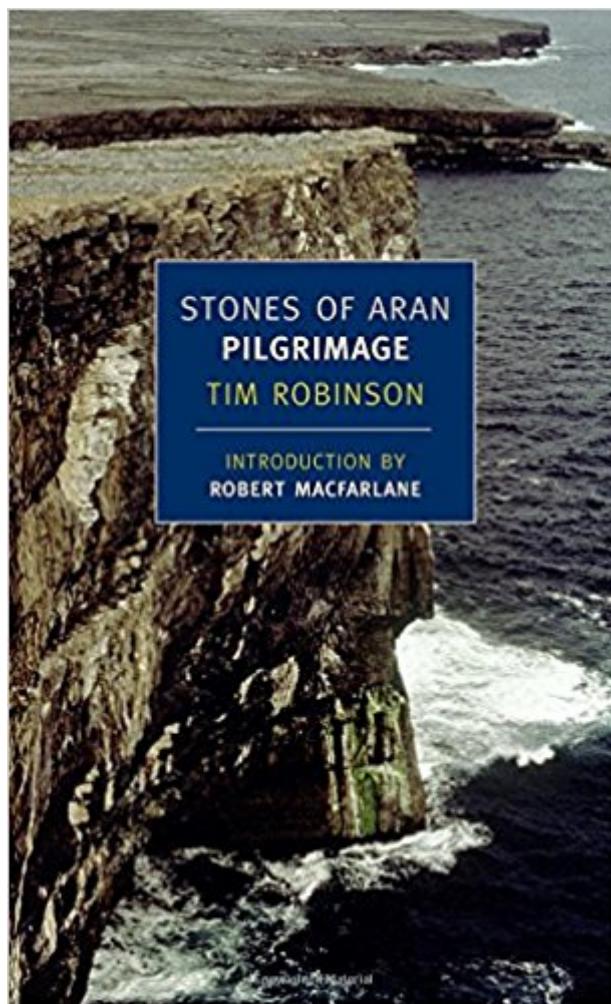


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# **Stones Of Aran: Pilgrimage (New York Review Books Classics)**



## Synopsis

The Aran Islands, in Galway Bay off the west coast of Ireland, are a unique geological and cultural landscape, and for centuries their stark beauty and their inhabitants' traditional way of life have attracted pilgrims from abroad. The Aran Islands, in Galway Bay off the west coast of Ireland, are a unique geological and cultural landscape, and for centuries their stark beauty and their inhabitants' traditional way of life have attracted pilgrims from abroad. After a visit with his wife in 1972, Tim Robinson moved to the islands, where he started making maps and gathering stories, eventually developing the idea for a cosmic history of *Afá•rainn*, the largest of the three islands. Pilgrimage is the first of two volumes that make up *Stones of Aran*, in which Robinson maps the length and breadth of *Afá•rainn*. Here he circles the entire island, following a clockwise, sunwise path in quest of the "good step," in which walking itself becomes a form of attention and contemplation. Like Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia*, *Stones of Aran* is not only a meticulous and mesmerizing study of place but an entrancing and altogether unclassifiable work of literature. Robinson explores Aran in both its elemental and mythical dimensions, taking us deep into the island's folklore, wildlife, names, habitations, and natural and human histories. Bringing to life the ongoing, forever unpredictable encounter between one man and a given landscape, *Stones of Aran* discovers worlds. Robinson's voyage continues in *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth*.

## Book Information

Series: New York Review Books Classics

Paperback: 316 pages

Publisher: NYRB Classics; First Edition Thus edition (August 5, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1590172779

ISBN-13: 978-1590172773

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.9 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.9 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #146,699 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #21 in Books > Travel > Specialty Travel > Travel with Pets #51 in Books > Travel > Europe > Ireland > General #328 in Books > Travel > Reference > General

