

# *A Step Towards the Earth: Interview with Tim Robinson*

*by Jos Smith*

*The following is an interview with artist, cartographer and author Tim Robinson. In 1972 Tim left a life as a visual artist working in London and moved with his wife to the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland in Galway Bay. After the post-mistress on the island suggested he make a map for the tourists he began to compile an index of the placenames and the history and lore associated with them. There soon came to be far more information than he could represent on the map, and so he began work on his two-volume study of the islands, Stones of Aran, the first volume of which was to be published in 1986. Today Tim lives on the mainland with his wife Máiréad in the headquarters of their small publishing company Folding Landscapes in Roundstone, where 25 years on he has just finished the final book in his Connemara trilogy. In this interview Tim reflects on his early practice as an artist and how this might have affected his choice to move to Aran before discussing his method both as a maker of maps and as an author. Touching also on such subjects as science and its relationship to art, religion and the environment, he shows the depth of thought and the extraordinary commitment to his practice that we have come to expect from perhaps the greatest living literary and documentary author of place.*

**As a visual artist in London in the late 1960s and early 70s you were involved with a movement called ‘environmental art’. This seems to be slightly different from what we would call environmental art today. Could you say a little about this movement and about its relationship to the art world at that time?**

Yes, I think what we meant by ‘environmental art’ was installations of artwork that surrounded you, spaces that you could walk into, and I don’t think it had that connotation of concern for the environment that the word has taken on since then. But there was the beginning of that as well in the 60s. Richard Long was one of the leading lights at the time and a number of artists were leaving the cities and doing things out in the natural world, making little changes on it and so on. I think that meant the beginning of more of an artistic consciousness of the natural world and its fragility, and the necessity to protect it. So maybe there was a slow change going on in the connotations of the word at that time, and I’m sure all that had some influence on our decision to leave London in 1972 and go off to the Aran Islands. I had an idea that all the rich and heady stuff brewed up in cities could flow out into the countryside and revivify it.

**I was wondering if there was tension between the schools of art going on in London at that time. On the one hand there was work quite influenced by American modernism, with visits by Clement Greenberg, and on the other there was an art emerging that was more socially engaged and politically active. Was this a tension that you felt?**

At first, in London, I was doing big abstract paintings of the sort that Greenberg would have appreciated. In fact Greenberg was one of the judges in that John Moores Biennial competition I had

a painting accepted for, which was then noticed by the art critic Guy Brett and *Signals*, the avant-garde gallery of that time. But at the same time there were other movements coming up which didn't appeal to me. The Pop movement never meant anything to me whatsoever and hardly means much to this day. And then later on, my environmental works of 1969 might have had something to do with the nascent environmental movement, but it is rather peculiar that my contribution to those environmental exhibitions was very geometrical, very mathematical. They were made up of numerous pieces that could be put together in a geometrically coordinated fashion but also leant themselves to being laid out as if composing a natural landscape. One work, 'Moonfield', was a series of curved shapes cut out of hardboard and painted black on one side and white on the other and displayed on a black floor in a blacked out gallery. At first they were black side up and you couldn't see them at all. People shuffled around and found them with their feet and turned them over so they became palely visible, and either made them into beautiful patterns or heaped them up at random against a wall in a fashion I hadn't thought of, which was fascinating to watch. So in a way they were subverting what I was doing. Or exposing a contradiction in what I was doing.

**Before you moved to the Aran Islands, you lived in a number of cities across Europe. What was it that drew you out of England?**

Sheer romanticism I think. I had visited Malaya before going to university, and during my time in Cambridge studying mathematics I'd been to Turkey with some friends. And I just found the East so romantic and exciting. There's a wonderful phrase in Patrick Leigh Fermor's description of Istanbul: 'haggish but indestructible beauty.' And that's it, wrecked but still wonderful. The great mosques, Hagia Sophia, and the strange graveyards that surround the city like a carapace. And the ruined Venetian caravanserai where the caravans coming in from the far east would have docked and unloaded their goods and so on. The people we knew in Istanbul were mainly French-influenced painters who made a bit of a living by translating French novels and art books into Turkish. They were a rogueish, bohemian lot. I remember Yüksel Aslan. He lived at the foot of one of these great slopes covered with graves. And when it rained the bones would be washed out of the hillside and roll down to his place and he would collect them and grind them up and mix them with honey and use them with pigments to make his strange, surrealist paintings. We enjoyed those people and their strange ways very much; but when I wanted to quit teaching maths and start painting seriously it was clear that Istanbul was not the place to pursue a career in the arts.

