool along the shoreline of an island called Garomna. A boatman whom he asks responds, "Well, [...] do you see that dot? That's a sheep. It's a hundred yards beyond that sheep." But by the time I had got round the head of the harbour inlet and onto the open shore again the dot had vanished. I pressed ahead, and on rounding a bend of the shore I saw the sheep running away ahead of me. How far back had it been when it started running? I went on until I began to feel I must have gone too far. Then the sheep turned and ran back past me.' At the conclusion of this scene worthy of a Monty Python sketch, he does find the pool just as a squall is blowing in. 'I looked up, and there was that sheep sitting in the lee of a field wall just a hundred yards back along the shore, grinning at me.'

Just as revelations, mishaps and humour alike liberate Robinson from the meticulous cartography of his intentions, so too does his essential scepticism prevent him from being anchored for too long to particular revelations along the path. He is determined not to subside into satisfaction with his own terms of perception. Such determination is stated especially strongly in The last pool of darkness, when Robinson observes that 'Touristic pioneers of the mid-nineteenth century, all following the same itinerary through Connemara – from Galway to Oughterard, Ballynahinch, Clifden, Leenaun, and so on to Westport – carried with them a set of concepts: the Picturesque, the Beautiful and the Sublime. Like a camera, or more accurately like a camera's viewfinder, this mental gadgetry enabled them to find the view: to identify what was worth looking at, to select and frame it, to record it as a verbal construction portable by memory with a view to publication. The Sublime came into play invariably as they passed through the Parish of Ballynakill…'

In his responses as a photographer both to Connemara and to Tim Robinson's writing, Nicolas Fève is alert to this tension between what we see and the expectations that govern our seeing. In a pair of images entitled 'Unfolding Roundstone', he focuses his lens through empty metal rectangles that may once have held a tourist placard or a traffic sign. In the photograph
to the left he includes a stone wall, boats at anchor and a distant ridge of mountains – a composition governed by the picturesque in the foreground, by a background of mountains rising sublimely against the sky. In the other he captures two men standing beside the harbour, the nearer one holding a glass in his hand and peering quizzically back through the empty frame at the photographer. ‘You looking at me?’ might have been an alternative caption for this second shot. In another photograph a round, domed mirror, set up to help cars around a winding road, hangs in the sky like a distorting moon, a weird addition to what it strives to reflect. In yet another, which is paired with Richard Murphy’s poem ‘Hexagon’, a shadowy reflection of the photographer’s head and hand appears in the glass of a house’s exterior window. Peering through that first layer of the image the viewer enters a room in which there is yet another window, this one looking back out into the wider world.
Anfractuous

For Tim Robinson, to walk through the world paying close attention to what he sees is also to submit to an unending process of collapse and erosion. Despite his grave, and understandable, reservations about the T.S. Eliot who produced ‘Sweeney Erect’, Robinson has found himself powerfully, and also understandably, attracted to one startling word in that poem. This is ‘anfractuous’ which ‘means, according to the OED, sinuous or circuitous’, and in that regard describes the lengthening shoreline around which his trilogy has pursued its own recursive meander. But this word, ‘with the sound of fracturing in its heart’, speaks to another aspect of Robinson’s experience as well. As his fractal path through space also winds through time, things fall apart. Solid facts tumble into scraps and edges on the ground, then wind and water set to work again. In the face of such ceaseless reduction and transformation, ‘anfractuous’, he suggests, ‘seems to answer not just to the winding course of the south Connemara coast but to its intimate texture, with its heaps of boulders worn into smoothly curving rims and basins by the almost ceaseless poundings of the waves’.

Where Tim Robinson’s story of eleven years in the Aran Islands felt to a reader like the report from a carefully planned expedition, his initial accounts of setting foot in Connemara conveyed a less predictable experience. When he and Mairéad earlier decided to move on, ‘our plan was to resettle ourselves in London, whence I would return now and again while finishing off my research towards a map of south Connemara. But before we did so I wanted to show M my new-found land, and so we came across by the little open ferry-boat of those days to Ros a’ Mhíl and set off to cycle around Connemara. Under September sunshine and showers the countryside was at its most seductive; M was amazed and appalled by the beauty and amplitude of the terrain I had rashly undertaken to map.’ When they come upon a studio and apartment available to rent in Roundstone ‘M worked it out that we should make
this the base, not for the mapping of south Connemara but of the whole of Connemara; while this was in progress – which would surely only take a year or so, said I, underestimating by a factor of seven, as it turned out – she could go and earn some money as a temporary office worker in London.’ This ‘diversion in our lives’ remains permanently connected in Robinson’s memory with an image from that momentous cycling adventure: an uncompleted bridge across which they pushed their bicycles as blustery weather forced them to walk the last six miles of a day that somehow lengthened into twenty-five years.