## Customer Reviews

An exquisitely detailed portrait of a special landscape, this is a gem-like addition to the travel genre. Robinson, an artist and cartographer, has made prize-winning maps of southwest Ireland and adjacent islands. Describing himself as "self-appointed resident scientific busybody," he walks the coastline of Arainn, largest of the three Aran Islands, clockwise from the western edge, in an exploration of geology, topography, history, language and folklore. Arainn is limestone, and its natural forms are rectilinear. We see storm beaches--mile after mile of huge boulders stripped from the rim of cliffs and moved inland by wind. Robinson recounts hazardous sports once practiced by the natives--birdcatching and fishing from clifftops; he calls our attention to prehistoric sites and to abandoned forts. He takes a side trip by curragh to the Brannock Islands and meditates on the origins of placenames. Arainn's north coast was a center for kelp factories producing iodine and fertilizer in the 19th century; Robinson offers a vivid picture of that period as well. Copyright 1989 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"This is a heart-felt and informative micro-history, and a eulogy and an elegy as well. Robinson is especially good on Aran's once great but now vanished kelp industry, and all that was involved....this is a fine addition to a fertile genre." --The Times (London)"A loving anatomy of the largest of the Aran Islands off the West Coast of Ireland, in which the point where nature and culture meet in the island is observed with great beauty and precision." -Colm Toibin"Tim Robinson's maps and books honor the landscapes they describe. As invitations, they irresistibly beckon the archeologist, botanist, geologist, bird-watcher, folklorist, student of the Irish language, or just plain tourist." -Chet Raymo."Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage and Labyrinth...is a necessity for all visitors and walkers."--Guardian"An exquisitely detailed portrait of a special landscape, this is a gem-like addition to the travel genre."-Publishers Weekly"Robinson takes the reader on a meditative walking tour of Aran...[he] seeks the essence of an increasingly distant Celtic past...like a visitor peering through the warped and colored glass of an ancient church window." -Los Angeles Times"A kind of travel writing The New Yorker sometimes sponsors: a virtuosity of gratuitous fact-gathering, a penitential recording of minutiae, a recitation of information as if it were prayer." -New York Times"Looked upon with a tactful, eager, strategic care that is as tender in its address as an admission of love...It is a wonderful achievement." -Seamus Deane, London Review of Books"The best book ever written by an Englishman about Ireland." -Independent"One of the most original, revelatory and exhilarating works of literature ever produced in Ireland." -Irish Times"Rapt, encyclopedic volumes...Robinson has done for the west of Ireland what Ruskin did for Venice, Proust for the voids and vasts of time." -Telegraph"Climate and location, flora and fauna, culture,

myth and legend, people, and over it all, the veneer of language and place name...Tim Robinson achieves this ultimate map in Stones of Aran" -New Scientist"Wholly irresistible." -Observer"This is a marvelous book--quirky and endearing, universal in scope yet with an extraordinary sense of place and purpose." -Sydney Morning Herald"One of the most interesting and important books produced in Ireland in the twentieth century. In prose as layered and rich as the area he explores, Robinson deals with space in the way Proust deals with time." --Sean Dunne

This review is also a personal note: my branch of Clan Mullen came to America from Aran in the late 19th century, which is what led me to Robinson's books, "Stones of Aran." "Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage" is Robinson's description of the island as he makes a circuit of its shoreline. Although the title "Stones of Aran" might suggest that the topic is geology or, perhaps, geography, "Pilgrimage" is actually an eclectic mix of these plus paleo-biology, ornithology, botany, anthropology, archaeology, etymology, mythology, cartography, and maybe some others. Robinson claims professional authority only in the last of these, having one time mapped Aran and parts of neighboring Connemara. To the rest of these fields he brings the energy of a keenly interested amateur, and he attempts to fuse from them the shoreline's gestalt. He deliberately and explicitly eschews photography, preferring to assemble pictures from nouns and adjectives, which he deploys in profusion and with technical specificity. Occasionally this approach is irksome. Robinson admits to needing a bird identification book, for example, but he then rattles off species as if the reader were an ornithologist. In such passages I substitute "bird" for the various and mysterious names and practice my speed reading for a few paragraphs. A reader more at leisure might enjoy the delay of looking up all these curiosities in his own bird book. There is no plot in this volume, no story line whatever, except when occasionally Robinson relates local legends, lore, or hagiographies of the saints. Rather the order of the narrative is an exploration of space, arranged sequentially as one walks (Robinson admits to occasionally pedaling to points on the shore, but in the descriptions he is always on foot) from the eastern-most point of the island, westward along the south shore, round the western end, then back along the north shore. Robinson is never an actor in this walk, only the narrator. The reader observes the circuit through Robinson's eyes and mind. One never reads or in any way derives a sense of his aching feet, watery eyes, or chilled limbs. It is a God's-eye view. There is, in fact, something extremely impersonal in the narrative. Robinson rarely writes of contemporary people in Aran, and when he does--as, for example, when he hitches a ride from a couple of lobstermen to an offshore island--the description of the event is written in "first-person-remote," i.e., with an aloofness of attitude that leaves the reader feeling like he is