So we moved to Vienna, which we thought of as the nearest purely European outpost to Istanbul. I had my first exhibitions there. But, again, Vienna was dominated by a small, belated surrealist group and the avant-garde stuff, the more exciting stuff, was happening in London at that stage. So we moved back to London. Then I had that bit of luck, that breakthrough with the John Moores Biennial and the *Signals* gallery and then the Lisson gallery. The Lisson has gone on to great things since then, but it was so new at that stage that when we were helping to paint it for the first exhibition we almost persuaded ourselves it was some kind of artist's co-operative.

**After all that moving around what do you think it was about Árainn that made you settle?**

Well I had started to write, and the thing about writing is that it sucks in material copiously, and in the Aran Islands I found a world that was rich in so many dimensions. I soon found I was

spending all my time writing it up in diaries, of which I have stacks – I've been living on them ever since in a way. So it was the plenitude of material. The islands are quite exceptional from the point of view of geology, and flora, and the cliff-bird fauna, and the folklore and placenames. The Irish language is alive and well there and the folkways were still legible. Little had been written about it, and I just found it a wonderful field for exploration and discovery. It was also a very quiet place. We were the only non-Aran people there during the winter

Aran re-awakened a love of the countryside and an interest in natural history that I had had as a kid but had lost through many of years of living in cities. The wild flowers enraptured me. I'd never really particularly concentrated on wild flowers - I'd been much more interested in caterpillars and butterflies when I was a kid. When we first settled on the island it was November and everything was very stark and bare until fairly early in January, when the whitlow grass appeared, tiny white spots of blossom about an 8<sup>th</sup> of an inch across. And all that Spring as each plant appeared - almost day by day a different plant would come into blossom - I looked them up and learned their names and their relationships. So it was as if this was unfolding beneath my eyes. It became quite intoxicating. I couldn't bear to be in the house; as soon as I came in from a walk I'd dash out again to see what had changed.

**Regarding your first forays into mapmaking, you mention that you saw it for a while as a 'making amends'. Could you elaborate on that?**

Yes, that really revolved around the cultural side of map-making, the placenames in particular. In many places they have been very carelessly recorded by the Ordnance Survey. (The first survey of the islands was made in 1839, and another one in 1889; they were at 6 inches to the mile and covered the island chain with about six big sheets.) I remember that in Inis Oírr I was very puzzled trying to match the local people's account of the names of places along the south coast with what was on the map, until I realized what had happened. There was a whole sequence of bays along the south coast of the island that had got moved over one bay. So they were all wrong. They were in the right order, but in the wrong places.

So there was that sort of carelessness. But then much more importantly there was the fact that they'd all been anglicized, and it was already clear to me, a mere beginner in the language, that the project of trying to imitate Irish word sounds in a phonetic system based on English was totally ludicrous. It produced a great coarsening of the sounds of the names. A most obvious and simple one like *baille*, which just means settlement or village, comes out in English as 'bally', which sounds slightly ridiculous. So they lost their musicality and they lost their meaning.

A very striking case was a placename that was recorded down at the south-eastern corner of the big island. It was something like 'Illaunanaur'. The surveyors had obviously thought that the first part of it was 'oileán', island, when in fact it should have been the Irish 'gleann', glen. But apart from making it an island when it was a glen, the rest of the name '-anaur' meant absolutely nothing in English phonetics. But in the Irish the name means 'the glen of tears' – it's exactly the biblical phrase 'this vale of tears', 'Gleann na nDeor'. And the story I heard from the local people, was that, in the days leading up to the famine when there was a lot of emigration from the islands, those emigrating would get a fishing boat to take them over to Connemara and they'd walk 30 miles along the

Connemara coast into Galway, where they'd wait for one of the famine ships heading for America. These ships used to sail out past the Aran Islands and very frequently had to wait in the shelter of the islands while a gale blew itself out. So they would be stationary just a few hundred yards off shore from this place, Gleann na nDeor, and people would come down to that little glen where they could wave to their loved ones but not talk to them. So the name had immense resonances and told you an immense amount about the personal griefs behind the statistics of the famine. That was very typical of what was lost in the project of anglicization.

