The Loneliest Boy in the World
The Last Child of the Great Blasket Island

Gearóid Cheaist Ó Catháin with Patricia Ahern

At Christmas 1948, reporter Liam Robinson and features photographer Donal MacMonagle visited the Great Blasket Island. They wanted to meet the last child of the Blaskets – Gearóid Cheaist Ó Catháin. Robinson’s subsequent article made Gearóid famous. Gifts of toys, clothes and books poured in from around the world. One Minnesota rancher even offered to adopt ‘the loneliest boy in the world’ as Gearóid was dubbed in the newspaper.

But Gearóid was not a lonely child. He grew up surrounded by family and neighbours in a tight-knit and supportive community. He never noticed being an only child as he saw everyone as the same age. He loved all those around him and felt they loved him too and always had great time for him. Generations of Irish children suffered Peig in the classroom although Gearóid remembers her as a loveable and cheerful woman.

But this was a small, vulnerable fishing community who lived without a doctor, priest, school, church or electricity. Their numbers were dwindling and they constantly battled the elements for survival. On 22 April 1947, three months before Gearóid was born, the islanders sent a telegram to Éamon de Valera, pleading for help: ‘Storm bound, distress, send food, nothing to eat.’

Gearóid was born on 21 July 1947 in St Elizabeth’s Hospital in Dingle and returned to the islands when he was six days old. When he and his parents landed on the island, all the islanders gathered to give their blessing to an leanbh. Six years later, on 5 September 1953, Gearóid and his parents were the first to be evacuated from the islands. Gearóid’s mother, concerned for her son’s education, was eager to leave the islands. The remaining islanders followed later.

Settled in Dún Chaoin, he pursued Gaelic football, traditional music and formal schooling as the islanders adapted to a new environment across the water from their deserted island. Attending an English-speaking boarding school in Kilkenny was a lonely time but at least he excelled in Irish class! Later Gearóid became the spokesperson for the islanders when an American began approaching islanders asking them to sell their land. The Blasket Island Foundation was established in 1985 to stop the sales and protect the islands.

Of the evacuated islanders, Gearóid is now the only survivor. His memories are entwined with the beliefs and customs handed down through the generations and are an insight into life on the Great Blasket and the difficulties and challenges facing the final generation. After the dramatic evacuation, The Blaskets, of which nothing remains but crumbling cottages and windswept land, will live on, in part due to the invaluable memories of the last child of the Blasket Islands.

The Loneliest Boy in the World – The Last Child of the Great Blasket Island by Gearóid Cheaist Ó Catháin with Patricia Ahern is published by The Collins Press, price €12.99. It is available in all good bookshops and online from www.collinspress.ie

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Notes for the Editor

• **Gearóid Cheaist Ó Catháin** is the only survivor of the islanders evacuated from the Great Blasket. He moved with his parents to Dún Chaoin and was educated at St Joseph's College, Kilkenny, Dingle CBS and School of Commerce, Cork. He enjoyed a varied career and lives in Cork, promoting Irish and occasionally lecturing at University College Cork.

• **Patricia Ahern** is co-author of *In Search of the Missing* and *The Lightkeeper*. From Mallow, she lives in County Cork.

• The name **Ceaist** comes from the word *ceast*, which is a heavy stone or lump of iron, and was used to distinguish Gearóid’s family from others of the same surname. It originated at a time when his paternal grandfather, Pádraig Ó Catháin, proved himself to be the best at rock throwing, which was a popular pastime with the men of the island when they gathered on the flat of the Great Blasket’s main path above the strand, An Tráigh Bháin. From then on, his grandfather was called Ceaist.

• Gearóid met Liam Robinson again in 1988, after Liam heard Gearóid speaking with Gay Byrne about the islands on the radio.

• Fishermen on the islands **never learned to swim** because they felt it would be better to drown quickly than to put up a fight.

• His **favourite uncle** was Faelí who at thirty years older than Gearóid was the closest in age to him on the island. He was great fun and always had time for his nephew.

• All the island men wore peaked tweed caps, winter and summer, even in sweltering heat. Some tilted the caps to the side, right or left. Others wore them back-to-front or with the fastener open. The **style they wore them in often depended on their mood**. Dad took off his cap only at meal times and left it on a rung under his chair while he ate.

• The Blaskets have **inspired great writers and musicians**. Mary Pheats Mhicí, one of the island women, was the prototype for Pegeen Mike in J. M. Synge’s play *The Playboy of the Western World*. Playwright Brendan Behan visited Dún Chaoin regularly and composer and musician Sean Ó Riada often played with Gearóid’s father who was a gifted musician.

• Thoroughly Irish experiences – on 31 July 1955 Brú na Gráige, an **Irish-language school**, opened about 2 miles outside Dún Chaoin. Father Tadhg Ó Murchú was instrumental in founding the school and he gave Gearóid and his friends their first taste of white lemonade – until then, they had only had **red lemonade**!