watching events from a long ways off through a telephoto lens. Similar to listening to news on National Public Radio, it's as if some omnipresent authority is floating serenely, invisibly, and untouched above earthly things, ultimately objective, neither affecting nor affected by events below. Robinson similarly seems to want Aran and her people unaffected by his passing there. Though any one section of the book can be accused of being too introspective, of containing too much *arcana*, or of being an egotistical exercise of linguistic nicety, what emerges with time and patience is an image of Aran that is at once general and intimate. It is similar to the sense you might get from looking out upon any landscape: you see a variety of trees, a roadway with a culvert diverting a stream underneath, the ruins of a barn encrusted with creeping vegetation, old pasture going to weed alongside a river, a hillside rising away to over-loomed cliffs. You can take the parts separately--identify the various trees, look up who once owned the farm, climb the cliff, paddle the river--but your eye takes them together at a glance, and together they make one image. So it is with "Pilgrimage." From the disparate parts Robinson creates a whole, and you come to feel as if you "know" Aran in some way, and probably in a better way than you would from reading a travel brochure and looking at photographs.~~~Family trivia:Members of Clan Mullen enter the narrative at a few points, all of them related to Cousin Pat of "Man of Aran" fame. Whereas the Wikipedia entry for his actress daughter, Barbara, tells of Pat leaving his wife and ten children in Boston, Robinson says it was only three children, two daughters and a son, and the son, "PJ," returned to Aran with him. (This accords with Cousin Pat's account in "Man of Aran.") Robinson also accounts for Pat Mullen's employment while he was in America--"rambling, labouring, and moonshining"--and he reports that he left his wife in Boston "running an illicit drinking-house." And religious skeptics among us may be interested to learn that Pat's branch of the clan were notorious for impiety. "Johnny Mullen, father of Pat, was considered such a social and religious heretic that it seemed doubtful if Father Killeen, the parish priest of the day, would permit his burial in God's ground....'If we can't bury him we'll pickle him!' Pat is said to have said, but instead they forestalled the priest by bringing the corpse here ["here" being Poll na Marbh, a place where unbaptized infants and strangers-not-known-to-be-Catholic were interred] and burying it secretly, replacing the sods, erecting no cross, but taking 'marks' for the spot...so that none but they would be able to find it."Robinson, who helpfully translates Irish place names throughout, inadvertently gives some clue to the etymology of the name "Mullen." There is a knoll near the east end of Aran called An Maoilin: "The word 'maoil' in Irish means among other things a hillock with a flattish top; it cognates with dozens of others denoting things blunt, bald, roofless, or low-topped in some way." I have always heard that the name "Mullen" derived from Irish for "The Bald One" or something like that. Indeed, I

have here a postcard from a friend, who brought it from Ireland, showing the Mullen coat of arms and explaining that the name derives from the Irish word for "bald." With my usual distrust of such authoritative pronouncements (which in my experience are often no more than reiterations of some long-ago error), I wonder if "Mullen" might just as likely derive from Aran's "maoil," or "flattish top." Perhaps our family of modern warriors spring from an ancient ancestor who went into battle sporting not a bald pate, but rather that frightening 80's hairstyle, the "mullet."

Tim Robinson could write about almost any subject and it would be a pleasure to read his erudite product. That he wrote this book about Aran is an extraordinarily fortunate event for us. The map he creates with his words has dimensions of time, character, opinion, humor and irony as well as the more usual up, down and across. No piece of earth has ever been more generously dealt with than Aran here in this book and its companion volume: Labyrinth. Mr. Robinson has distilled a place and its people--historical and current--to a deeply satisfying draft and serves it with Irish hospitality.

Not much I can say that hasn't already been said by previous reviewers, a great book. A look into a world that no longer exists

Wow, not an easy read, but worth it. Much to chew on.

I had been to the Aran islands and was curious about the history....this book looks like just what I wanted---eventho I haven't had time to really look it over, but liked what I did see. The seller did an excellent job of sending it and I received it fast. His description of the book looks right on!! Thanks for the great service!! Would recommend his name for friends who may like to know a good link on to check out books.... I never hesitate looking on when I want something---they usually have it!!

Obviously, it takes a somewhat rum fellow, a mathematician and an artist and cartographer, to settle down and become a denizen on a few relatively barren, sparsely populated limestone rocks off the west coast of Ireland, to do so and to write a book exploring the minutiae of the language, folklore, history, geology, archaeology of said outcrops whilst making what he is pleased to call a "pilgrimage" around the perimeters of them. The results of this pilgrimage range from the pedantic to the poetic. The careful mathematician in Robinson scrutinizes all these different aspects of the the surrounding flora and fauna, folklore and myth, that, frankly, at times, make reading the book what this perambulation obviously was for Robinson much of the time, more than a bit of a slog. One

certainly learns quite a lot, but is it worth knowing? Robinson, as it happens, and this to me is the heart of the book, is continually asking himself this question. Often, he will simply break in the middle of what he is describing or explicating to ask himself the equivalent of - "What am I doing here?" - both in regard to making this foray on foot and to recording his experiences and his researches into Aran's archaeology, geology and history, both actual and apocryphal. There are brilliant, epiphanic poetic flashes, which, to me, constitute the finest parts of the book, such as: "I have visited the place too on a calm summer night by a full moon that laced the sea with mercury all the way to Clare, and in a wintry dusk when the screaming choughs were blown by like scraps torn out of the night, and a crescent moon and evening star followed the sun down into the western cloudbanks." A "chough" is a bird of the crow family. What one comes away from the book with is a sense of a man trying to find his place in the world, to make some sense of it all. Towards the end here, Robinson recounts the peroration of a cleric on the book of Ecclesiastes, to which Robinson contemplatively rejoins: "Preachers induce such moods, the better to peddle their teleological pick-me-ups. If one declines these, the only cure is to walk on, out of the state in which nothing matters into its mirror image, more vivid like all such, in which everything matters." The book can be viewed as a meticulous description of the oscillation on the author's part between these two extremes on his scholarly tramp, an oscillation to which all impressionable, contemplative readers will respond, and recognise in themselves.

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