**There seems to be a certain pleasure taken in the subjectivity of your mapmaking. Where do you feel it sits between an art and a science?**

I was approaching it from the point of view of an art form. I wasn't interested in the sort of maps that had little drawings on them, pseudo-artistic styles or anything like that, but I wanted to use the maps as an expressive medium. I wanted them to engage you with the surface of the ground somehow, and to involve and delay you like thickets that you got into and that held you there. Most maps seem designed to help you get out of a place as fast as possible; I wanted these maps to draw you in and keep you there as long as possible.

A lot of this depended on the style of drawing. There are all sorts of quick ways of putting a mechanical tint on an area in cartography or in diagram drawing. You can buy sheets of Letraset with patterns of dots and squiggles and so on, and stick them on. I wasn't interested in doing that. These commercial products were all too mechanical and regular. So instead I was doing it all with a pen, all these minute dots to represent beaches and so on. And I enjoyed doing that. It was very laborious, it took days sometimes to just cover a corner, but I could do something that expressed my feeling about a certain beautiful shelving beach, say, like one I can remember that is shaped like an oval seashell and has a pearly sheen on it when the tide is out and leaves a huge expanse of sand to splodge over, with sand dunes round it. By dotting away very carefully I could get a delicate gradation of tint. On the map it was tiny, but if you look at it carefully under a lens, it's beautiful. And then endless little jagged bits of line for the rugged shores; I wasn't representing any particular rock formations but just giving the general idea of what a craggy shore this was to walk along. Or a mix of dots of two sizes to express what a sucky and muddy shore it was. I was able to invent symbols of my own for such qualities of the ground; I wanted to express what it was like to be there. The only academic criticism of the maps I ever heard was that I apparently 'departed grievously from the international norms of representing limestone', which was a kind of brick pattern I wouldn't have dead on my coffin.

**Could you describe your thinking behind the move from cartography to literary essays?**

I think I was really writing about Ireland from the very day we arrived there. It became a habit to write quite a lot in my diary. But I'd always done some writing. I'd written but not published a novel before then and some short stories and so on, and I tended, in my earlier days, to write very elaborate letters home. But for some reason I never quite focused on the fact that I really was a writer rather than anything else, until making a belated start at about 36 or so.

Although the maps could do all sorts of things that maps don't usually aim to do, they weren't able to encompass the richness of what I was discovering in those places. One aspect that always interested me and always had done, I think, even in my earliest painting days, was the fact that the natural world is made up of countless tiny details, and yet there are these huge overarching forms that bring it all together. I was fascinated by the textures and the details and the names and so on, but also in the big things as well, the place's relationship to the sun and moon and the cosmos behind that. Lots of the paintings I had done had fallen down on the attempt to try and convey these things together. On the maps I could do the detail, certain sorts of detail anyway, but couldn't say much about these global forms, and I found I could do that in writing, because you can produce a book that has a very clear overall structure. The two volumes on Aran have that clear north/south, east/west structure with excursions in either book between the two halves, and a preface to the first volume and a postscript to the second. So *Stones of Aran* had a balance of structure that held innumerable details in place and left me plenty of room to move, quite suddenly, from the minutiae to some observation about the whole place's relationship to space and time on a grander scale. It also had a sense of progression from east to west, a direction that is very important in Irish culture. I found much more scope for doing that in my writing, and by degrees writing took over from the maps. I've done these three maps, of the Aran Islands, the Burren and Connemara, and I wouldn't be interested in doing another map unless I had some radically new ideas about mapping.

**There is a preoccupation in the *Stones of Aran* books with the inconceivability of the job at hand, the failure of the book to adequately capture the islands. What prompted this?**

I think if the gambit is used very carefully and sparingly, to say that something is inexpressible can be very expressive about it. But the ground has to be prepared so that the reader is conned into seeing what is being expressed even through the claim that it is inexpressible. One aspect of the natural world that is strictly inexpressible is the totality and the richness of life forms. The density of perceptual experience in walking a landscape like that of Aran, poking into the bushes, looking down the crevices and looking over the cliffs – sometimes I'd feel in trying to write the book, or experience the place, that it is too much.