Now it seems that Tim Robinson is once more preparing, in his writing at least, to leave Connemara. In three striking new essays included in this volume he is already ranging far from its shores – to prisons and ditches in France, into weird towers looming over urban warrens and along a reverberation set up between boyhood memories of his grandparents’ village in north Wales and the lecture halls of Cambridge. Even within these apparent departures from his Irish scenes, though, continuities remain. In the shingle visible through shallow water as a small boat oars away from Connemara’s intricate shore, one may glimpse the same bedrock that shoulders up through Roundstone Bog.

‘Contrescarpe’ adopts the title of a 1974 memoir by Julien Sarrazin that takes its own name from that of a square in Paris – which echoes in its turn a term from medieval fortification fully as odd and evocative as ‘anfractus’. An Irish friend who is an archaeologist explained to Robinson that ‘the inner wall of a defensive ditch is the escarpe and the outer one the contrescarpe’. When a large ditch is dug around the protective walls of a city or a castle the resulting ‘spoils’ are heaped up as obstructive rubble around the outside of the ditch. Such a stepwise, fractal etymology for his essay’s title recalls Robinson’s strategy of ‘intrication’ as he delved into, heaped up and ramified the majestic inwardness of Connemara. The image of fortification also expresses the fierce embrace at the heart of Sarrazin’s memoir. That book arose from the death at 29 of his love, Albertine. He in his autobiography, as she had done in her 1965 autobiographical novel L’Astragale, recounted how amid
their circumstances of poverty, crime and relentless defiance of social norms they found a 'precious and savage reason' for living in one another. Robinson's tangy evocation of a recent stay near Place de la Contrescarpe reveals once more how the name of a place (or of a place) can serve as his vehicle for a voyage through time. As was so often true for him in Connemara, the story embedded in a placename can serve as an opening to sympathy with the sufferings and triumphs of lives that might initially have seemed remote.

'Contrescarpe' also amplifies another aspect of Robinson's writing that I have always prized. In his wry and dignified persona he generally alludes only in passing to the passions that underlie his outlook on life. An example of such literary pointillism would be his many brief references to Proust, eventually allowing a reader to understand how much these books have meant to him as a writer without ever devoting an extended passage to À la recherche du temps perdu. An even more striking aspect of the trilogy (as it is of Stones of Aran) is the emergence within his narratives of an extended love-letter to Máiréád – whom he generally refers to in his writings simply as M. Early on he makes it clear that, though they are partners in life, he can only tell his side of the story. That fact notwithstanding, again and again her perspectives, and her ratification or redirection of his insights, are essential to his choices – as in the crucial matter of their remaining in Connemara for twenty-five years just when it seemed they were about to decamp for London.

If imagination and mathematics are two of the ways in which people can travel through time and into other lives, even while restricted to one locale, an equally powerful vehicle is the experience of love. In The last pool of darkness, while 'roaming the photon-drenched spaces of Roundstone Bog', Robinson begins to reflect caustically about the road that has led from Marconi's early radio station at Derrigimlagh to 'the bath of invisible communications we are all immersed in today'. But then he suddenly felt 'like sending a love-note to M back at home' with the aid of his cellphone, and was able in unjaundiced wonder to experience 'the way the complex numbers
dance together, the photons flit, the electrons run and the world folds like a map for one point to kiss another.

‘Where are the nows of yesteryear?’, the longest essay of these three traveller’s reports posted back to Connemara, is yet another echo of Robinson’s longing to accompany Proust on the search for lost time. His childhood memory of an ancient set of playthings called ‘spillikins’, kept at his grandparents’ house in the wonderfully named town of Mold, enters into conversation with a Cambridge philosopher’s perspective on time. He describes Professor Mellor’s assertion that ‘Our subjective experience of the flow of time…is no evidence that time really does flow; what we actually experience is change in ourselves, the accumulation of memories, of memories of memories.’ It might seem to one who has just finished re-reading The last pool of darkness, especially with Wordsworth’s spots of time in mind, that such accumulation is how time flows, and where it pools – which is to say, in us.