In one of the chapters towards the end of *Labyrinth* I write about the last time in the book when I go up to Na Craga, the craggy plateau along the spine of the big island, on a roasting hot day. It's bursting with life; there are many butterflies, and caterpillars about to pupate and having tantrums in their too-tight skins. You could see it all happening, you could see the burnet moths hatching out and big golden chafers zooming to and fro – a very rich, an almost frighteningly weighty experience. Ultimately you can only represent that metaphorically, you can't go on listing species and describing the way they jump and fly. So I just have a little passage in which each one of them is crying out to be noticed before I finish the book – “what about this? I am the unspotted form of the six-spotted burnet moth, this is how I fly, this is how I hop, this is how I jump.” So, yes, there's this constant movement in the book between purely literary passages like that and factual writing. And I did try quite consciously to evolve a style flexible enough to move seamlessly from one to the other.

**Coastlines, margins, boundaries, borders, edges are a recurrent fascination for you, both materially in the landscape and more abstractly. Why do you think this is?**

I used to think I always lived on the fold in the map, and I think that's one of the reasons why our publishing firm became 'Folding Landscapes'. A long time before I thought of doing anything with maps I'd been interested in some ideas about them – I haven't ever been interested in the history of mapmaking or mapmaking techniques or anything like that – but the idea that we might use a map, marking out the itineraries you take, all starting from where you live, until that part of the map is worn out, that's the bit of the world that you can't see, that always gets lost and obliterated. I seem to have felt this as a feature of my mental life.

### **Why did you never come to write books on the Burren?**

In a way I would like to write a book about the Burren, it would round off the project nicely. But if I did – and it remains a possibility – I think it would be very short and more literary than factual. I have the usual great stack of stuff concerning the placenames of the Burren and could very easily spend a year gathering more. I'd have to re-explore the archaeology, there's been quite a lot of discoveries made there since I last updated the map. But I couldn't really undertake to go round the Burren again like I did when I was making the map all those years ago. I think it would kill me. And anyway if I did write about all that I would be repeating material from the other books. Anything like a complete account without obvious gaps in it would necessitate repeating a lot of what I've said about the Aran geology and the Aran flora, which might be a bit tedious. So I'll only write about the Burren if I can come up with another mode of writing or of shaping a book.

### **A lot of the research you were doing for the Connemara map you published in the *Connacht Tribune* before you put it in a book. Could you say a little about the thinking behind this decision and about the kind of response you got?**

I've always had this pedagogical urge. As soon as I learn something I want to tell people about it. And it sometimes shows itself prematurely, before I've really absorbed and understood whatever I'm dealing with. But that habit did turn out to be a wonderful research tool because, as I moved around Connemara, I'd write up a little account of each townland, partly from library researches and partly from my own explorations of it and what I heard locally. I started publishing these in the local newspaper, the *Connacht Tribune*, and I was amazed by its penetration. I had no idea quite how much attention was being paid to the articles until, quite well into the process, I found that everyone was waiting for me to turn up, even in the most remote farmhouse up the valley. They were quite indignant that I hadn't already called on them, and they'd have all their information on the tip of their tongue ready for me. I'd say in a sort of diffident way: "O I'm the man from Roundstone who's making the map," and they'd immediately start: "Himself has a stone he wants to show you; and the name of that hill is such and such." I'd described a megalithic tomb on a hill near where we live and I very soon got a letter saying: "There's something like that on my land, come and have a look at it." And, yes, it was another megalithic structure of some sort. All that was very exciting.

### **Looking for correspondences and resonances between the materials that you write about has become something of a hallmark of your poetics, particularly in the Connemara books. What inspires this?**

That does mean a lot to me and often enough it seems to be a correspondence between the mythological and geological aspects. Somewhere I use the phrase ‘we search for rhymes, between words in literature and between things in science.’ And science is like finding how things rhyme; Newton shows how sentences about apples falling relate or rhyme with sentences about the Moon going around the Earth or the Earth going around the Sun. He’s exploring a real physical correspondence, or discovering one. I like to find imaginary or literary correspondences I can use as a metaphor for the interconnection of all things, the concatenation of cause and effect through the cosmos down to tiny details of micro-geography and micro-history. Sometimes I do this quite fancifully, like in that passage about Wittgenstein who spent some time in Connemara and lived in a place where there’s a legend about the local saint’s struggle with the devil. The chain that the saint was being pulled away to Hell on produced this gash through the mountains. But on the other hand one can look at that same gash and say this is a fault, a fault-weakened zone that’s been excavated by a glacier, giving a geological explanation. And then you can go on to remember Wittgenstein’s mental struggles over his philosophical ideas, and imagine that, in some future or mythological recasting of the history of Connemara, people might get it all muddled up and think it was Wittgenstein’s struggle with the devil of inaccurate speech-forms that caused this disruption of the landscape. But then I’m really just using that as a sort of hidden metaphor for the way that all sorts of different ways of looking at the ground are necessary, and they all necessarily rhyme because they’re all directed at the same thing in the end. There’s a sort of rationality about existence – what E.O. Wilson calls consilience – that forces correspondences between them.

**Your atheism, or what you call your ‘passionate unbelief’, has been an issue of difficulty for some. How do you feel it has developed living in a landscape permeated by such a variety of faiths?**

Well in a way it hasn’t, because I think I’m a naive realist so far as theological questions go. For me there are certain entities that do exist and certain entities, including God, that don’t exist, for better or worse; that’s not up to us, that’s just part of the facts of the case as I see them, and I could be wrong. But it also seems to me that we’re missing something about the natural world and our natural relation to it by expending our religious emotions on non-existent entities. I think that religious emotion is extremely important, perhaps the most important aspect of human life, and most of it is misdirected, wasted in a way. So it seems to me anyway. So if there could be some sort of secular language, secular vision, secular ritual perhaps, directing that source of power in the human spirit towards the Earth and our relationship to it, and not just the Earth but the whole cosmos that contains it, that could perhaps be very much more enriching than the standard religious approach, which always tends to prise things apart into two layers, the physical and the spiritual.

**I read somewhere that your Aran map was used in something called the Vinyl Project.**

What happened was an artist and curator called Simon Cutts – who used to run a little gallery shop down in the east end of London called ‘Workfortheeyetodo’, but then moved to Ireland – was organizing an exhibition of works on vinyl, in Cork when it was European City of Culture. Apparently artists have used vinyl in all sorts of ways. And he suggested that I take the Aran map and blow it up and get it printed on a big sheet of vinyl and that we’d put it on the wall in this exhibition. I thought that this was a pretty boring idea actually, just a big map of the islands. But if we put it on

the ground and let people walk on it, something interesting might happen. So that's what we did, printed it on the sheet about 22ft long and about 15ft across. And it was big enough for you to walk along and see the house that you lived in or the road that you took and you could look over the cliff and read all the placenames and so on. It came up very clearly on that scale. So we invited people to walk on it, to write on it, to dance on it, to treat it as they saw fit. And so they did, kids skateboarded on it and some people wrote rather nice little reminiscences of their time on the island. Later on it acquired notes like "Here I wished I was kissing Jenny. Here I kissed Jenny for the first time" and rather charming things like that. By the time it came back to us it was crumpled and dirty, but unturned. We decided to call it 'A Distressed Map of the Aran Islands'.

But then, just last year, this extraordinary curator, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, phoned up out of the blue from the Serpentine Gallery in London and said that he was putting together a "map marathon", which was to be a series of interviews with people who as artists or thinkers had worked with maps of some sort; would I take part, and so on. So we sent the Distressed Map across. By that time the exhibition had become too big to go into the Serpentine so it was moved to the Royal Geographic Society, one of these grand old Kensington buildings with portraits of Speed and Livingstone and all these heroes. It looks like an old fashioned gentleman's club and it has a lovely map room, and the map of Aran fitted nicely into this room, between four pillars. Again we invited people to walk on it and dance on it. I remember one elderly gentleman dancing on it with a little girl while Hans-Ulrich was interviewing all the people who had taken part, including very interesting people such as Ai Weiwei, the Chinese artist who produced that astounding work of 80 million porcelain sunflower seeds in the Tate Modern.

So the Distressed Map of Aran came back with another layer of damage on it and a few interesting bits of graffiti, and we'll continue exhibiting it now until it wears out. There's a bit of magical thinking going on here: that maybe if it happens to the map it won't happen to the islands. It certainly makes you think about what's happening to the islands with 300,000 people visiting it a year.

**Finally, I have to ask, what do you think it is that drives the enormous scope of your interest, from the minutiae of Planck's constant up to the scale of deep geological time and the cosmos?**

It seems very significant that we're middle-sized entities between those two vast extremes. And if you abandon the transcendental aspect of things, if you abandon that relationship to theological transcendence, then you're left clinging onto a place on a globe that's tumbling through space and time. I've always had that sensation of the precariousness of all things. I can't pin it down more exactly. Art can at least play at permanence. I like to think that sometimes I can write a sentence that stays written – but I know I delude myself.