Those childhood spillikins, existing now only in Robinson’s mind, remain gauges for time’s inward flow. They were thin ‘stems’ of ivory, about five inches long and with a little emblem representing ‘a Chinese sage, a sickle moon, a long-tailed bird or some fabulous species of animal’ crowning one end. At the game’s beginning they were dumped from the box into a pile on the floor or onto a table top, like a heap of rubble shovelled up from a fortifying ditch. After that, a player’s task was to lever them out one at a time, so carefully that none of the other spillikins trembled at its departure. This remembered process is for Robinson like the task of extricating valuable ‘nows’ from the thickets of personal experience and regional history alike. A similar ‘connoisseurship of memory’, he writes, ‘is the human role in this indiscriminately memorious world’.

Reading ‘The tower of silence’, shortest and most compressed of these three recent dispatches, feels in its global frame of reference like turning the last page of the Connemara trilogy and closing its final volume. When Robinson wanders into a London house that is awaiting demolition, lured by the promise
of books left behind by a mysterious squatter, he discovers that the floors and attics have all been removed, leaving a vast dreamscape. 'One wall of the great empty tower had a door in it at each level, all hanging open; another wall had four tiled fireplaces one high above another.' In an uncanny realization, reminiscent of Borges, he suddenly knows that he had seen this same tower, often associated with misery and grief, in many other stations of his travels, including Istanbul, Paris, Calcutta, Bangkok and, most exotic of all, Terre Haute. Within such a thicket of associations he can make out one city within another; one moment, one life, within another. At this giddy, centrifugal moment, though, when the map of Connemara seems to have been completed, or at least abandoned, the practice of mapping still continues.

Yet another notable word to which Tim Robinson was drawn in writing the trilogy is 'superincumbent'. This term, originally drawn from botany, describes how certain flowers of his beloved heath family bend over to lean against their own fuzzy stems. The more generalized dictionary definition of 'superincumbent' he cites is of 'lying or resting and usually exerting pressure on something else'. It's a good way to express what it means to arrive in a mysterious stony land and to venture into the tenacious community that survives there after one has grown up elsewhere and pursued a wandering life. What it means, as well, to read the ground with a mind full of poetry, philosophy and mathematics. Inevitably, we superimpose what we arrive with onto what we find, and exert distorting pressure on this new world with the movement of our bodies and our minds. But a traveller may nonetheless choose to settle down into this strange new realm, juxtaposed intimately with it by the circling storms and seasons that embrace them both. If a day does come for departure, one might choose to view it as the 'twinned opposite', and in that sense the fulfillment, of the newcomer's long-ago arrival.

Such a movement beyond may feel like a release for one fearful of sentimentality, through forgetting the distinction between what we see and what we see things as. Like so many forms of release, it can at the same time be an
experience of grief, a relinquishment of the inadvertent but beloved conditions of one's life. Perhaps such mixed feelings had something to do with Tim Robinson's decision to declare that A little Gaelic kingdom, his final volume when it was published in 2011, should actually be considered the middle unit of his trilogy. Having surrendered himself in it to the fringing intricacy of Connemara's southern shoreline he came to realize that there was never going to be a place to stop, since 'Every tale entails the tale of its own making, generalities breed exceptions as soon as they are stated, and all footnotes call for footnoting to the end of the world.' By sliding this final volume back into the middle he tucked the trilogy's fringe back underneath. It was a process of literary subduction, analogous to the submergence of one tectonic plate when meeting another plate's counter-momentum. New headlands and ridges will rise above such a zone where one geological realm has been relinquished while leaving its constituent elements available for what comes next.

With all their concreteness, precision and richness of perception, Tim Robinson's books and maps from Connemara were always about transience. They delineated traces left in the heart by the risings and vanishings of beauty. Even in the initial sentence of his first essay about this peninsula, the 1990 'Space, time and Connemara', he was already saying goodbye: 'Connemara — the name drifts across the mind like cloud shadows on a mountainside, or expands and fades like circles on a lake after a trout has risen.'